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How Does a Community Hold itself together? Insights from a Study on Community Social Capital in Malaysia

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Abstract

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This paper discusses conceptually the mechanisms that underlie the existence of a community. The insights explicated in this essay came from a study on community social capital in Malaysia. The study utilized a combination of focus group discussions and a survey method of a total of 293 respondents covering six (6) communities from six (6) districts in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. The study managed to produce a community social capital measuring instrument comprising a total of 36 items covering six (6) different dimensions. The study reveals that within the conceptual corpus of social capital, there are several “social dimensions” that can be construed as the socio-psychological contexts where people within a community may converge and develop a sense of togetherness. What happens within these realms has been shown to indicate the level of cohesiveness that ultimately allow people to live and work together as a community.

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1. Introduction

A study was carried out to investigate the nature of community social capital in Malaysia (Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd. Sobhi Ishak, 2014). It aimed to generate a set of indicators capable of producing localized measure of community social capital. Bearing the fact that up to that point in time, such measures have yet to be developed in Malaysia, the study managed to produce a set of indicators of community social capital that are deemed suitable to not only measure levels of social capital in Malaysian setting but also managed to bring forth insights over what constitutes the ingredients that make a community bind itself together. This paper aims to elaborate on the latter by focusing on what can be learnt from this particular study. In

other words, it tends to answer the question of how a typical community in Malaysia holds itself together as a social unit.

2. Community social capital – the concept

Sociologically, the idea of how a community come to be is a basic one. In Malaysia, understanding this basic idea constitutes a challenge due to the multicultural and multireligious nature of her population. The Malaysian society remains one of few instances where social diversity has been a valuable asset for a country to grow upon and develop. Hence an insight into what makes the Malaysian society holds itself together is a valuable one.

In recent times, sociological scholarship has been abuzz with the idea of social capital and how it was considered to be a beneficial for academic and policy purposes (Schuller, 2007; Siegler, 2014; Kwon & Adler, 2014). The concept has gained a considerable amount of popularity amongst scholars and researchers of various disciplines, as well as policy makers both on local as well as international level (Halpern, 2005). Some consider it to be a gem in sociological theory since it has such an enormous grab on contemporary thinking about society and social cohesion (Kwon & Adler, 2014; Halpern, 2005). Undoubtedly there has been much discussion on this together with convincing evidence as to the utility of the concept in conceptualizing as well as solving social problems (see Siegler, 2014). Others however are quite sceptical, particularly due to its unusual flexibility in catering for a wide spectrum of social problems and issues (Woolcock, 2010). The main argument is that such conceptual breadth renders the idea quite loose (Portes 1998; Fine 2001) and at times useless (Macinko and Starfield, 2001; De Hart & Dekker, 1999).

The controversy does not end there. On top of that, there are also different conceptions on the nature of social capital with regard to whether it exists on personal or social level. As with many conceptual iterations within sociology, the plains of social existence vary from the micro to the macro. Thus, some scholars insist that social capital is an individual attributes while others look at it as communal or societal asset. For example Uphoff (2000) considers social capital to exist in two categories simultaneously: structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Similarly, Cote and Healy (2001) identify three types of social capital networks operating in any social setting at any one time, with each corresponds to a different level of social organization. Harpham (2008) also argues for the indispensability of viewing the phenomenon in both of its – individual and societal – dimensions. Evidence abound in support of each arguments, however. As far as individual social capital is concerned, researchers such as Schneider, Teske and Marschall (1997) and Narayan and Pritchett (1999) have developed instruments which measure individual social capital. Whereas, in terms of collectivity, Newton (2001), Brehm and Rahn (1997), Putnam (1993, 2000), and Halstead and Deller (2015) argued that social capital can be measured at a higher level of social organization, such as communities and societies.

While it can be argued that both contentions have their own merits for the claim yet it is the focus of this paper to limit the discussion only to the communal dimension of the concept. Specifically, the focus is on community level social capital. The next section will delve into the concept of community

social capital based on the aforementioned study. The following section discusses the insights gained from the study based on its findings.

