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Bowling together -
applying Robert Putnam's theories of community and social capital to public relations

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Abstract

Although the concept of Social Capital is by no means new, it has certainly spread more widely due to the writings of Robert D. Putnam. His writings have underlined the importance of civic engagement and social ties for the welfare of individuals and societies at large. Putnam's theories lay the foundation for an understanding of the broader societal functions of public relations, and offer useful concepts and ideas for both theory and practice. Putnam's theory of social capital posits that the success of societies greatly depends on the horizontal bonds of collaboration: only long-term relations, such as associations and clubs, are able to generate the cohesion that brings societal benefits such as lower crime rates, increased health, happiness and even economic prosperity. Putnam's writings are timely in a world of increased uncertainty and increasingly fractured publics. The creation and maintenance of organizational social capital can be seen as a foundation for public relations and as spanning the boundaries of PR through topics such as stakeholder thinking, corporate social responsibility and relationship management. In fact, organizations with reciprocal, trusting stakeholder networks can be understood as having high amounts of social capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of public relations is very tightly intertwined with society and its functions, yet this connection has often been overlooked by public relations scholars in theory development. Although Robert Putnam's writings on social capital and community building are well-known, his work has rarely been applied to the study of public relations. Putnam's theory social capital presupposes that the success of societies greatly depends on horizontal bonds of collaboration: only repeated, long-term relations are able to generate the cohesion that brings societal benefits such as reduced levels of crime, increased health, happiness and even economic prosperity (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Putnam, 1993; 2000; 2003). Accordingly, organizations with reciprocal, trusting stakeholder networks could be understood as having high amounts of social capital.

The topic of community building is timely, as corporations struggle to survive in a globalized, unpredictable and fractured 'reputation society' (Luoma-aho, 2005; Pizzorno, 2004). This article argues that the aim of public relations should be to create and maintain organizational social capital. The content of the article is as follows: First, the work and theories as well as the criticism toward Robert Putnam are introduced. Second, Putnam's contributions for public relations theory and practice are discussed through discussing its previous applications and suitability. Third, a model deriving from Putnam's thinking of social capital creation is presented and finally conclusions are drawn on the usefulness of his theories for theory and practice of public relations.

ROBERT PUTNAM AND THE ART OF BOWLING

Robert Putnam (1941-) is an American political scientist famous for coining the slogan “*Bowling Alone*”, first in an article (Putnam, 1995) and later in a book (Putnam, 2000). Putnam’s studies have concentrated on democracy and society at large, and he argues that society today has seen a decrease in sense of community. Despite technological development and the new media, and in fact partly because of them, people today have fewer interpersonal relationships than ever before. There has been a generational shift, and people have become isolated; they no longer belong to clubs and associations or do things together, but instead they even bowl alone. Putnam argues that people today have lost a sense of community, which makes collaboration and relationships difficult to establish and maintain.

According to Putnam (2000) the reasons behind this decline are several. Putnam identifies the biggest causes to include the changing family structure toward living alone, suburban sprawl that has fractured people’s spatial integrity and affected their free time. Moreover, the introduction of electronic entertainment has “privatized” leisure time, and the newer generations value communal activities less than older ones. All these trends are responsible for diminishing interaction and hence slowly eroding the social networks vital for the welfare of societies and individuals.

Bowling alone (2000) describes the disintegration of civic tradition in America, but similar trends can also be found elsewhere. In fact, the ideas were originally discovered on Putnam’s studies on Italy (Putnam, 1993 with R. Leonardi and R.Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*). Putnam conducted a comparative study of successful and unsuccessful regional governments in Italy that had been established around the same time. Putnam was interested in these differences and offered empirical evidence for the reasons behind them. He argued that the

blame resided in the civic traditions and histories of the local populations. He emphasized the importance of informal collaboration: a society with strong civic traditions and a participating population made for successful government as well a successful economy, whereas a weak and un-civic-minded society would only foster a corrupt government and lead to a cycle of poverty. Success was due to the social networks that generalized trust and trustworthiness among people.

What Putnam has been able to describe, is a link between institutional performance and the character of civic life (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Putnam, 2000), and therefore also contributed to the ongoing structure –agent controversy. While Putnam’s theory is mostly about structure, he makes it clear that agency is the creator of structure: a civic community is characterized by civic engagement, political equality, solidarity, trust and tolerance as well as a strong associational life (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanaetti,1993). For Putnam, civic engagement is not only about politics, but refers to the different connections people have with the life of their communities. Putnam sees different clubs and associations as learning grounds for democracy: he claims that the social networks formed in associations generalize trust across society at large. In short, learning to trust people on a small scale will enable trust even on the societal level. This learning to collaborate and formation of trust, however, are not quick processes, but take place gradually over time, and as in the case of regional governments in Italy, even centuries (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanaetti, 1993).

