CAPITAL PARADOXES

Has Robert Putnam Erred on Ethnicity, Engagement and Trust?

ABSTRACT

This article tackles some of the assertions made by Robert Putnam in his research on civic engagement. It tests the relationship between ethnic identification, family attachment and two elements of social capital: level of trust and the effects of bonding on trust.

In his 1995 essay, "Bowling Alone," author Robert Putnam pointed out that the breakdown of the traditional family unit (mom, dad, and children) contributed to a downturn in civic engagement. Since the family is a key element in the formation of social capital, Putnam speculated that its eclipse partially explained the reduction in trusting the wider community.

As Putnam correctly affirmed, evidence of the loosening of family bonds is unequivocal. And family stability contributes to greater civic engagement and heightened trust; hence, it results in higher ranking on such critical measures of social capital. In effect, after controlling for education, age, race and other factors, single people – both men and women, divorced, separated, and never married – are significantly less trusting and less engaged civically than married people. Putnam reveals that married men and women are about a third more trusting and belong to about 15-25 percent more groups than comparable single men and women. Marital breakdown may, to some extent, be the consequence and not the cause of lower social capital. On the other hand, he adds that changes in family structure cannot be a major part of our story, since the overall declines in engagement and trust are substantial even among the happily married.

While Putnam points to the breakdown of the family unit as being detrimental to the decline of voluntarism, he is equally preoccupied by those engaged in the type of volunteer activity that promotes bonding social capital, which he insists will undercut trust amongst persons of different backgrounds. He concludes that bridging social capital through civil society engagement that transcends ethnic ties will enhance trust of others. Putnam's hypothesis may result in the following paradox: it is immigrants and persons with strong ethnic attachments that tend to have the highest degree of family stability, thus implying greater social capital. On the other hand, these same individuals tend to possess stronger ethnic attachments and, therefore, are lower in the dimension of social capital that is germane to the trust of others.

This article will test the relationship between ethnic identification, family attachment and two of the principal elements in the construction of social capital: the level of trust and the effects of bonding on trust. Putnam maintains that bonding social capital as practiced at times by ethnic engagement in civil society organizations risks undermining trust of others that is fundamental to a healthy democracy.

Table 1. Population by marital status, immigrant and non-immigrant

	Total population 15 years and over by legal marital status	Non-immigrant population	Immigrant population
Total	23 901 360	18 598 660	5 131 655
Never married (single)	8 010 725	6 919 515 (37.3)	1 007 665 (19.7)
Legally married (and not separated)	11 959 160	8 603 695 (46.5)	3 282 155 (63.9)
Separated, but still legally married	722 845	560 155 (3.0)	158 365 (3.1)
Divorced	1 833 130	1 511 125 (8.1)	316 655 (6.1)

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2001

JACK JEDWAB
Jack Jedwab is the Executive Director of the Association for Canadian Studies.

Table 2. Importance of ethnicity and trust of people by persons not engaged in volunteer activity, 2002

Ethnicity		People can be trusted	You cannot be too careful in dealing with people
not important at all	1	202	266
	2	247	294
	3	920	1 072
	4	1 696	1 807
very important	5	5 737	6 807
Total		**8 802**	**10 246**

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey, Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage, 2002

Table 3. Importance of Ethnicity and trust of people by persons engaged in volunteer activity with an Ethnic or immigrant association, 2002

Ethnicity		People can be trusted	You cannot be too careful in dealing with people
not important at all	1	5	2
	2	7	8
	3	39	35
	4	104	88
very important	5	335	292
Total		**490**	**425**

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey, Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage, 2002

The breakdown of the family described by Putnam has been rather widespread in North America and Europe. In 1971, some 60% of census families consisted of married couples with children at home. In 2001, this group no longer constituted a majority; they represented 42% of census families compared to 29% that were either common law couples or lone-parents (a group that collectively represented less than 10% in 2001). While there has been a breakdown in the traditional family structure, the vast majority of Canadians continue to cherish family values as revealed in a recent study commissioned by the Vanier Institute. Its author, Reginald Bibby, demonstrates that almost all Canadians regard the family as a life-long, indispensable resource. Bibby concludes that the hopes and dreams of Canadians with respect to family life are, for the most part, fairly traditional.

Rarely does one find a monograph about a particular ethnic or religious group that does not contend that strong family attachment is a defining and distinctive characteristic of that community. Indeed, the Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) reveals that nearly all Canadians possess a sense of belonging to family that is as strong, and even stronger, than attachment to nation and community. Such attachments persist despite the fact that most Canadians' family structures are anything but traditional.

Though the traditional family structure has significantly evolved over the past few decades, the effect has not been felt to the same extent by Canada's immigrant population.

In support of Putnam's hypothesis, the EDS reveals that the less involved in voluntarism the less likely they are to trust others. But this tends to be the case whether or not one is strongly attached to ethnic identity, thus suggesting that it is the absence of volunteer involvement that is far more central to undercutting Putnam's notion of social capital than identity issues.

Do those engaged in ethnic or immigrant associational life exhibit lower levels of trust? Before attempting to answer this with data from the EDS, it is worth noting that a relatively small percentage of Canadians are involved in such organizations. Of the 40 000 people surveyed in the EDS, nearly half did not engage in volunteer activity in the year surveyed. Of the near 20 000 that did engage in volunteer activity, about 6% did so through ethnic and immigrant associations. In short, ethnically-based voluntarism is lower than what is often implied by those concerned with bonding social capital. With this in mind, the cross-tabulation of EDS data does not provide support for Putnam's hypothesis. As observed below, a majority of those who consider ethnic identity important, and are involved in ethnic organizational life, tend to trust people.

Table 4. Importance of Ethnicity and trust of people by persons engaged in volunteer activity, 2002

Ethnicity		People can be trusted	You cannot be too careful in dealing with people
not important at all	1	144	151
	2	216	174
	3	838	657
	4	1 945	1 274
very important	5	6 459	4 234
Total		**9 602**	**6 490**

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey, Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage, 2002

Table 5. Do you trust people / Importance of first ethnic identity

Ethnicity		People can be trusted	You cannot be too careful in dealing with people
not important at all	1	305	292
	2	389	319
	3	1 507	1 232
	4	3 138	2 257
very important	5	11 433	8 681

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey, Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage, 2002

The same appears true for those engaged in non-ethnically based voluntarism, as they too manifest significant rates of trust of others. This is independent of the importance they attribute to their ethnic identity.

Finally, I tested the relationship between high levels of trust in family, strong ethnic attachments and trust of others. As noted, nearly all Canadians have a strong sense of attachment to family. Of those with powerful family attachment, their degree of trust in others bears little difference from those with lower attachment to ethnicity.

Conclusion

Clearly, aspects of the social capital hypothesis of Robert Putnam remain questionable. While there is strong evidence in support of the relationship between stable family structure and extensive civic involvement, there is less proof that trust of others requires reduced levels of ethnic attachment. Furthermore, the notion of bonding capital as encouraging low trust of others does not appear to stand up to the empirical test of the EDS. When it comes to assessing various kinds of society, the definition of trust may be at the root of a problem.

References

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JIMI
1-17 Humanities Centre
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2E5
Canada
Tel: (780) 492-0635
Fax: (780) 492-2594
Email: jimi@ualberta.ca
Web Site: http://jimi.metropolis.net