3. Community social capital – the study

The study entitled “Development of Community Social Capital Indicators” (Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd. Sobhi Ishak, 2014) seek to develop an indigeneous measure of community social capital. The final outcome of the study emerged in the form of a set of indicators comprising 36 items that measure community social capital along six dimensions. Based on the statistical tests conducted throughout the study it was found that all of the dimensions contribute significantly to the sense of community which can be interpreted as social capital that exists at the communal level.

The methods involved in formulating and finally building a set of constructs that represent a measure of social capital involve two broad phases. In the first phase, two focus group sessions were conducted with two different groups of residents from a local community in the district of Kubang Pasu, Kedah. The sessions involved a total of 18 adult individuals picked at random from a large housing estate. The main purpose of the focus group discussions was to generate social capital constructs based on the points of view of actual community members. Prior to the sessions, the study had reviewed a number of previous social capital instruments and measures developed by scholars and researchers within the area of community social capital. A social capital instrument developed by Onyx and Bullen (1998) was found to have the most suitable set of constructs (social capital elements) to be adopted for the study. Throughout the focus group discussions, eight (8) social capital elements featured in the Onyx and Bullen study were adopted and used as a template to elicit conceptual ideas from the respondents.

Table 1. A comparison between original instrument and the adapted.

Original Instrument (Bullen & Onyx 1998)		Adapted Instrument	
Social Capital Elements	Items	Social Capital Dimensions	Items
Participation in the local community	5	<i>Penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti</i>	5
Proactivity in a social context	6	<i>Proaktiviti dalam konteks sosial</i>	7
Feeling of trust and safety	5	<i>Rasa percaya dan selamat</i>	5
Neighborhood connections	5	<i>Hubungan kejiranan</i>	7
Tolerance of diversity	2	<i>Toleransi kepelbagaian</i>	7
Value of life	2	<i>Nilai kehidupan</i>	5
Family and friends connections	3		
Work connections	3		

Source: Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Najib Ahmad Marzuki and Mohd Sobhi Ishak (2015) and Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd Sobhi Ishak (2014). *Note:* The researchers decided to retain much the naming of the constructs as they appear in the original instrument because they were considered as accurately depicting the constructs. However, they were translated to *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) because the study was conducted, and the instrument were developed and tested, in *Bahasa Melayu*.

The second phase of the study involved redefining the constructs and comparing the findings from the focus group discussions with the constructs from Onyx and Bullen (1998). The outcome of the focus group analysis was six (6) constructs which were deemed most suitably reflect the local community setting. Two of the original constructs were removed because a) it (i.e., family and friend connections) was redundant with an existing construct (i.e., neighborhood connections) and b) the “work connections” construct was found to be unsuitable with the social context. The suitable constructs were incorporated into a new adapted instrument. Table 1 contains a list of the eight social capital elements featured in the original study and the retained constructs.

4. How does a community binds itself into a cohesive group?

The main task of this essay is to explicate the methods or mechanisms involved in creating community cohesion. The following has been formulated based on the findings of the aforementioned study which incidentally offer insights into how social capital becomes instrumental in fostering a community. In broad strokes, the findings of the study suggest that there are six (6) socio psychological realms that exist in the midst of a community which can be associated with the development of collective or structural social capital. This finding corresponds to another recent study which concluded that community social capital is generated out of three (3) different types of community processes and mechanisms which runs across different levels of social organization (Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, 2015).

Table 2. Path analysis of social capital constructs and significance level.