For Putnam, working together requires a bottom-up approach: what is important is not only how governments or organizations are managed, but how people in general behave. The key ingredient, what makes or breaks societies and different forms of organizations, can hence be seen as what Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1980) have earlier described as social capital. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and

networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993; 167). Social capital not only benefits those involved, but also bystanders and society at large, as the benefits vary in nature from decreased tribal conflict to voter turnout, lower transaction costs and satisfied citizens (Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, 2003). In short, social capital builds and maintains a thriving community, and it is social capital that decreases as a sense of society is lost.

Defining social capital

Social capital can be understood as a metaphor derived from other types of capital. “Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.” (Putnam, 2000; 19). In other words, social capital enables people to collaborate, socialize, establish communities and live together.

Social capital owes its origin to such concepts as social connectedness, referring to formal memberships as well as informal social networks, and generalized reciprocity, social trust and tolerance. Putnam (1996, 34) clearly links social capital with collaboration and community: “By ‘social capital’ I mean features of social life-networks, norms, and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. (Whether or not their shared goals are praiseworthy is, of course, entirely another matter.)” On this basis, social capital is understood to consist of beneficial connections among individuals.

For Putnam, social trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civil engagement are mutually enforcing. “Effective collaborative institutions require interpersonal skills and trust, but those skills and that trust are also inculcated and reinforced by organized collaboration.” (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993, 180.) Moreover, norms and networks of trusting behavior contribute to economic prosperity and are in turn reinforced by that prosperity (Fukuyama, 1995). Collaboration makes no sense, if you do not trust others to do the same. In societies where generalized trust in other people is low, collaboration is difficult and scholars speak of the social trap (Rothstein, 2003; Rothstein & Stolle, 2002; Luoma-aho, 2005). According to Putnam (et al., 2003), it is possible to build trust even in societies lacking in collaboration. The key is to get people involved with each other on a smaller scale, for example through associations. These grass-root level experiences of working together are the building blocks of trust in society at large (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993).

The role of social networks

For Putnam’s understanding of social capital, networks play a special role. They not only foster reciprocity, but also facilitate coordination and communication and amplify information about the trustworthiness of individuals or organizations, that is, their reputation. Networks are for Putnam the embodiment of past success at collaboration. In fact, reputation can be described as the value of public awareness in the social networks important to the organization; ‘an intertemporal identity’ (Pizzorno, 2004), a record of trustworthy or untrustworthy behavior (Luoma-aho, 2005). According to Putnam’s logic, importance is placed on “particularly the historical trustworthiness of parties in previous interactions with others, and it is the social context that makes reputational effects possible” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998; 397). Previous experiences of working together create expectations for the future.

However, not all social networks are alike nor do they serve the same functions. Putnam (2000, 22-24) applies the distinction made between two different types of social capital: bridging or inclusive, and bonding or exclusive, social networks. Bonding social capital is the type that furthers in-group cohesion, whereas bridging social capital is understood as relationships with those outside the group. In Putnam's emphasis both are needed.

Bridging and bonding networks represent different types of relationships. If a relationship is a way to survive possible threats posed by the surroundings, people and the environment, bonding social capital is for Putnam (2000) the superglue of groups and societies. It reinforces exclusive identities, and promotes in-group cohesion. It is easily formed, but runs the risks of becoming excessive. In fact, bonding social capital is often formed without any effort: like minds tend to gather together. Bonding social capital is necessary for organizational cohesion and collaboration, as it enables the organization to function. However, as it is exclusive by nature, its consequences are not always positive (Ojala, Hakoluoto, Hjorth & Luoma-aho, 2006). Negative consequences of social capital include for example insider trading or exclusion from social groups, both of which are beneficial for their members, but not for those outside nor the society at large.

On the other hand, bridging social capital, the kind that is the most beneficial for a healthy but diverse society, is difficult to create (Putnam et al., 2003; 3). Bridging social capital is like oil for groups and societies; it smoothes relations between groups and individuals. Bridging social capital is close to what Granovetter (1973) calls weak ties, and related to what Burt (2002) calls structural holes. Bridging social capital identifies networks that bridge social divides and promote heterogeneity in groups and societies. It reinforces inclusive identities, and thus runs less risk of excess.

