

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE CASE OF TAIWANESE SCHOOL MASTERS

Tien-Hui Chiang

Professor, Department of Education, National University of Tainan, Tainan, TAIWAN,
President, Taiwan Association for Sociology of Education, TAIWAN.
Guest Professor, The 985 Project, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, CHINA.

thchiang@mail.nutn.edu.tw

ABSTRACT

It is argued that social networks are able to circulate important information, functioning to assist the actor to achieve his/her goals. This positive function would stimulate people to construct their own social ties. This article is set up to explore the meaning of social capital. It further explores how Sino-culture conditions the operation of social capital by analyzing the case of Taiwanese school masters.

Keywords: Social capital, social network, Sino-culture, school master

INTRODUCTION

Weber (1964) argues that the expansion of social size, requiring a variety of social services, stimulates the development of bureaucratic systems. Furthermore, this system needs to operate in a rational mode because its impersonal orientation is able to block personal preferences or selfishness and, thus, to ensure the production of positive functions. However, such a rational perspective may underestimate the influence of informal aspects, such as personal preferences or linkages. Michels (1971), for example, points out that this bureaucratic theory may remain in a utopian society because the element of selfishness hasn't been taken into account. The enlargement of a bureaucratic system not only results from social needs but also from a political intention. The case of France provides strong evidence. The development of French higher education resulted in an oversupply of mental labor. By enlarging the size of the French bureaucracy, the impact of this oversupply was able to be reduced. This assimilation successfully transformed this group from being opponents to strong supporters. This case indicates that instead of a rational mind, selfishness may become a core ingredient in regulating the operation of bureaucratic systems.

The study of Gouldner (1964) offers proof of this hypothesis. His findings showed how organizational regulations became a vital means for a top manager to achieve personal gain. What he did was to introduce more regulations to protect his authority and make his colleagues conform to his orders. This picture indicates that a bureaucratic system may be run not by a rational mode but by personal intentions. Furthermore, the theory of motivation-hygiene, argued by Ferzberg (1968), appears to highlight the importance of personal needs in organizational operation. For Ferzberg, practitioners, even professionals, have their own concerns. Some of these are devoted to achieving organizational goals and some are related to the conditions of their working environments. This differentiation is able to generate a profound influence on institutional operation. Such a picture also firmly rejects the idea of a rational model.

Obviously, the above arguments are able to fill the gaps in the hypothesis that institutions operate in a rational mode. However, such skepticism tends to define the informal sector in a rather negative sense. Relevant researchers have addressed the importance of personal

linkages. They argue that social networks facilitate the circulation of important information that enables their participants to achieve their goals effectively. The following sections will narrate key theories of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

The Meanings of Social Capital

Unlike other forms of capital, such as economic capital, human capital and cultural capital, social capital is not a fixed form, because it functions to circulate valuable information that enables people to achieve their goals (Coleman, 1990).

Social capital must be understood as a relational construct. It can only provide access to resources where individuals have not only formed ties with others but have internalized the shared values of the group. For this reason, it is important to treat the concept as a property of relationships. (Field, 2003: 139-40)

In a competitive context, acquiring such valuable information is likely to let its possessors reside in privileged positions. Therefore, social relationships are able to regulate the results of actions. This possibility would motivate the actor to construct proper social networks in order to maximize the usage of social capital (Lin, 2002; Szreter, 2000).

The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace... Individuals engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits... capital is seen as a social asset by virtue of actors' connections and access to resources in the network or group of which they are members. (Lin, 2002: 19)

Although many researchers recognize the value of social capital, no consensus has been achieved regarding what structure of social networks is the best. J. Coleman argues that a closure form is able to ensure the circulation of information. In contrast, R.S. Burt contends that an open one allows its members to acquire new information. The following sections will analyze these two key theories.

The Closure Structure of J. Coleman

Coleman (1990) argues that the majority of people will be benefited by a situation in which social operation is stable and normal. This is because social norms, as argued by Durkheim (1933), are able to overcome the impact of selfishness. Coleman (2003a) further believes that without social norms, selfishness becomes the main force driving human behavior, and, thus, engenders conflicts among people. Therefore, in order to prevent society from descending into chaos caused by selfishness, people care about social consequences more than self interests.

