

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LIFELONG LEARNING^{1, 2}

John Field

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Josef Basl

Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic

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Social capital and lifelong learning are central to current policy concerns both in the UK and internationally, according to Field. This book confirms the significance of both issues and it is aimed mainly at researchers in education and policy studies. Empirical evidence presented within the reviewed book is focused on Northern Ireland, which makes the discussed topic even closer to the context of the Czech Republic, as many similarities could be observed between both countries, including the rate of adult learning participation.

John Field is a Professor of Lifelong Learning at the University of Stirling, where he directs the Division of Academic Innovation and Continuing Education. He has published widely on the education and training of adults.

It is important to mention that both terms, *lifelong learning* and *life-wide learning*, are taken as synonymous for the purpose of the book. The fact that Field begins (p. 1) with learning society definition is very useful as it enables him to introduce social capital and lifelong learning in a wider context. The learning society vision emphasizes the value of learning both in its own right

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and as a gateway to participation and full citizenship, Field points out. Furthermore, a civilized society, in his view, is one that provides opportunities for learning for all as a right, regardless of their age or life stages.

The concept of learning is very different from the concept of education, and people's active engagement in the wider social context is an extremely important aspect of the distinction between the two, according to Field. Only some of our learning takes place in an educational setting, and what people learn at school is not only what their teachers intend. You might, by the way, learn how to avoid the instructions on chewing gum or mobile phones, Field mentions as an example (p. 3).

As a next step, the meaning and differences of formal, non-formal and informal learning are discussed. In contrast to formal learning provided by schools, non-formal learning is provided by bodies the main purpose of which is other than education (e.g. trade unions). Informal learning represents a very wide range of activities and can refer to all forms of learning that take place as a result of an individual's life experience, rather than a result of any intentional instruction by a third party. In other words, it encompasses a broad range from incidental learning to a more determined attempt by someone to teach oneself by, say, visiting a library. Although the above mentioned types could be seen as directly opposed to one another, they occur simultaneously, and they mingle, according to Field (p. 4).

The central argument of the book is that social relationships play a vital role in people's capacity for learning if it is understood as an acquisition of skills and knowledge, including their creation. The book under review sets out to explore the possibility that social relationships can also affect the lifelong and life-wide learning undertaken by adults (p. 5). Therefore, social capital is considered as if it may be defined as consisting of social networks and the reciprocities that arise from them. In general, the book examines ways in which our everyday relationships, and the patterns that they assume, affect our capacity to learn across the lifespan.

In the context of the idea of learning society, the author examines relations between social connections and lifelong learning in the first chapter. It provides a conceptual background to the next parts of the book. Field notes that social capital is one among many sets of possible resources that can come from social connections. Although connections, relations or resources vary on individual level, they exercise influence on learning in adult life, Field claims.

He notes that the relation between lifelong learning and civic engagement in the contemporary society has been discussed by many authors since the 1980s. Many studies presented in Europe suggest that there is a strong association between civic engagement and adult learning, but studies have not been able to identify which is a cause and which is an effect, Field points out.

Next, he briefly examines theories of social capital and claims that they centre on the “proposition that people’s social networks are a valuable asset” (p. 18). In particular, he discusses the work of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. I appreciate that he compares and links various authors and their ideas. Apart from that, Field refers to Woolcock who (p. 28) claimed that social capital comes in different forms and identified three broad categories of social connections: binding, bridging and linking (scaling) social capital. This approach is adopted as a frame further in the book when Field discusses how the concept of social capital can help to understand lifelong learning. According to the author, it is clear that people acquire very particular skills through their connections and such skills are derived from the practices of cooperation.

In the next parts of the book, the focus is on empirical evidence of social capital and adult learning in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that as far as education and training in adult life is concerned, the proportion of people of working age who receive any job-related training is lower in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, according to Field.

Chapter Two examines empirical evidence on the connection between people’s networks and both their formal and informal learning. Despite a long tradition of the debate, research into the influence of social capital on lifelong learning is still a relative newcomer, Field mentions. Using the example of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), he illustrates that the countries that scored high in respect of adult education participation also tended to score high on participation in voluntary associations, and generally showed a higher level of trust in other people (p. 36). Furthermore, family connections were found to have a powerful influence on participation in learning. In the rest of the second chapter Field deals with lifelong learning in Northern Ireland and the empirical evidence comes from interviews. After a brief description of the educational system’s specifics, findings are presented.

Arguably, though, there are too many quotes from interviews and focus group sessions cited in this chapter, which makes its content rather unclear, from my point of view. I am not sure if the answers presented with just “yes” given three times over are appropriate (p. 73). It would be helpful to explain why this type of quotes is used and what actually they illustrate.

Chapter Three focuses on social connections and adult learning survey evidence, and considers particularly people’s attitudes towards learning in a way that it can be related to people’s engagement in wider sets of social relationship. It is based on quantitative data from social attitudes surveys conducted in 2000 and 2001. However, the conclusion from the analysis is too general as it merely suggests that social capital has different roles in respect of formal and informal learning and also that its impacts vary at the different stages of the life cycle.

Next, the book deals with the idea that the concept of social capital can be a bridge between different disciplines and fields of study. This is a strong reason for closer scrutiny within the context of lifelong learning, Field stresses. Thus, the fourth chapter contains a review of recent research findings.

The analytical works on social capital produced by the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the European Union (EU) are discussed within Chapter Five, which also examines how policy makers have tried to work out the idea of social capital. Field points out a lack of progress at the EU level.

The author summarizes that people’s networks are learning resources that can give them a better access to and enhance the capabilities of using information, knowledge and skills. He claims that the people whose social capital consists mainly of close ties and whose connections are with the others that have low levels of human capital are very likely to enjoy a very limited access to the ways of acquiring and generating new skills and knowledge (p. 140).

Community development is one field where the concept of social capital seems to offer implications for policy and practice (p. 144), Field claims. Active citizenship and volunteering is another thing in his view. As far as the implications for policy and practice are concerned, it should be pointed out that the empirical evidence has proved the following relationships: people with a higher education are more engaged in civic affairs and tend to participate more in lifelong learning activities.

Although the book provides quite a detailed empirical investigation of the relationship between social capital, knowledge creation and lifelong learning, the author is aware of the fact that the impact of social capital on learning is complex and is always tied with other factors. Therefore I admire that in this context Field emphasizes for instance the potential of information and communication technologies development.

In conclusion, the book under review can be used as a useful source for the students and researchers who wish to have insight into the social capital field and its relation to the lifelong learning concept. The book offers a wide range of topics (covering theoretical background, empirical evidence and policy aspects) that form an integrated work. Field in his book presents relevant arguments that support his idea that social relationships can affect lifelong learning activities of adults. Also quite positively, Field identifies a few themes (community development, active citizenship, volunteering) that could be regarded within possible policy measures. On the contrary, some weak points can be found in the chapters that focus on empirical evidence. Not only are the findings from the analysis of social attitudes surveys formulated rather generally, but also quotations from interviews are often too long and it is not always clear what each quote illustrates. A more prudent use of quotations would make the text more fluent and reader-friendly.