Putnam's theories operate on a macro level of societies and collaboration. He argues that recent societal changes have disintegrated social bonds, and diminished people's sense of community. As a result, trust in societies has diminished contributing to problems in health, wealth and wisdom. What is needed, is more trust and collaboration that allows people to resolve collective problems, share information, transact smoothly, stay healthy, be social and build a feeling of belonging: to conclude, more social capital. Social capital is formed over long periods of time and as a result of repeated interactions, and increasing it is more complex than forming a bowling club: "Social capital is usually developed in pursuit of a particular goal or set of goals and not for its own sake" (Putnam et al., 2003; 10).

Critique of Putnam's works

Putnam's theories have been widely supported, but also widely criticized. The central tenets of his theories have attracted perhaps most criticism; critics are quick to point out that there is little convincing empirical evidence that getting people to work together and trust each other on a smaller scale would result in social capital for the whole community (Patulny, 2003; DeFilippis, 2001). Moreover, he has been called naïve and illusionary to propose that re-establishing community would solve large societal problems.

Social capital is intangible, and thus difficult to measure and prove of value. Putnam's attempt to introduce narrative and quantitative history and compare it to his present-day empirical data has been greatly admired, as he has been able to tell a story of historical development and their influence on present day social networks. However, the direction of causality has never been satisfactorily demonstrated: does social capital result from cohesive societies or does it cause societies to become cohesive? Moreover, Putnam is taken to task for divorcing power from his concept of social capital, and for oversimplifying history, especially by

ignoring many significant developments for the formation of social capital. Although there may be a correlation between active communities and societies that flourish, it has been argued that Putnam's social capital does not tell the whole story. (DeFilippis, 2001.)

Putnam has since addressed many of his critics, and there is a clear evolution from his earliest theorizing on social capital and community to his most recent publications on the creation of social capital. For example, after *Making Democracy Work* was criticized for holding true only in Italy, Putnam published *Bowling Alone* arguing that the same concepts held true in the United States. Now, Putnam's thinking was criticized by those who argued that he was ignoring new organizations and forms of social capital. Others further argued that many of the organizations included were responsible for the suppression of civil rights movements and the reinforcement of anti-egalitarian social norms. By way of atonement, Putnam published *Better Together* in 2003 with Lewis Feldstein.

Critics also complain that the historical-based civic community and measures of social capital Putnam describe serve as a form of predestination. Putnam has also been accused for bringing a forlorn message: in areas with a low sense of community and little social capital, the process of re-establishing these is almost impossible. If the social trap has been shut, creating trust becomes almost impossible (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993; Rothstein, 2003).

While Putnam's message has not changed due to this critique, he has recently directed his interest away from the description of social capital toward finding ways of creating and maintaining social capital. *Better Together* (Putnam et al., 2003) and Putnam's active role in the annual meetings of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America represent a search for new possibilities of social capital creation. In *Better Together* he describes 12 different social capital creators, from clubs, churches and organizations to networks and neighborhood pressure

groups, that all “involve making connections among people, establish bonds of trust and understanding, building community... They all involve creating social capital: developing networks of relationships that weave individuals into groups and communities” (Putnam et al., 2003; 1).

Putnam’s writings spell out that individualism has overtaken communitarianism, social capital is diminishing and a sense of community is fading. If society is to prosper in the long run, a sense of community must be rebuilt and social capital created (Putnam et al., 2003). The next chapter discusses the contributions of Putnam’s work for the theory and practice of public relations, and gives insight into the processes of creating social capital.

PUTNAM FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations in a changing world requires a more holistic approach than most PR theories have thus far provided. Putnam’s theories are important, as they are able to explain the deeper meanings of relationships for not only individuals and organizations, but also society at large. In Putnam’s view, the vitality of a community can be estimated based on its social interaction, and this can be seen to hold true for organizations as well (Luoma-aho, 2006). Putnam’s thinking broadens the view of public relations, as he shows the long-term effects of social relationships and that communities and publics form also without and despite organizational existence and action (Putnam et al, 2003; Hallahan, 2004): a common interest is able to birth communities. The focus of public relations has often been on issues management and managing publics, but Putnam’s view of communities is broader, some say even communitarian; communities consist of their own historic developments, aims and interests, and as such, can often not be controlled by organizational activities.