Where social norms can come into being to allow the actors affected by externalities to gain an appropriate level of partial control of the action, the result is a socially efficient outcome, in the sense that the level and direction of action is governed by all its consequences. (Coleman, 2003a: 156)

This rational mind commands them to deploy appropriate manners. Therefore, social efficiency bestows a powerful mechanism, sanction, upon social norms to regulate human behavior. As social norms are created by the public, sanction is built in a collective form. In other words, instead of individuals, the group possesses the option of sanction to govern its members' actions. When people display suitable behaviors, they will be rewarded. Otherwise, punishment will come into operation (Coleman, 1990).

... a norm is a property of a social system, not of an actor within it... The concept of a norm, existing at a macrosocial level and governing the behavior of individuals at a microsocal level, provides a convenient device for explaining individual behavior, taking the social system as given. (Coleman, 1990: 241)

This collective mechanism helps information circulate effectively in a given group and, thus, benefits its members' actions. This positive linkage will reinforce members' approval of this mechanism. Consequently, they are willing to internalize group norms into their value system, functioning to direct their own behavior. As a result, any actions from group members that jeopardize their group norms can be prevented in advance (Coleman, 2003b). Similarly, Granovetter (2003b) argues that people are not driven by the rational calculation of self-interest, but social relationships that bring social capital. This embeddedness is able to create a dual mechanism, comprised of self-government and collective integration.

Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations. (Granovetter, 2003b: 112)

When social relations affect people's behavior, they need to take proper actions in order not to violate others' expectations, conceptualized as social norms. This situation generates the mechanism of socialization that lets them internalize social norms into their value system. Such a value system further establishes a common belief, trust. Consequently, the key factor initiating their actions is not economic purpose or self-interest, but social norms. (Granovetter, 2003a).

As trust is able to ensure the integration of group members and the prevention of corruptive behaviors, Coleman (1990) further argues that it is easier for a closure group to develop trust rather than an open one. This is because it is much easier for the members of the closure one to develop similar cognitions, beliefs and interests. They are familiar with each other. This context will engender a strong sense of trust (Coleman, 1990).

Closure of the social structure is important not only for the existence of effective norms but also for another form of social capital: the trustworthiness of social structures that allows the proliferation of obligations and expectations. (Coleman, 2003b: 171)

Because trust makes it likely that members will share valuable information that benefits their actions, loyalty develops in this closure context. Loyalty is the force that commands them to practice their collective obligations (Lin, 2002). Therefore, trust is able to strengthen expectations and obligations among members (Coleman, 1990).

The density of outstanding obligations means, in effect, that the overall usefulness of tangible resources possessed by actors in that social structure is amplified by their availability to other actors when needed. (Coleman, 1990: 307)

In short, the closure structure of social networks is able to brew trust and obligations, effectively assisting the circulation of information among its members. Therefore, this closure form proliferates to the utility of social capital.

The Open Argument of R.S. Burt

Unlike J. Coleman, R. Burt (2007) contends that an open structure of social networks is able to bring more useful information. Burt claims that a closure group has the problem of 'homophily', referring to the similarity of knowledge and resources of group members. This situation obstructs the actors' access to new knowledge, resources and information from

others of the same group. Each contact with them becomes redundant, even time-wasting. Burt (2003) further argues that the utility of social capital is involved with the point of timing because the value of information is determined by timing.

Timing is a significant feature of the information received by a network. Beyond making sure that you are informed, personal contacts can make you one of the people who is informed early... Personal contacts get your name mentioned at the right time in the right place so that opportunities are presented to you. (Burt, 2003: 203)

Knowing valuable information in a closure group tends to occur simultaneously and this concurrence decreases timing opportunities:

Because the relations between people in that network (a closure one) are strong, each person knows what the other people know and all will discover the same opportunities at the same time.

The issue is opportunity costs. At minimum, the dense network is inefficient in the sense that it returns less diverse information for the same cost as that of the sparse network. (Burt, 2003: 206)

Therefore, concurrence decreases the utility of social capital because the actor doesn't receive information earlier than others, and so occupies an equal competitive position to other competitors. Burt (2003) further points out that social capital is not only determined by the useful information embedded in social networks but also requires the insight of an actor into this information.

