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Re-Thinking Social Capital

Introduction

The concept of social capital has been used very often in sociological researches over the last two decades. Measuring social capital in civil society, neighborhoods and educational systems is merely a part of its popular usage. Many sociologists tend to use the concept of social capital very freely and therefore expand the definition of social capital. The author's personal experience indicates that there have been a great number of academic discussions, research planning and public speeches implementing the notion of social capital without taking a detailed consideration of what that concept truly entails.

By overviewing the available literature on social capital, it is actually no wonder that both sociologists and the noted concept were in this confusing situation. As Field stated in his book Social Capital (Key Ideas), published in 2008, his work was "the first attempt to provide an extended introduction on increasingly influential concept of social capital" (Field 1). Quibria notes that even though there is a vast number of research conducted on social capital in many academic fields and with various approaches 'the concept of social capital remains largely elusive''(1). That obviously is not an obstacle because there is a constantly growing interest in social capital[1] . A vast body of research concerning, measuring, and defining social capital is available today, which helps a researcher to analyze and compare all of the perspectives concerning social capital. This can be of great importance when researchers approach a somewhat new subject of research such as online communication and, more specifically, online games.

Although there is a growing number of research concerning gaming, gaming culture and online games, there is still a small representation of social capital in that kind of work.[2] Regarding specifically Croatia, there is no research concerning the gaming culture and researches concerning

eISSN 1847-7755; doi: 10.15291/sic/2.1.lc.7

social capital play along with the elusive nature of defining social capital. There are no distinctive procedures of measuring social capital and no consistent overview of social capital as a concept.

Therefore, this paper aims to offer an introduction to the debate on social capital and to suggest ways in which the discussion might be applied in researching online games and the gaming community. This theme has been constructed for two main reasons. Firstly, there is practically no relevant sociological research on media in Croatia.[3] Secondly, there is a common practice of negative representation of the newest media forms such as Internet and (especially) video-games in the Croatian media. Although an extensive amount of research conducted on the implications of gaming in sociology and psychology exists today, there is only a small portion concerning the implications of strictly online games. Online games are an important issue today for many reasons, one of them being the internet accessibility even with users with low incomes, as well as the growing popularity of certain online games such as World of Warcraft, EverQuest, Travian and many more.

The main question suggested in this article concerns the application of social capital on online games researches. This will be done by overviewing the theoretical background of the social capital concept and offering a fusion of social capital definitions that will be used as a first step in breaking the elusiveness of the concept in the given context of online games research. After this, the article will explain the possibilities of formed fusion of social capital definitions on researching the implications of playing online games. In that way, this article will be the first step in presenting a way for a better understanding of the relationship between online gamers and social capital in all its forms.

Social Capital

The Concept of Social Capital

Although there exists a vast number of books, articles and research concentrated on giving a consistent overview and universal definition of social capital, most of them undergo a similar strategy, noting seminal authors in the field, including Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, Robert Putnam, Michael Woolcock and Nan Lin. They are all noted for a significant contribution in

understanding and defining social capital, mainly for their new additions of its usage and enabling new possibilities in the interpretation of subject in a researcher's focus.

John Field in his book Social Capital (Key Ideas) offered a consistent overview of the concept, starting from its history as a ''metaphor'' which developed in a ''concept'', and thoroughly explaining all the significant contributions, critics and further development of Bourdieu's, Coleman's and Putnam's work on social capital. All of the definitions and approaches, although distinctive, have a similar main message, and that is that 'relationships matter'. The main focus of social capital is social ties, which in various ways can be enabled for obtaining different kinds of resources for the individuals and groups within these relationships. Determining the way it works, where and in which way (with what kind of implications) is something that is ever-changing in the sociology field. Nonetheless, this article will take a step further in acknowledging further similarities between these seminal authors, as well as doing what can be called a fusion of their work on social capital. This fusion will be constructed mainly for providing an ideological framework for the online communication and communication based on online gaming.

As stated by Fields, Bourdieu's definition of social capital is closely based on class distinction and inequalities in the society constructed mainly on economic prerequisites. ''Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition''(Bourdieu and Wacquant 119 in Field 17). James Coleman broadens that term by applying it to the family relations and educational system stating that social capital is "the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up. Social capital exists within the family, but also outside the family, in the community'' (Coleman 334 in Field 27). Coleman was first to state that social capital is not something exclusively owned by the elites. It was no longer class-oriented and it was closely related to education and other surrounding communities in which individuals are a part of. Robert Putman has, later on, implemented his version on social capital and basically made it popular with his work on civil engagement of Americans and their engagement in politics (as evident in his most notable book Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community). "Social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, which can

improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 167). Putnam introduced two types of social capital (bridging and bonding) which Michael Woolcock later on broadens by implementing the concept of linking capital. According to Putnam and Woolcock, respectively, bonding social capital denotes ties between like people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours; bridging social capital encompasses more distant ties of like persons, such as loose friendships and workmates, while linking social capital "reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available within the community"(Woolcock 13–14).