Putnam is beneficial for public relations, as he concentrates on organizational forms of social capital, whereas other theorists of social capital often take an individual approach (Bourdieu, 1980; Burt, 2002; Coleman, 1988). This chapter argues that Putnam's theorizing on community and social capital can contribute to theory and practice of public relations. In fact, Putnam's thinking contributes to a metatheory of public relations, as it emphasizes in the spirit of communitarianism the importance of creating social capital (Hallahan, 2004; Wilson, 2001; Leeper, 2001). Moreover, Putnam provides for several practical ideas on the mechanisms of social capital creation, by describing the places and processes of building trust. What Putnam's studies are able to point out is the importance of social networks for the long-term organizational survival and prosperity (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993). For practitioners, Putnam offers a noble metaphor to build the identity of the field: public relations practitioners should be seen as creators and maintainers of organizational social capital.

Establishing community through public relations

What Putnam was at pains to emphasize, was the value of social networks, through which a sense of community is created (Putnam, 1993; 2000). Networks may be personal or organizational, but their influences are always wider, even societal. It has been argued that through forming the necessary networks and connections for organizations and individuals, public relations plays a central role in maintaining a balanced society. Kruckeberg & Starck (1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001; Kruckeberg, 2006) as well as Hallahan (2004) have argued that building a sense of community through communication is in fact the essence of modern public relations. Kruckeberg & Starck trace the formation and popularity of public relations to the development of society, and argue that "most of the concerns of public relations practitioners today simply did not exist before the loss of community... public relations came about to fill a

social vacuum created by the disappearance of community” (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988, 43).

Putnam’s thinking provides ideas of how this important task can be accomplished through creating social capital, whether on an organizational or national level.

Although Putnam does not apply the concept of public relations - nor define it precisely - in his work, he notes the importance of communication as an intermediary tool for the creation of community and social capital. Putnam does not, however, comment on the type of communication that would at best foster social capital, but marks all interaction as beneficial. It is communication that creates belongingness, whether it is a matter of joining a club or going bowling, and it is communication that keeps the relationship strong over time. However, Putnam does emphasize the importance of strategic community planning and the maintenance of reciprocal relationships for the survival of society at large (1993, 1995, et al, 2003). Community does not happen by accident and neither does it prosper where it is not cultivated. In a similar manner, the cultivation of stakeholder relations ensures organizational survival.

The challenges public relations practitioners face today are not new. In fact, they resemble those faced by the early propagandists of the railroads in the 19th century: the need to “invite (a dispersed people) to act as a unified body” (Peters, 1995, 17-18). As Dimock & Dimock noted already in 1953 (403), the aim of public relations “is to satisfy all parties of interest- public, employees, and management included.” This building of common meanings and generating goodwill among publics can be aided by creation of social capital.

Another historical background is provided by the sociologists of the 20th century Chicago School. They theorized about possible ways of re-creating and building the sense of community that had been lost in the formation of the big cities. Communication, they argued, was central for creating and maintaining a sense of community. (Dewey, 1916; Cooley, 1909,

1918; McDermott, 1981; Damico, 1978; Mead, 1934.) For example, Dewey believed that society existed purely through processes of communication, and saw the associated activity as a necessary condition for the creation of a sense of community. He believed that it was possible for ‘the Great Society’ to re-establish its sense of community through communication and the media and become again what it had once been: ‘the Great Community’ (Dewey, 1916; 1938).

These aims are well apparent in the recent trends of public relations development. Stakeholder thinking (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997), relationship building (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Wilson, 2001), relationship management (Bruning, DeMiglio & Embry, 2006; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and social responsibility (Wilson, 2001; Leeper, 2001) all apply the ideas of community. They all deal with enabling different stakeholders and fostering collaboration with the communities and publics around the organization. The traditional management of publics and issues is turning towards ongoing interaction: building and maintaining a relationship between the stakeholders and the organization. This shift places more emphasis on those stakeholders with whom organizations have stable or frequent interaction, as they are the ones with whom a relationship can be built (Lahno, 1995; Luoma-aho, 2005). In fact, Putnam himself highlights the importance of frequent interaction. He concludes, “Again and again, we find that one key to creating social capital is to build in redundancy of contact” (Putnam et al., 2003; 291).

Public relations or community relations?

