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Local communities and social capital

Some reflections on the 5th global conference on health promotion: "Bridging the Equity Gap"

Summary

The objective of the health promotion movement is to restore and develop local communities. In this article, I discuss the way the health promotion movement seems to perceive local communities, and argue that communities should be treated more like constants than variables. Although local communities are hard to restore or develop, the theory of social capital, when applied to local communities, provides some guidelines for public policy and public authorities. The article argues that an important aspect of the implementation process of health promotion, which will influence local communities, is the way public authorities handle and support voluntary organizations and civic life.

Keywords: local community, health policy, social capital, Norway

Introduction

In June 2000, ministers from countries all over the world assembled in Mexico to discuss issues related to health promotion. This WHO-organized global conference was particularly concerned with the role of local communities and civil society in health promotion. One of the conference reports, worked out prior to the conference, was entitled "Increasing community capacity and empowering communities for promoting health" (Restrepo, 2000). The keywords in the title appear numerous times in the English version of the declaration from the conference.

The aim of this article is threefold. First I would like to discuss the way the "Health promotion tradition" seems to define and understand local communities. Then I will argue that civic life in most countries has undergone considerable changes during the last generation: changes that are not supportive to the traditional concept of local communities. Finally, I will

argue that, in order to empower people and communities, we need to think of local communities in new ways. Based on the theory of social capital, I will present an alternative approach, and then discuss its practical and political implications for the following national implementation process.

The Mexico declaration and its forerunners

The World Health Organization (WHO) has for years been an important arena for policy initiatives regarding health and health promotion. During the last 15 years, so-called "global conferences" have structured the work of WHO, and a clear line can be drawn from the very first global conference in Ottawa in 1986, where local communities were defined as a main level for health promotion, to the 5th global conference in Mexico.

The Mexico conference and its forerunners express a widespread feeling that we need to restore local communities and group belongings in western societies. Most governments in the rich western part of the world express ambitions in this direction, and a lot of money and time is put into local projects and plans. But how likely are they to succeed?

The idea that social entities can be planned and more or less constructed is widespread among health promotion workers. Often, saying "community", one really means "target group" and one asks for "management" (Mittelmark, 2001). This position implies perceiving (local) community as a manipulative variable. The following reasoning starts out from an opposite position. Most often local communities are constants, hard to change in short time-spans, influenced by a large number of variables, and there is no common theory covering all possible variables influencing the thing that one has the ambition to change.

Following this argument, the success of health promotion work depends on how the chosen strategy fits into the processes and the social units one aims to change. Therefore, in order to implement the ideas under the health promotion umbrella, we need to know the present state of civil society and local communities. Under what conditions will a government such as the Norwegian, have to implement the actions necessary for the fulfillment of the Mexico declaration? Does the terrain match the map?

A typology of local places and their sociality

The health promotion movement gives a lot of attention to *local* communities, meaning local places with certain social structures. But "local places" does not make up a homogenous category. We can easily observe large dif-

ferences from place to place. Some places are part of something bigger, i.e. being an urban district, and some are isolated, rural areas. If one digs deep into the social elements of local places, one will find considerable differences between places which, at first glance, look very similar. In one place they may have the capacity to cope with serious common problems, whereas in the next place they do not seem to possess this ability.

By doing research over years, I have experienced that the variation in Norwegian localities, according to their social life, can be reduced to at least three types of places. These three types, the fragmented, segmented and consolidated places, cannot be perceived as deep analytical categories, but they may help us clarify the concept of "local community" and point to some problems regarding how the concept is used.

Fragmented places

Fragmented places are more or less fragmented because people living there are different on a broad front, ranging from culture to wealth and occupational status. Typically people are loosely linked to each other, there may be much migration in and out, and homes are sometimes designed in an individualistic way (by i.e. backyards). In such localities, there are few arenas common to all citizens, and most people know just a small proportion of the entire population in the locality. In some fragmented localities, people do their daily business outside the locality, and the locality has the characteristics of being a "dormitory town". Fragmented places appear to be no more than the aggregate of each individual living there, their families and households.

Such a place will probably have a limited potential to cope with common problems that are not solved by local political authorities (i.e. crime, environmental problems, etc.) When bad things occur, and local political authorities (if they exist) are powerless, people will tend to move away, rather than take the initiative to solve the problems themselves.
If we use the concepts introduced above, we can say that fragmented places are localities characterized by a weak degree of social life.