Nan Lin defined social capital in the context of social networks in which the actors are embedded. For Lin, social capital encompasses all particular assets in network, "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions". (Lin 29) Their work was not concentrated on the aspect of online communication and Internet accessibility which became more and more relevant in many of today's societies. Consequently, this profiles question about the role of social capital within online communication.

Social Capital and the Internet

Online communication can lead to socialization and forming communities. Many Internet users have participated in some sort of communication with the people they know offline or with people they never met. Many of them participate in new online-based and online-developed communities that take up a lot of time, like a community of fans of a certain film, product or series, community based on an online game, etc. Therefore, it is not surprising that this kind of communication gained more attention over the years in the field of social sciences.

Even though researchers sometimes lack conceptual clarity in using the term social capital, thinking about that concept can enable them to focus on comparing new social phenomena of different social capitals within or outside online communication and on redefining and rethinking the concept all together. The possibility of forming new relationships and mobility which the Internet offers can enable people to go further from traditional barriers in communication and obtain a higher degree of control over their lives. Howard, Rainie and Jones in their research 'Days and

Nights on the Internet: The Impact of Diffusing Technology' conclude that the Internet has improved their connection to their family and friends (399). Wellman and Haythornthwaite state that The Internet has embedded itself into everyday life and mapped itself fluently onto the goals of its users (1).

Quan-Haase and Wellman stated that the Internet and social capital co-exist in three main relations (16). The Internet transforms social capital, the Internet diminishes social capital and the Internet supplements social capital (16).

Regarding this, we can interpret the authors' intentions from their detailed description that the use of the Internet tends to influence users' personal relationships in a good or a bad way.

The low cost of the Internet leads to great transformation in social contact and in civic engagement by enabling the formation of dispersive social networks (Quan-Haase and Wellman 16). With its services and stocks of information it can isolate people from families and friends. With its global communication and engagement in other fields of (non)interest, the internet can isolate individuals from their local community and local politics. (Quan-Haase and Wellman 16).

People use the Internet to maintain obtained social contacts by adding online contacts to already existing mobile phones and face to face communication. They can also continue and expand their hobbies and political interests online, which can enhance their social contacts and involvement in various civil organizations. (Quan-Haase and Wellman 16).

Social Capital Fusion

Regarding all available approaches and definitions on social capital profiled in this article, further selection and critical approach was needed to establish the main aspects of social capital that can be used in online games research. It should be noted that the author is aware of many other aspects, approaches and research regarding the concept of social capital. But, in these contexts and for this particular use, only the most notable and the most used theories and approaches were used (finding them from overviewed previous researches available). The complete number of work on the subject entails a lot more research and time that could possibly result in, again, an

incomplete overview of the subject. The other reason is its similarity to other works with no noted discrepancy on the already overviewed works on social capital.

Keeping that in mind, the following social capital fusion is proposed for operating on the notion of social capital in online gaming research. They are abbreviated from the overviewed work of seminal authors in this paper.

SCF1 - Social capital is a term for resources integrated into social networks, resources which are available and can be mobilized through the network's internal links.

SCF2 - Within the term social networks, we can add certain organizations, associations, traditional and virtual communities which are based upon social relations and interactions whose outcome is useful for the members of that network.

SCF3 - Results manifest in the form of resources which can be economic, social, emotional or cultural in form which is dependable on a type of social network in question.

SCF4 - Social capital has a close relation with structures (whether it is a hierarchical structure of social stratification inside the network or the position of the social network inside the whole of society's structure)

SCF5 - Without social networks, social capital is achieved with difficulty, yet networks are not unanimous with resources that can be acquired through networks and thusly create social capital. A specification of conditions is required under which certain characteristics lead to obtaining specific resources.

SCF6 - There are three primary kinds of social capital- bridging, linking and bonding capital, which differ through the relation of members inside a social network to the network itself, their interactions, membership status in a network as well as the possibility of acquiring resources considering their relations from within a specific network.

SCF7 - Social capital can be measured in various ways: via quantitative or qualitative approach, and the procedure itself differs depending on the kind of social phenomena being researched.

Implementing the Concept in Online Games Research

It is evident that one sole definition and explanation of the term social capital is not possible and cannot be applied alone. As with every structure from which some negative or positive resources can be obtained, it should be explained what kind of structure we are talking about. Those are social networks which need to be defined thoroughly, to avoid semantic ambivalence. The measuring of social capital is also a theme that is discussed broadly in contemporary research and it can be measured quantitatively as well as qualitatively (through interviews, observations and focus-groups). This article is proposing a primary set of research questions which should be used in a qualitative approach to further define all the assets an online player can obtain in the online social structures enabled by a certain game.

By respecting already established parameters of trust, norms and networks in the context of social capital, the following research questions are offered as a base for examining and measuring developed social capital within the online gaming community:

How many people do they know by name?

Even though the players present themselves mostly by nicknames and players communicate with each other mainly within the nickname discourse in the game, knowing somebody else's real name can be an indicator of stronger ties which are developed within a game or outside the game (if players are friends, lovers, or family in an offline communication before entering the game).

How did they begin to play the game?