The search for the great community continues as society becomes all the more fragmented. People are less willing to work together, and individual aims override common agendas (Putnam, 2000). One could argue that commitment is no longer the norm, and that the concept of ‘the general public’ has been replaced by diverse and fractured publics. As publics

fracture, there is a loss of shared meaning that in turn affects cultural, moral and political standards and participation (Leeper, 2001). The creation of shared meanings is a central function of public relations. In line with Putnam's views, public relations can be understood as a tool for maintaining a balanced society: PR contributes to society by making information available, by building relationships between possibly opposing views and maintaining consensus (Hallahan, 2004; Burton, 1998; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1999; Luoma-aho, 2005). In fact, Hallahan (2004) even suggests that the field should be called community relations instead of public relations.

This is achieved in practice by making information available, building relationships between possibly opposing views and aiming at harmony (Leeper, 2001). In fact, public relations can be understood as having the responsibility for creating, restoring and maintaining the societal linkages between governments, civil society organizations and corporations (Kruckeberg, 2006). Social capital is all about "making connections among people, establishing bonds of trust and understanding, building community" (Putnam et al., 2003; 9). The idea is related to what organizations were originally created for: reaching goals that for the individual alone would be difficult or impossible (Hatch, 1997). But achievement per se is not the point, as associations and groups provide the satisfaction of belonging, a sense of loyalty and community that motivates actions.

Social capital is associated with increased interaction and coordination of operations and can be said to boost achievement as cooperation becomes frequent and social ties enable the formation of trust (Putnam et al., 2003). Putnam's social capital refers to investments in social relations that create surplus value: relations between people and the various kinds of capital embedded in and mobilizable through those relations. If public relations aims at generating goodwill toward the organization, the amount of social capital could also be a measure of public

relations efforts (Hazleton & Kennan, 2000). Public relations could profit from a redefinition: Public relations could be understood as the practice of creating organizational social capital.

Previous studies applying Putnam's theories

Community building and the ideas behind social capital creation are central for public relations (Burton, 1998; Kruckeberg & Starck, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Kruckeberg, 2006; Luoma-aho, 2005; Leeper, 2001, Hallahan, 2004). However, Putnam's theories on social capital and community have so far been only moderately applied to research and theory in the field. Some scholars have applied similar ideas with or without mentioning the concept of social capital. Among the most fruitful applications are the "Community Building Theory" by Kruckeberg & Starck (1988, 2001) and the writings on community as a foundation for public relations by Hallahan (2004). They focus on the role of PR practitioners as restorers and maintainers of a sense of community. Like Putnam, they underline the social and historical elements behind the conceptualization of public relations, and note that the need for modern public relations is the result of a change in people and society: the inversion of public and private life. Kruckeberg & Starck (1988, 24) define community relations as an "organization's planned, active, and continuing participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community". Public relations have often been accused of being too organization centered, and this definition is useful, as it highlights the benefit of both the institution and community.

Others apply Putnam's ideas of social capital. Lehtonen (2002) writes of the arrival of a new era of intangibles, where social capital is the means through which more traditional forms of capital are materialized in corporations. Social capital acts as a catalyst for organizational functions, and because of this universal role its definition becomes difficult. Ihlen (2005) defines

social capital and its organizational benefits through Bourdieu's view of social capital. For him, social capital, even in organizations, is individual; it is equal to the opportunities that accrue to an individual through membership. Though Bourdieu and Putnam share many aspects of theorizing, only Putnam acknowledges the larger societal impacts of social capital.

Many applications of Putnam's thinking for public relations are vague, and provide little concrete examples of the benefits. A more utilitarian application of social capital in public relations research comes from Hazelton and Kennan (2000). They note that organizations have two types of goals: instrumental and relational, and public relations is concerned with the latter. They apply the concept of social capital in arguing for the contribution of public relations to the organizational bottom line. Among the benefits of organizational social capital they list reduced transaction costs, improved productivity, efficiency, improved quality and customer satisfaction. Hazelton & Kennan also note the central role of social capital as a link between and a way to acquire other forms of capital. They present three dimensions of social capital they see as important for public relations: the structural dimension, the content dimension, and the relational dimension. Communication, they argue, is not only the foundation for the emergence of social capital, but also the "mechanism whereby the available stock of social capital can be accessed and expended to further various organizational goals and objectives" (Hazelton & Kennan, 2000; 83). To them, social capital is the property of a community.

Among the public relations scholars, I have probably been the only one concentrating on Putnam's theorizing on social capital (Luoma-aho, 2005, 2006). For me, social capital is an organizational benefit. I have defined social capital as "the extent of the resources available to an organization through networks of trust and reciprocity among its stakeholders" (Luoma-aho, 2005; 150). Elsewhere I have argued that communication with stakeholders has both

instrumental as well as eigenvalue: not only do stakeholder networks enable organizational survival, but having established channels of communication and being heard in today's communication entrenched society are of value by themselves (Luoma-aho, 2005).