Segmented places

Segmented places are characterized by strong social links, and represent an obvious contrast to fragmented places. In segmented places, there will be numerous persons engaged in neighbourhood and local community affairs. But still, there will be no common understanding of whom or what defines the place. The tension between different groups may be extensive. In Norway, this is typical in places where people from different groups of working

life meet. People from agriculture and fishing represent traditional values; people from secondary industry are focused on industrial development and growth, whereas people working in the public sector may be more representative of academic values and the academic way of living. Segmentation may also stem from other sources, i.e. ethnic background (Norwegians versus immigrants), age (the old generation versus the young generation) or religious differences.

Often, one can observe that the segmentation is expressed by physical structure, i.e. in the way that residential areas are organized in line with the social structure. Industrial workers settle in one place, academics in another, etc. This separation makes it hard to organize common activities, and to solve common problems.

One can say that segmented places are characterized by being localities with more than one social life.

Consolidated places

Consolidated places are characterized by people that are similar culturally, socially as well as economically. These are often societies with strong social links, and most people are involved with each other, and share common values and a moral universe. Dissenters may be welcome, but will seldom settle for a long time. This selection, based on values and morals, will over time make the locality even more strongly consolidated. In a Norwegian setting, the consolidated place is often synonymous with small villages, dominated by agriculture and/or fishing.

We may say that consolidated places are localities characterized by one single, strong social life.

Classic theories of local communities

In classical theory one has tended to interpret local communities as something similar to the "consolidated locality", as defined above. This implies a place characterized by a homogenous social structure, where most people face the same opportunities and obstacles. This definition comes close to the communitarian perspective on (local-) communities (Etzioni, 1995.)

In my view, this is also "the place" that WHO argues in favour of when they, in the "Health Promotion Glossary" define a local community as:

«A specific group of people, often living in a defined geographical area, who share a common culture, values and norms, are arranged in a social structure according to relationships which the community has devel-

oped over a period of time. Members of a community gain their personal and social identity by sharing common beliefs, values and norms which have been developed by the community in the past and may be modified in the future. They exhibit some awareness of their identity as a group, and share common need and a commitment to meeting them». (WHO, 1998, cited in Restrepo, 2000:4).

However, two problems immediately occur when using this definition. First, we can argue that the idea is unrealistic, and therefore provides no guidelines for public policy. Due to processes of globalization and differentiation, there are few "consolidated places" left, and there may be even fewer in the future. Secondly, one can ask whether "consolidated places" are good frameworks for health, social life and welfare. Similarity in moral norms and culture also means, to a certain degree, intolerance towards differences. One could argue that the definition above has more to do with the "ghetto" than i.e. the vision of a multicultural society, which stands out as an ideal for most Norwegian politicians.

One question worth asking is whether there are mechanisms that make it possible to imagine a local community, in the meaning of a locality including social life, based on the fact that there are few common experiences among people? Can there be a capacity for solving common problems in places unlike the consolidated locality described above? What is the reason that we sometimes can observe a great capacity to solve problems in localities more in common with the "fragmented" place than the "consolidated" place?

One possible explanation of this paradox can be found in the theory of *social capital*. In short, this theory argues that the ability to cooperate within localities and regions is dependent on cross-cutting cleavages and social overlap in social relationships, e.g. by the way people participate in voluntary organizations.

Social capital as a theory of local communities

The word «capital» is usually associated with economic goods, money, wealth, property or means of production. Among other things, capital develops through technological improvements and more efficient ways of production. Over the last decades other concepts of capital have emerged, i.e. human capital, which is created by developing skills among individuals enabling them to act in new and better ways.

The concept of «social capital» is also a fairly new one, directed at rela-

tionships between humans, in common with the traditional concept of capital. And like financial capital, social capital is a means holding only a limited value in itself, but tending to grow when invested. All forms of capital have some common characteristics, but there are also important differences. The economic concept of capital, as used by i.e. Marx, is typically directed towards hierarchy and asymmetry, while the concept of social capital, looking at how it is applied, is more linked with words like non-hierarchy, reciprocity and egalitarianism. Still, anyone who has tried to use the concept for analytical purposes knows that a waterproof operational definition is more or less impossible to find.

Probably the most quoted definition of social capital stems from the American sociologist James Coleman. Regarded as one of the concept's founding fathers, he claims that the concept needs to be defined by its function. Social capital is not a single, but several phenomena, which include two common traits: There exists a particular social structure, and this structure is a determinant for certain ways of acting, both at an individual and at a collective level (Coleman, 1988:98).

> «Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence [...] For example, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust [...] In a farming community [...] where one farmer got his hay baled by another and where farm tools are extensively borrowed and lent, the social capital allows each farmer to get his work done with less physical capital in the form of tools and equipment» (Coleman, 1990:300-321).