When people realize the fact that the closure context is unable to provide them with useful information, they will try to contact other groups in order to overcome this weakness. This intention shows that contacting various groups is able to create new channels of acquiring information resources.

People live in a cluster of others with whom they have strong relations. Information circulates at a high velocity within these clusters. Each person tends to know what the other people know. The spread of information on new ideas and opportunities, therefore, must come through the weak ties that connect people in separate clusters... Weak ties are essential to the flow of information that integrates otherwise disconnects social clusters into a broader society. (Burt, 2003: 215)

Therefore, weak ties are able to empower the actor's social capital. In order to amplify the function of social capital, people desire contact with more people. Their intention is to avoid redundant contacts and time wasting. Furthermore, in terms of receiving and filtering information, the junctions of social networks are crucial. The ability to know valuable information earlier than others through occupation of privileged positions naturally increases social capital. Therefore, people, who wish to maximize social capital, need to occupy the junctions of social networks (Burt, 2007).

Holes are buffers, like an insulator in an electric circuit. People on either side of a structural hole circulate in different flows of information. Structural holes are the empty spaces in social structure. The value-potential of structural holes is that they separate nonredundant sources of information, sources that are more additive than overlapping. (Burt, 2007: 16)

Lin, Cook and Burt (2001) develop a similar argument – that social capital scatters in different groups unevenly. However, the intersection of social ties is the bridge between social circles. Wellman and Frank (2001) further point out that this critical spot allows its

occupants to have multiple forms of interactions with a variety of persons. This channel may carry valuable information to them. Furthermore, the findings of Granovetter (2003a) show that although a strong tie is able to promote trust among its members, it may largely constrain their interactions within a rather narrow scope. In contrast, the open structure of social networks creates more opportunities for its members to have contact with outsiders.

Sino-Culture

The mechanism of socialization lets people gradually internalize mainstream social values into their own value systems. Consequently, such internalized value systems play a key role in directing an actor's behavior (Parsons, 1961). He/she consistently engages in a rational process to develop his/her action projects/plans and takes the results of action as feedback to modify further action projects/plans (Schutz, 1972). This modification not only involves the evaluation of action efficiency but also the reactions of his/her encounters (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Therefore, people are not free from the social contexts within which they are positioned. In contrast, they behave like social agents to disseminate the mainstream social values (Wolff, 1993). Such a relationship indicates that the interactions between people and social contexts are unavoidable, intensive and continuous. They develop their own selves through interactions with others to fit into social norms (Mead, 1934). This interactive principle further regulates the development of social cultures. As Schutz (1971) argues, a culture results from people's participation, allowing them to share and construct a specific culture with unique meanings. The findings of Tunstall (1973) further indicate that such a participative construction, functioning to exchange personal experiences and viewpoints, is able to shape a collective identity. Therefore, individual societies develop their own cultures with unique meanings.

The above viewpoints show that the development of individual cultures is dynamic rather than static. This phenomenon explains why the characteristics of Sino-culture are different from those of Western cultures. Unlike Western cultures, which emphasize individualism, the key feature of Sino-culture is collectivism (2008b, 2010c). Yang and his associate (Yang, 2002; Yang and Ye, 2005) have argued that Sino-culture has long addressed the importance of family values. This is because the main industry in ancient Chinese society was agriculture, which required organized manpower. This requirement made the size of families big, normally having over three or even four generations. This form of family not only provided their members with good shelter but also protected them from enemy attacks. The family gradually became a vital core of life. Eventually, this situation formed a family-oriented culture, making its members sustain and enhance the reputation of their family. Although industrialization has lasted for about fifty years in Taiwan, this family-oriented culture is still preserved.