What matters is not the network alone, but what is at the other end of it. Social networks are social capital if, and only if, they contain potential benefit and resources for the organization (such as organizational legitimacy or good reputation). Earlier (2005) I have built on Putnam's idea of long-term benefits of social relations, noting the importance of stakeholders with frequent interaction. Frequent stakeholders, if accompanied by high levels of trust toward the organization could be entitled faith-holders. Faith-holders are the organizational 'regulars' that contribute to creating social capital (Luoma-aho, 2005).

Creating social capital

Email and online communities : build or destroy social capital? Some argue that they may bridge people together but do not bond them. Another interesting debate among political scientists has regarded whether email helps produce or diminish social capital within the workplace (Cheney).

While all these applications of Putnam's theorizing for public relations are beneficial, they all fail to provide the mechanisms of how social capital could be produced. Public relations scholars and practitioners need to understand the processes of creating social capital. Putnam emphasizes the importance of past experiences for the creation and maintenance of social capital. In fact, networks of civil engagement work by fostering reciprocity, facilitating coordination and amplifying information about the trustworthiness of other individuals; social networks embody past success at collaboration (Rothstein & Stolle, 2002). "Successful collaboration in one

endeavor builds connections and trust - social assets that facilitate future collaboration in other, unrelated tasks.” (Putnam, 1993b; 3).

To fully understand community, the experiences of its members must be captured (Cohen, 1985). Elsewhere I have (Luoma-aho, 2006) operationalized Putnam’s views of social capital through the concepts of trust and reputation, both of which reflect the members’ experiences. Stakeholder trust and a good reputation among stakeholders are important resources for organizations; even social capital (Luoma-aho, 2005; 2006). Reputation refers to the past history and the sum of the stories told about the organization among the stakeholders (Sztompka, 2000; Bromley, 1993; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003), whereas trust refers to the future expected behavior of the organization, what is believed and expected of it (Seligman, 1997; Rothstein, 2003). Trust here is understood as faith in the interaction continuing (Seligman, 1997), yet also a prerequisite of a cohesive society (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993). Reputation and trust are both formed within the context of continuous meetings and interaction between an organization and its stakeholders. They are interrelated, as “Trust turns into reputation as the present turns into history” (Luoma-aho, 2005; 142).

Drawing on Putnam’s arguments presented in *Making Democracy Work* (1993), figure 1 simplifies the process of social capital creation. Figure 1 demonstrates how at best, a good reputation and high levels of trust lead to social capital (Luoma-aho, 2005; Rothstein & Stolle, 2002). It is vital to note, however, that in the case of no previous experiences, a reputation can be formed through others’ experiences as well as mediated information, which in turn is subject to change should personal experiences be available.

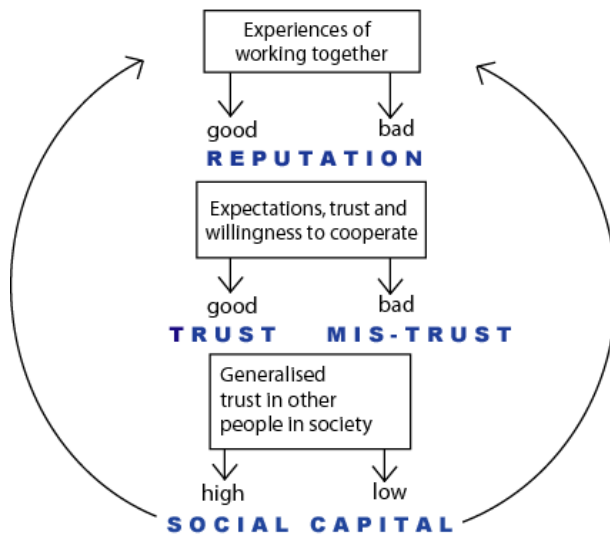


Figure 1. Model of the extremes of social capital creation.

Figure 1 is a simplified and polarized model and hence has its limitations. However, since it shows the importance of experiences and expectations, it is of value when considering Putnam's contributions to the study of public relations. The process is cyclic, and starts with experiences, whether of a person, group or organization. These experiences (whether mediated or personal) of working together, either good or bad, form a reputation. Reputation carries with it certain expectations and facilitates willingness to trust (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Misztal, 1996; Sztompka, 2000; Luoma-aho, 2006). The level of trust results in high or low amounts of social capital, which in turn shapes experiences and expectations and thus the possibilities for working together (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 2003).