The beginning is important for determining gamers' social capital before engaging the game. Answers for this question can point out gamers' motives, friends' potential encouragement, boredom, isolation and longing for an online companion.[4]

Is it better to play alone or with others?

This part will explain the fundamental nature of the game, namely, if the game as a product encourages people to engage in affiliation and ask help from others, and in what way. These answers will also profile the necessity of playing in groups and communication.

Do they think that they benefit from online relationships and in what way?

Their subjective opinion about possible benefits is also important. If they feel like they benefit from something, even if it is a long conversation about certain topics in the middle of a night, it represents one component of obtaining particular elements of social capital (i.e. emotional resource)

Have they ever met anyone from the game in real life? (Why? How was it?)

Examinees' stories and experiences in a face-to-face interaction with individuals they met online can give insights into the development of those kind of relationships, so the questions turn to declaratives about how that experience was for them, how they interacted and have they helped each other in some way (offering a place to live, introducing them to other people who don't play the game, had an intimate relationship etc.)

Would they ever help someone they met in the game? Why and why not?

The tendency to help someone they met online can be an indicator of potential social capital. If the user is eligible to give a certain resource from someone else from the game this can be a powerful motivator for development of social capital and how playing a particular online game can form social capital. If there is no indicator of that kind, it can be important to determine small proportions of social capital of examined online games players.

How did online communication (catalyzed by the game) influence their face-to-face communication?

If the game is easier and more entertaining to play while co-operating with others and if the communication with other players is inevitable it is important to examine the players' reaction to their offline interactions; mainly, if they are feeling more isolated (as some scientists and journalist presume they are;), or more satisfied with their life and themselves, or if they change their habits, etc.

Who are they communicating with and why?

This research question is helpful in determining what the criteria are for further non-game related communication between players. It is important to find out which topics they are discussing, with

whom and for what purpose. This can be helpful to understand the mechanism and prerequisites for developing social capital within and outside the online game.

These research questions are just suggestions and guidelines for determining social capital (as defined by social capital fusion) to further examine the impacts and implications of . of playing one of the complex and online-based multiplayer games that are increasingly popular over the years. By performing online interviews, as well as while obtaining and interpreting data for the interviews, discourse analysis can be also useful. That kind of research (which would use the discourse analysis methodology) is a different research concerning the problems of identity and articulation. In addition, that kind of method and the framework of discourse theory is more difficult to methodologically define and it would acquire special thinking and approach to the subject of online games. New problems would definitely come to surface and the focus on social capital would become more dispersed. Questions that would come to center would be about who is saying a particular statement (who is playing), in what circumstances, how are particular words or images given specific meanings, are there meaningful clusters of words and images, what objects do such clusters produce and what associations are established within such clusters[5] ?

These questions can be useful in this kind of research to note the importance of every statement the players decide to share with the researcher and to get insights on more intensive and layered problems of identity, relationships that are produced in that kind of online communication and to easily determine the perception and representation of an online gaming community within and outside online communication.

Conclusion

This article suggested the application of the concept of social capital on online games research. These suggestions are compiled through the given fusion of social capital definitions and the possible research questions that can be asked in an interview with the players of online game.

Regarding the social capital fusion, social capital is a term for resources integrated into social networks, resources which are available and can be mobilized through the network's internal links. Those resources can be economical, emotional, social or cultural. It is important to note that we should not disregard the other concepts related to social capital, such as cultural capital and

economic capital, which should be distinguished from the social capital resources. There are certain characteristics that an online game player has to have in order to maintain a communication not related to the game. In these cases, it is most common that cultural attributes of the players are the criteria for further communication (same taste in movies, games etc.). All these issues should be investigated and can be investigated through these research questions and the proposed social capital concept.

Qualitative sociological researches about video-game players are rare and they do not seem to grasp the broader range of problems besides measuring different variables through survey. Sociology should be more active in this field and propose its own insights and results on the implications of gaming today. This article can be a starting point for a particular type of research, mostly in online gaming communities. Further application of discourse analysis is possible, to complement the possible broader focus of research of implications of online gaming, such as identity and representation of the gaming community in the media.

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[1] One of the most vivid examples is web page “Social Capital Gateway” (http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/)

[2] See Games and Culture (G&C), an international journal that promotes innovative theoretical and empirical research about games and culture within interactive media.(http://gac.sagepub.com/)

[3] Author is aware of the work of anthropologists Iva Pleše, Sanja Puljar Alessio, Reana Senjković or literature theorists like Dean Duda, Andrea Zlatar and Lada Čale Feldman, as well as extended work on media analysis of Ivo Žanić. All of them provided completely different theoretical interpretation of media culture which can be helpful for further media researches, but sociological research on media (especially on Internet and online games) is rare. This kind of conclusion on sociological research is based on the information available at hrcak.srce.hr (Portal of scientific journals of Croatia).

[4] The element of pure coincidence (or explanation that "playing games" is just a part of their gaming lifestyle) is also possible as an answer.

[5] More details on discourse analysis can be seen in: Rose, Gillian. (2008). ‘’Discourse analysis I: Text, Intertextuality, Context’’. Visual Methodologies: an Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials. London: Sage. (2008): 141-171.

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