



An evolutionary psychological perspective on social capital

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ABSTRACT

We present an evolutionary psychological perspective on social capital. We first suggest that evolutionary psychology provides the most ultimate (as opposed to proximate) theoretical definition and most theoretically driven measures of social capital, by providing a theory of values and specifying what human actors value and want. We then suggest that evolutionary psychology can illuminate certain cognitive constraints and biases to which human actors are subject in their attempt to seek the most efficient means to achieve their ultimate goal of reproductive success. We illustrate the utility of an evolutionary psychological perspective on social capital with its application to some empirical puzzles: Why women have more kin in their personal relationships than men do, and why we are closer to our maternal grandmothers than to our paternal grandfathers.

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1. Introduction

What is social capital? *Capital* is any resource that helps individuals produce or achieve some goal. *Social capital* inheres in relationships between individuals, just as *physical capital* inheres in physical objects and *human capital* inheres in humans. Thus social capital is any resource that inheres in relationships between individuals that helps them produce or achieve some goal. But what are individuals' goals? What do humans want?

Any resource can be capital depending upon the goal. If your goal is to run an efficient drugs market in your neighborhood, then guns and ammunition are important physical capital, the ability to distinguish between high-quality and low-quality drugs is important human capital, and connections to corrupt cops in the precinct are important social capital. None of these resources qualify as capital if your goal is to earn an MBA in Harvard Business School. If we don't know what the goals of human behavior are, we don't know what capital is (social or otherwise). And if we don't know what it is, we can't measure it precisely.

The problem of defining social capital may therefore be largely a problem of values. We need a theory of values that explains what humans want in order to define what social capital is. Without it, any definition of social capital is likely to be *ad hoc*. Unfortunately, however, while some have made promising starts (Hechter, Ranger-Moore, Jasso, & Horne, 1999;

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Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Wildavsky, 1987), there is presently no general theory of values that is widely accepted (Hechter, 1992, 1994; Hechter, Nadel, & Michod, 1993). This is why nobody seems to know what exactly social capital is, or different people define it differently (Paxton, 1999).

The lack of consensus on what social capital is has led researchers to define it in widely varied ways: participation in voluntary associations (Paxton, 1999, 2002; Putnam, 1995); voter turnout (Putnam, 1995); norm enforcement and social control (Coleman, 1988); trust (Coleman, 1988; Paxton, 1999, 2002); social network ties (Burt, 1998); family composition (presence of two biological parents; Portes, 2000); and “embedded social resources” (resources one can access through network ties; Lin, 2000). The lack of consensus has also led many empirical studies on social capital to contain sections called “Social Capital” or “What is Social Capital?” (Coleman, 1988, pp. S97–S100; McNeal, 1999, pp. 119–120; Paxton, 1999, pp. 91–97; Paxton, 2002, p. 256; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000, pp. 524–530; Schiff, 1992, pp. 159–161). Paxton (1999, p. 90) observes that “the term “social capital” is used in many recent articles but in vastly different ways.”

We do not seem to have as much trouble defining physical or human capital as we do defining social capital, because the concepts of physical and human capital are often used in microeconomics and rational choice theory, where the human goals are narrowly defined economically (the maximization of individual utility, which practically often means wealth or income maximization). In contrast, scholars who discuss social capital have a wider view of social life than how economists view economic life, and do not always know what humans value *in social life* (even though they may know what humans value in economic life). What makes clear definitions of physical and human capital possible is economists’ clear definition of human values in economic life.

Evolutionary psychology is currently a strong contender for a general theory of values (Ben-Ner & Putterman, 2000; Horne, 2004; Kanazawa, 2001a). It is a general theoretical perspective that can explain the ultimate (as opposed to proximate) causes of human behavior, cognition, preferences and emotions. Evolutionary psychology can therefore theoretically define human goals, and thus social (as well as physical and human) capital. Evolutionary psychology is compatible with a variety of proximate theories of values and goals.

In this paper, we present an evolutionary psychological perspective on social capital. Our aim is twofold. First, we suggest that evolutionary psychology provides the most ultimate (as opposed to proximate) theoretical definition and most theoretically driven measures of social capital, by specifying what human actors value and want. Second, we suggest that evolutionary psychology can illuminate certain cognitive constraints and biases to which human actors are subject in their attempt to seek the most efficient means to achieve their ultimate goal of reproductive success. We then illustrate the utility of an evolutionary psychological perspective on social capital with its application to one empirical puzzle: why women have more kin in their social networks than men do.

2. Biases and constraints in how the mind works

2.1. The Savanna Principle

Evolutionary psychology rejects the view of the human mind as *tabula rasa*, and avers instead that it is *content-rich* and *biased*. The human brain, and all of its psychological mechanisms, are adapted to the ancestral environment and are therefore biased in favor of viewing and responding to the world as if it were still the ancestral environment. The psychological mechanisms we possess today are still the same psychological mechanisms that we possessed in the ancestral environment. It is not impossible to overcome this bias through conscious effort, but it is often difficult.

Phobias and fears provide a good example. Most humans have deep-seated fear of spiders and snakes, and they appear to have an innate capacity for prepared learning for such fears (Öhman & Mineka, 2001). This is because spiders and snakes, many species of which are poisonous, represented genuine threats to human survival in the ancestral environment (Nesse, 1990). That is why humans have biological mechanisms (either freezing or fleeing) to deal with these threats. Humans have been selected to have the evolved psychological mechanism to learn to fear spiders and snakes with a minimal environmental stimulus and the physical mechanisms to freeze or flee to avoid the danger.

This is true even today. Even though very few of us, living in urban cities, encounter poisonous spiders and snakes, we still have phobias for them. For most of us, cars and guns represent far greater danger for survival than spiders and snakes; about 50,000 people die in car accidents in the United States every year, whereas fewer than 20 people die from spider and snake bites (nearly all of them owners of poisonous spiders and snakes) (Hagen & Hammerstein, 2006, p. 341). However, most of us still have innate and strong fear of spiders and snakes, rather than cars and guns, because our brain is biased to perceive our environment as if it were still the ancestral environment, where there were no cars and guns.

Pioneers of evolutionary psychology (Crawford, 1993; Symons, 1990; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990) all recognized that the evolved psychological mechanisms are adapted to the conditions of the ancestral environment, not to those of the current environment. Kanazawa (2004b) systematizes these observations into what he calls the Savanna Principle: *The human brain has difficulty comprehending and dealing with entities and situations that did not exist in the ancestral environment*. Burnham and Johnson (2005, pp. 130–131) refer to the same observation as *the evolutionary legacy hypothesis*, while Hagen and Hammerstein (2006, pp. 341–343) call it *the mismatch hypothesis*.

The Savanna Principle can potentially explain why some otherwise elegant scientific theories of human behavior, such as the subjective expected utility maximization theory or game theory, often fail empirically, because they posit entities and

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