Figure 1 describes the process of how social capital is created. The model has both instrumental and theoretical value, as demonstrates how experiences become expectations, which contribute to reality. Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti (1993, 182) note: "Citizens in civic

communities expect better government and (in part through their own efforts) they get it.”

However, for this prophesy to be fulfilled, it needs a society, for example a democratic societal system, in which various voices are enabled and allowed to be heard. Fostering such a society is one of the core responsibilities of public relations.

Once created, social capital feeds on itself. However, it is important to remember that reputation may be either positive or negative: a good reputation creates trust whereas a bad reputation may diminish trust. Trust on the other hand is unequivocal: it exists to some degree or it is lacking. Whatever the content, the mechanism seems to hold. The organization-stakeholder relationship develops over time and a good reputation is formed through trustworthy conduct. Untrustworthy conduct or a bad reputation can be amended and improved over time with positive experiences. Research has shown, however, that it is much harder to reverse a negative reputation and poor trust than to repair damage done to a hitherto good reputation and high levels of trust (Sjovall & Talk, 2004).

Putting social capital to use

Putnam's theories on the importance of social connectedness and social cohesion provide a point of entry for public relations by highlighting the consequences of uncultivated relationships; not only are organizations and individuals affected, but also society at large. The building and maintaining of relationships is presumably close to what Putnam, given the emphasis he places on reciprocal relationships and trust, would see as 'creating' new social capital. The key in creating social capital is getting people to work together and trust each other on a smaller scale (Putnam et al., 2003). Important public relations functions, such as maintaining harmony and creating a sense of community are achieved through communication, by building relationships among the stakeholders (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning,

2000). Organizations cultivating social capital aim at becoming the neighbors of choice for the communities around them. This process requires building relationships as well as establishing practices that enable exchange of expectations, concerns and issues. (Hallahan, 2004.)

Social capital has to be established before it can be used, and this amplifies the need for strategic public relations. Public relations should be, above all, a proactive process of building and preserving social capital, not the often applied (and reactionary) reconciliation of organizations with the community (Hallahan, 2004). Many of the ideas concerning civic involvement are related to public relations functions. In fact, the creation and maintenance of organizational social capital can be seen as underlying the theory and practice of public relations, as behind all PR-theories is the assumption that organizations benefit from good relationships with stakeholders (Luoma-aho, 2005). Burton (1998) calls for public relations to once again assume a community-building role as this role will otherwise be taken over by other sources, whether activist, bloggers or journalists. He notes that two-way communication “can help make sense in the information flowing within a community and can help develop a healthier social structure. PR, with its firm grounding in communications approaches, is well positioned to take an active step in facilitating the two-way flow of communications within a community.” (Burton, 1998; 39).

There are several aspects of Putnam’s theorizing in addition to the model of social capital creation that could benefit the theory and practice of public relations. For example, Putnam’s distinction between bridging and bonding social capital could be applied to better understand the value of communicating with both internal and external stakeholders. Bridging social capital describes the relationships an organization has toward its external publics, whereas bonding capital is needed for internal communication or the internal relations of the organization.

Bonding social capital is good for the creation of a sense of community within an organization, as it promotes cohesion by “undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity”. (Putnam, 2000; 22). Bridging social capital, or external stakeholder relations as looser networks are “better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion”.

A stable organization needs both types of capital, and public relations should aim at ensuring the formation and maintenance of both kinds of ties. The ties should first be formed inside the organization (bonding), for example through a shared identity, as the organizational reputation among the external stakeholders is greatly influenced by the organization’s internal reputation. Only after bonding capital is established, can organizations build bridging social capital. As well understood by network theorists, those with central roles in the social networks will be able to direct the crucial resource flows of information. Public relations practitioners should aim at becoming central in both bonding and bridging social networks related to the organization.

Public relations and Putnam’s social capital have many features in common: they are long-term social functions that aim at goodwill and co-operation. They both aim to create a feeling of belonging, a “we-feeling”. As intangibles and still in the process of development, both are concepts that can be overlooked and considered unnecessary during good times, but when crises arise they are critical for organizational or societal survival. (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Putnam, 2003). In fact, it is the PR professionals who bring the lone bowlers, the various stakeholders, into the club; into a joint discourse with the organizations. PR practitioners turn bowling alone into bowling together, and their value will increase in the future as they are equipped to build and cultivate long-term relationships with both external and internal organizational stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, 2003).