Hwang (1987, 2005) argues that this family-oriented culture will further incubate a face-oriented culture. A big family tends to have a considerable number of members and, thus, numerous and unpredictable conflicts occur between them easily. In ancient Chinese society, this situation demanded the family master maintain harmonious relationships among his family members. If he failed to complete this mission, the big family would start to fall apart. This mediatory role further bestowed a considerable degree of authority upon him. The combination of authority and family concordance tended to create a special principle of resource allocation. What guided the master's thinking was not the principle of equality, an iron dogma in Western culture, but one of emotional coherence. This harmonious principle expanded its influence to society and eventually became part of Chinese culture. Therefore, the right of resource distribution was normally given to an important person. However, the harmonious principle was always mixed with an emotional account that was initially brewed

within the family, as mentioned previously. The distributor of resource allocation normally needed to consider personal and social linkages, taking the blood relationship as the top priority, friendship next and the equality principle finally. This method of determination embodied a strong sense of emotional concordance and generated a face-oriented culture. Because this culture lasted for thousands of years in ancient Chinese society, it is able to survive now under the impact of industrialization. The face-oriented culture has now become a principle of courtesy for interacting with others.

It is worth noting that this face-oriented culture is significantly different from that of its western counterpart. Goffman (1959) argues that the human being is a social creator. Without appreciation from others, it is very hard for people to achieve their social intentions. This situation gives people no choice but to devote themselves to creating a positive impression in encounters, in order to secure a perfect social image. Although this behavior occurs in almost all countries, the face-oriented culture contains more symbolic meanings than substantial functions. As noted previously, the main function of this culture is to maintain emotional concordance in groups. This emotional linkage serves as a key element in the construction of good social relationships that are the key to attaining appreciation, resources and promotion in Chinese society.

School Principals in Taiwan

Unlike Western cultures, of which the key feature is individualism, Sino-culture is collective-oriented (Chiang, 2010c). Its family-oriented culture, for example, has a collective feature. This culture also highlights the fact that emotional coherence is generally viewed as a key concept in interactions with others, and necessary to win appreciation from others in Chinese society. This collective linkage explicitly suggests that social networks function as a key means for Chinese to construct personal or emotional linkages, facilitating the gain of more resources or privileges for insiders. In order to occupy such a privileged position, Chinese will devote themselves to building up their social circles. This intention will be reinforced by another characteristic of Chinese culture, the face-oriented culture. As a social circle creates advantages for its members, the membership of a professional group serves as a symbol of excellence, functioning to sustain or enhance his/her social status and reputation (Veblen, 1994). This social symbol matches with the face-oriented culture perfectly. Therefore, the family-oriented culture and the face-oriented culture tend to form an outside mechanism and an inside one respectively. As noted previously, this family-oriented culture addresses a collective identity, functioning as a social norm. Therefore, Chinese are forced to demonstrate communal forms of behavior that match such social expectations. In the inside stage, the face-oriented culture makes the actor care about the appreciation of others. Therefore, he/she needs to monitor his/her behavior consistently in order not to violate this spiritual constraint. As a professional group or club carries the social symbol of excellence, becoming a member will be viewed as a key means of maintaining or promoting the social status of the actor. Therefore, the social linkage will generate dual social functions: information circulation and social status. Consequently, Chinese are likely to be motivated to construct their own social networks in order to occupy privileged positions.

As the family-oriented culture has its collective nature, the members of a given institute tend to believe that their director, like a school principal, needs to carry out their collective identity and interests. This mental projection is able to fuse individual expectations into a collective form. Therefore, school principals are expected to create more resources from outside school for their colleagues and students. This expectation tends to impel the commitment of school principals to social activities outside school. However, the nature of such a public intention may be conditioned by their personal concern, promotion.

This concern is involved with the face-oriented culture that makes Chinese give more value to important posts. The occupiers of important posts, thus, win social honor and power. The strong connection between important posts and dignity is likely to stimulate Chinese to pay much attention to the issue of promotion. Therefore, promotion also embodies dual meanings: a better post and social dignity.