The virtues of social capital are said to be manifold, according to various literary sources, from enhancing economic growth and prosperity (Fukuyama, 1995) to «making democracy work» (Putnam, 1993) and providing health benefits (Putnam, 2000; Restrepo, 2000; Ziersch et.al 2005).

One possible reason for the confusing state regarding the lack of consistency of definitions could be that «social capital» was developed as a metaphor. As with most metaphors, at first glance it is loaded with meaning and explanatory power, but loses potency when confronted with a demand for a measurable definition. One attempt to clarify the meaning splits the concept into two versions: "closed" social capital and "open" social capital.

Coleman's version of social capital can be interpreted as a closed version. He argues that the theory of social capital is placed in a methodological position between norm-ruled behaviour on the one hand and the rational theory of individual behaviour on the other (1988:95). This starting point carries him to three forms of social capital: (1) *Obligations, expectations and trustworthiness of structures, (2) Information channels* and (3) *Norms and effective sanctions.*

These forms of social capital are developing within well-defined and closed networks. There seems to be a short distance from Coleman's definition to communitarian ideas concerning local communities (Etzioni, 1995). Both the communitarian theory and the closed version of social capital presuppose, more or less implicitly, a well-defined, common set of values and norms.

While there is a connection between the closed version of social capital and the communitarian perspective, the open version of social capital in many ways provides an opposite to the communitarian perspective. While the communitarian perspective pays attention to the common set of values and norms, diversity, variety and pluralism characterize the open version of social capital. As opposed to the closed version, the open version means that social capital is a fleeting, changeable and unlimited phenomenon.

Because Putnam (1993, 2000) does not dwell on the theory of social capital, there is doubt as to whether he advocates the closed or the open version. Social capital is defined as a trust-based capacity for solving problems:

"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" (Putnam, 1995:20; 1993:167)

In a later work, however, Putnam makes a clear distinction between *bridging* and *bonding* social capital, which in my view appear to be equivalent to the distinction between "closed" and "open". Putnam argues that some forms of social capital are "inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups", while *"other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages"* (Putnam, 2000:22).

Several authors have written about phenomena resembling what others call social capital, without using that particular name, one of which is Granovetter whose work «The strength of weak ties» (1973) undoubtedly represents an open version of social capital (Ringholm and Røiseland, 2001). In Granovetter's view, we cannot a priori state that strong ties are more ef-

fective for problem-solving than weak ties. This argument is also implicit in Tocqueville's study of American localities in 1840 (Tocqueville, 2000). Many have interpreted his observations and analysis as a theory of social capital (Aarsæther, Nyseth and Røiseland, 2002).

In the following, I will argue in favour of the open version of social capital, and derive the theory by looking back to Tocqueville's study of American daily life more than 160 years ago.

If we take Tocqueville's theory of democracy as a starting point, which can be perceived as a forerunner to the "open" theory of social capital, the voluntary organizational life is of major importance in explaining the formation of social capital (Tocqueville, 2000). Tocqueville's theory can be reduced into five observations:

1. People seem to form voluntary organizations in order to achieve common results/goals, which they are unable to realize as individuals.
2. Voluntary organizations are, as opposed to organizations in a market, based on some democratic principles, i.e. the norm of equal power to every member, norms of low threshold for new members and formal procedures for decision-making and representation and leadership. Through participation, members are trained in cooperation and democratic procedures and management of conflicts.
3. In societies with a wide variety of voluntary organizations, people seem to be member of several, different organizations parallel in time.
4. Overlap in membership means that individuals relate to different groups of persons and organizations, since different organizations organize different groups of people.
5. In a rather paradoxical way, overlap in membership increases the flow of information and the capacity for creativity and problem-solving at a society level.

This mixture of loyalties at individual level aggregates up to crossing and complex cleavages, which in turn will reduce the level of conflicts at society level. In such a context, negotiations and reciprocal adaptations will become the normal way to solve conflicts (Aarsæther, Nyseth and Røiseland, 2002, Wollebæk and Selle, 2003:71).

This rather abstract argument can be exemplified through a very concrete example: think of a football team. The team is an arena for training in the art of football, formally on a pitch, but possibly also informally off the football pitch. One can easily imagine that there will be different people in the team, i.e. some may be deeply religious, some not, some are academics;

some belong to the working class, etc. etc. These are important differences in most other settings, but in this specific case, they are toned down in favour of the art of football.

The processes observed by Tocqueville took place in American towns in the first half of the 19th century. How do we know that this theory is transferable to our societies? The differences are more striking than the similarities when we compare our present societies with those Tocqueville studied a long time ago. People in our times are more mobile and more globally oriented, and they definitely have a lesser chance of experiencing overlapping memberships within a small geographical area. On the other hand, we still live our lives more or less linked to local places, and we can observe, at least in Scandinavia, that a large part of voluntary organizational life, including new kind of activities, still connect to local places and local communities. The formation of social capital is still a process that to a certain extent takes place within delimited geographical regions or places.