Despite these shared traits, applying Putnam's theories to the theory and practice of public relations does not occur without problems, and these problems are next discussed.

Problems with Putnam in PR

Introducing new theories has its dangers; their application involves generalizations that may water down their original ideas. Moreover, when theories are applied and borrowed across disciplines and even across sciences, the original problems the theories addressed can be forgotten. In the context of public relations, Putnam's theories run the same risk, yet offer something very valuable in return: a macro view of social processes and a better understanding of societal consequences of cultivating relationships.

Putnam's theories have been developed for the fields of political science and sociology. They focus mostly on societal processes, which is both their strength and weakness. Many of the traditionally central issues of public relations research are not addressed. Putnam's thinking does not address how organizations could best build social capital, but rather the benefits and the importance of social capital. Neither can these theories be applied to describe the type of communication or its contents, but rather affirm that communication is beneficial in the long run. Putnam's theories provide no measure or proof for the benefit of public relations activities, but they give a name and value to the outcome, through the concept of social capital. The problem with all applications of Putnam's theories for public relations lies in the scope: while most scholars agree that social capital is an activator of other beneficial types of capital for organizations, almost all scholars apply Putnam's theories only in part.

Social capital, as understood by Putnam, is always positive to those possessing it, but it can be harmful to those outside the group (Ojala, Hakoluoto, Hjorth & Luoma-aho, 2006). In the case of bridging social capital, excess is seldom problem. However, in the case of excess

bonding social capital, external stakeholders may be feel ignored and the organization even harmed through these feelings. In sum, social capital provides organizational efficiencies that provide for long term existence and success. For public relations, social capital creation can be modeled through the creation of trust and reputation among organizational stakeholders (Luoma-aho, 2005; Hazelton & Kennan, 2000). As with all new theories, one should apply what is useful, and leave out what does not fit.

CONCLUSION

Public relations theory has long been organization-centered and lacking in meta-level theorizing. The thinking of Robert Putnam makes way for a deeper understanding of public relations through introducing the importance of maintaining a sense of community. Putnam has been able to prove the value of long term benefits of social networks, a result which still remains unproved by public relations scholars. Moreover, as Putnam focuses on the larger societal benefits brought about by social relations, he reminds that publics and communities form also without and despite organizational existence and action (Putnam et al., 2003; Hallahan, 2004). As the publics fracture, the process of creating a sense of community becomes of central importance. Despite these insights, Putnam's theories have so far only moderately been applied to theory and practice of public relations. The model of social capital creation presented in this article derives from Putnam's theorizing, and marks a starting point for a more holistic development of public relations toward communitarism and social capital creation.

Putnam writes at the close of *Making Democracy Work* (1993, 185): "Building social capital will not be easy, but it is the key to making democracy work." If, as suggested here, public relations builds organizational social capital, then it is a necessary force not only for organizational legitimacy, but for the prosperity of democratic society. This thinking is timely, as

the democratization of many developing countries is still underway, and as society today shows no signs of becoming more predictable or less risky in the future. Public relations in modern society has the potential for much greater influence than has thus far been acknowledged. As the benefits of social capital become better known (relationships, interaction and collaboration) the importance of social capital for the practice of public relations will increase. In fact, a new, more holistic definition of public relations could be *the creation and maintenance of organizational social capital*.

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Appendix 1

LIFE OF ROBERT DAVID PUTNAM

Robert David Putnam is a political scientist and the Peter and Isabel Malkin professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Putnam is best known for his famous arguments of loss of community in modern society, which, he claims, has had several negative consequences. He has written many books, translated into altogether seventeen languages, including the best-selling *Bowling Alone*. Putnam's books rank high among the most cited publications for social sciences within the last several decades.

Putnam was born in Rochester, New York on January 9th 1941 to a moderate Republican family living in a small community. He graduated from the liberal Swarthmore College in 1963, where he met his wife Rosemary. Putnam studied with a Fulbright Fellowship at Oxford University, and earned his doctorate degree from Yale University in the 1970. Putnam has held many posts at university of Michigan and Harvard and served as chairman of Harvard's Department of Government, Director of the Center for International Affairs, and Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Putnam has received honorary degrees from Swarthmore and Stockholm University, and served on the staff of the National Security Council. Putnam has worked with the top political leaders and activist, and he is also the principal investigator of The Saguaro Seminar, and the 2006 winner of the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science.

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