The nature of school organization also puts school principals in a crucial position. As far as we know, the achievement of organizational goals depends mainly upon teachers. This critical function tends to authorize teachers with a great degree of latitude, allowing them to actualize their educational beliefs and obtain a high level of job satisfaction (Chiang, 2003). This situation makes teachers develop a teaching-oriented culture (Chiang, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b). However, this culture has a negative impact on school operation, dividing schools into two compartments, teaching and administration. This segment is able to reshape the nature of school organization, shifting from a hierarchical form to a loose/flat one (Bidwell, 1965). What teachers are concerned with is no more than teaching-related matters, generally occurring within the confines of the classroom. This teaching-oriented culture is able to reshape the school into a closure form, in the terminology of J. Coleman. Because school principals have the legitimate authority to present their schools, this closure nature is able to reinforce this representative role. This public representation, thus, creates an open context for them to have contact with others outside school. Therefore, like the argument of R. Burt, school principals are positioned at the conjunctive point of social networks, possessing more opportunities to build up a variety of social networks.

The above analysis shows that school principals simultaneously occupy a closure position and an open one. The combination of these two privileges bestows more power upon them. Building up social networks to obtain more social capital is viewed as a core mission for school principals. Therefore, an open structure of social networks allows them to acquire valuable information earlier than their colleagues, and, thus, to have more social capital. At the same time, they play the role of an information filter, transmitting the information that they receive to their colleagues.

As noted previously, social networks facilitate the circulation of valuable information. This argument tends to define social capital as a positive asset. However, Sino-culture appears to appreciate the symbolic meaning of school principals rather than their substantial functions. This social context tends to decompose the collective commitment of school principals, shifting from the achievement of public obligations to the pursuit of personal promotion. Therefore, what they pursue may not be collective interests but personal gain. It has been argued that the social norm tends to block the critical thinking of people and, thus, neutralizes social injustice as a natural phenomenon. As a result, social elites, who enjoy too many privileges and are viewed as a key factor in social inequality, acquire a legitimate status (Turner, 1961; Bottomore, 1964). Obviously, Sino-culture, functioning as a powerful social norm, is likely to motivate school principals to relentlessly seek personal gain. If so, this possible selfishness will change the function of social capital, shifting it from a positive aspect to a negative channel.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that social networks are able to circulate important information, the receipt of which helps members of the networks to effectively achieve their goals. However, the form of social networks may regulate the functions of social capital. J. Coleman argues that a closure structure fosters norms and trust and, then, transforms its members into an integrated entity, ensuring the circulation of important information among its members. In

contrast, R. Burt contends that such closure may generate redundant contacts among group members. In order to enlarge the function of social capital, the actor needs to have contact with different types of groups. Furthermore, a social tie functions as the bridge between social networks. Therefore, in terms of maximizing social capital, this bridging point bestows a lot of advantages upon its occupants.

In terms of social capital, J. Coleman and R. Burt provide complementary viewpoints. Coincidentally, school principals reside in both closure and open points. On the one hand, they are present in their own schools. On the other hand, they have more chances for contact with others outside their school. This synthetic connection positions them at a privileged position to receive and filter important information, and, then, to benefit their schools.

However, these perspectives tend to define social capital in a positive light. The Sino-culture is able to transform it into a rather negative form. As the nature of school organization addresses teaching professionals, school principals are expected to play a supportive role in assisting teachers to achieve teaching goals. However, as personal linkages are viewed as a key means to produce more resources for schools in Chinese society, Taiwanese school principals are expected to devote themselves to having strong connections with high ranking persons, such as educational officials and gentries. This social norm tends to encourage school principals to serve as social creators. However, Sino-culture appears to allow such social creators to operate in a selfish way. This is because the family-oriented culture and the face-oriented culture address the value of emotional coherence and concordance. This emotional linkage generates two forms of functions. On one hand, it is a key means for coping with personal conflicts, which are normally the critical element affecting interactions between people and, influencing the operation of school administration. On the other hand, personal linkages, referring to emotional identity, function as a crucial channel for promotion in Chinese society. The contradictory nature of these two functions allows selfishness to have a large influence in the construction of social networks. As the face-oriented culture tends to appreciate the symbolic meanings of important posts rather than their substantial functions, promotion becomes a central concern for school principals. Therefore, this intention is likely to push the public functions of social capital into the personal domain. Personal gains may replace organizational interests. Obviously, Sino-culture, functioning as a powerful social norm, is likely to encourage school principals to pursue personal gain. If so, the social culture is able to regulate the functions of social capital.

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