In other words, the theory of social capital can help us understand the processes that turn local places into communities, and in addition the theory has the potential of establishing a new way of thinking about local communities in an era of diversity and globalization.

After the Mexico-conference: Political implications

Using the concept of "Health Promotion", the international health authorities argue that power should be given to individuals and communities, enabling them to control themselves and their environment. An important part of this political strategy seems to be the creation or restoring of communities linked to physical places, and the enabling of communities to solve common problems relevant to local people's health. However, the argument above indicates that this is not an easy task. On a continuum from *variable* to *constant*, local communities seem to have more in common with the constant than the variable. This does not mean, however, that local communities, or lack of community, should be taken for granted by public authorities. But it means that changing local communities is a long-term and complex process. Therefore, there may be good reasons to redefine how we think of local communities.

An alternative theoretical strategy for health promotion, derived from the theory of social capital, is based on the fact that most local places do not seem to have communitarian characteristics. People move in and out, there are a number of different occupational categories, different age groups are mixed together, faith and beliefs vary and ethnical backgrounds differ.

Only a minor share of the population is deeply concerned with local community work. The main part of the population is occupied with jobs, family, leisure activities, children's leisure activities etc.

One can ask how collective actions at community level can grow out of such a society. Here we touch an important argument in the theory of social capital, discussed implicitly above, namely that collective actions at the local community level are minor products of actions at an individual level. The ability to cope with common problems, which can be said to be at the core of social capital, is established when every individual is less concerned with the collective level, and more concerned with themselves. We can imagine that every single individual, based on personal needs and interests, participate in a number of (leisure-) activities in their neighbourhood. This can be i.e. voluntary organizations, activities related to the local school, a sports club, meeting other individuals at the local pub or café, doing their shopping in the local store, etc. etc. If the pattern of this participation is organized in such a way that individuals relate to different individuals in different activities, their social circle will consist of a number of different individuals. If this is typical for individuals in a given locality, there will also be a large and very complicated network of people, even in small places. Such networks are the foundation of social capital.

This implies that voluntary activities and voluntary organizations play several roles and have several effects. One obvious role is the instrumental. Most activities and organizations do have an aim, i.e. to become a successful football team or to help people suffering from AIDS. But apart from this, we also find at least two minor effects. Firstly, we know that social activities and voluntary organizations are good for health as they prevent social loneliness, provide self-confirmation to their members and also a platform for enlightenment and information. Secondly, they create social capital, which in turn represents a resource for a whole population.

This reasoning has a number of practical implications for national authorities as well as regional and local. In a more indirect way, public authorities do have great influence on the creation of social capital and local communities. To some extent, public authorities create the structural framework for civic life through legislation and financial support. In most countries there is a "public policy for civic life", although this is not very visible in the public domain. Public policy for civic life can be formed in different ways, and founded on different principles. The argumentation put forward in this paper can be transferred into guidelines for national authorities when they form this policy. Very simplified, we can formulate some of them like this:

1. *Activities and participation mean more than formal membership!* It is fairly irrelevant whether people participate as formal members in traditional voluntary organizations, or whether they participate in a more ad hoc manner. What is important for the creation of social capital is some kind of commitment beyond family and friends.
2. *New forms of common, social activities are just as important as traditional voluntary organizations!* We know for sure that the level of activity in traditional voluntary organizations has decreased over a period of time. We are not quite sure to what degree and in what way this has been replaced by other forms for voluntary activity. But we are able to state that, for the creation of social capital, all kinds of voluntary activity are of importance.
3. *The content is not important!* Unless we are talking about activities involving health hazard, any form of voluntary activity will promote health, and provide a potential for social capital.
4. *Its more important that individuals spread their energy on a number of activities, rather than work hard on one single activity!* During the period after Second World War, there has been a concentration of voluntary activity. More people seem to engage in just one single voluntary activity, which is not so supportive to the creation of social capital.
5. *For the government, it's more important to secure diversity and variation in activities rather than support a few large organizations!* Public financial support should be organized in such a way that diversity and variation is maximized.

If one compares these principles with the actual and relevant policies in a given country, one would probably find that there is a gap. Public policies in most western countries are probably not as supportive to social capital creation at the local community level as they should be. In my view, this is where the national implementation process after the "Mexico-conference" should start, by mapping public authorities' contribution to social capital creation, and thereafter establishes a clear public policy for civic life. In a long term perspective, this would mean turning the constant of local communities into a variable.

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