Construct	Std. Regression Weight	Regression Weight	S.E.	C.R.	P	Significance
Participation in local community	0.817	0.662	0.63	10.427	***	Significant
Proactivity in social context	0.819	0.928	0.88	10.522	***	Significant
Feeling of trust and safety	0.875	0.928	0.79	11.681	***	Significant
Neighborhood connections	0.960	1.077	.102	10.522	***	Significant
Tolerance of diversity	0.590	0.713	0.79	8.999	***	Significant
Value of life	0.908	0.844	0.75	11.200	***	Significant

*** Significant at 0.05 (P<0.05). *Source:* Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd Sobhi Ishak (2014).

Table 2 presents the result of a path analysis of all of the constructs contained within the community social capital measurement instrument. Overall, as shown in Table 2, the findings of the study indicate that all except one of the indicators (constructs) which the study had formulated (in large part involving the process described in the previous section), has a very strong predictive value as dimensions of social capital. In other words, the relatively high predictive value (>0.8) of each of the constructs indicate they constitute formative elements for community social capital. The only construct that features lower predictive value is “tolerance of diversity.” With a relatively lower standardized regression weight value of 0.59 the construct can still be considered as a good predictor but a lesser one at that compared to other constructs.

To put this finding in relatively commonsensical explanation, a community can be said to have the capability to exist and function as a cohesive unit if it is able to adhere to the following:

- a) Active involvement in social activities. Social activities (activities done in collective and cooperative spirit) are the lifeblood of a community. As findings of this study suggest, a community rich in social capital comprises members who enjoy helping each other, keen to get involved in community activities, willing to spend time for the group, willing to contribute and provide for community needs.
- b) Being proactive in social context. Being proactive is another indicator for a community that binds together well. Members who are proactive are willing to take the first step in making a worthwhile effort, knowing that such action might be beneficial for others. It may also be regarded as an altruistic gesture since people who are proactive put the welfare of others ahead of themselves. The study finds that amongst the behavior that people enjoy doing proactively include tending for environmental cleanliness, minding the welfare of others especially neighbors (to be differentiated with minding other people's business), taking active measures against unruliness, initiate beneficial actions and offer advice to others.
- c) Feeling of trust and safety. Trust is a crucial part of being in a community. Having trust would normally be followed by a feeling of safety and security. Findings from the study indicate that tight community value trust by putting high level of trust in other people, possess high level of safety when living in the community, always believe in the goodness of others, avoid having bad thoughts about others and having faith in neighbours.
- d) Being neighborly. Communities that bind together well put a very high value on being neighborly. At some point neighbors are indistinguishable from family and friends. In this study, neighbourliness is a good predictor of community social capital because people who live in good communities enjoy helping their neighbour out, always try to maintain good relationship with them, keep in contact, maintain a good impression towards them, maintains regular interaction, put great trust in them and be willing to offer assistance when needed.
- e) Tolerance of diversity. Malaysians have come to accept the fact that tolerance is something that they must have in order to live harmoniously in communal setting. The study found that Malaysian are generally tolerant towards others, except in areas that are being regarded as sensitive. Overall, they have no problem mingling with people of different backgrounds, accepting of others' way of life, strive to maintain good neighborly relations with others, accept their cultural practices, feeling comfortable living in the same community with others, learn to respect other people's religious practices and respect their ways of life.
- f) Value one's life. One measure of good community is the way people feel about themselves as being part of the community. As social actor, satisfaction in life generally would indicate the quality that a person has with the surrounding. Thus, one would put a high value on life if one considers others appreciate his or her presence, feel satisfied with his or her involvement in the community, accept group decisions on important things, willing to express ideas and voice out concerns and feel satisfied with the way the community turns out.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of what makes a community cohesive based on the findings of a study on community social capital in Malaysia. The study was conducted with the aim of producing indicators for measuring localized social capital. From the findings, which suggest that all constructs developed to measure dimensions social have statistically significant predictor value as a measure of community social capital, it was argued that a close scrutiny of responses for each construct can be used to infer the type of mechanisms responsible for creating a tightly bound community. Further, the analysis also suggests some areas within a typical community life capable producing social capital in various forms. These six areas, designated as "participation in local community," "proactivity in social context," "feeling of trust and safety," "neighborhood connections," "tolerance of diversity," and "value of life," are socio psychological areas where community members can invest in order to produce a pool of common goods. However, due to the limited scale of the study from which these analyses were derived, the preceding conclusions should be considered with caution as to the extent to which they can be generalized.

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