Reference No. 62

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 261/2004

Name of Researcher(s):
B.H. Hunter

Time period:
2004

Geographic location:
N/A

Methodology:
This is a theoretical paper drawing upon social capital literature and related applications to Indigenous issues.

Aims:
The paper aims to identify those conceptual and empirical issues that need to be taken into account when developing measurements of the social capital of Indigenous populations.

Selected findings and insights:
Maintaining and indeed strengthening social capital of Indigenous communities is often cited as an important aim of strategies to improve the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. The paper provides an overview of the development of social capital theory, identifying theoretical concerns and measurement problems with the concept, before examining the extent to which the concept is an appropriate means of addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

This is a 'reflective' paper which explores the many different conceptual understandings of social capital and warns that as a construct, if left unquestioned, it may well distract policy makers from the real causes of Indigenous poverty and ongoing social exclusion. In brief, it appears quite difficult to identify causal linkages between social capital and many of the Indigenous outcomes of concern to government. Nevertheless the paper provides useful background for examining current emphases on the development of social and human capital as a means of addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

4. Social capital is a rather ambiguous term but typically refers to the benefits which flow from membership in networks and other social structures, such as social cohesion and family support. It contrasts to human capital which refers to the acquisition of skills and knowledge and leads to increased employment prospects and income.
The paper distinguishes four sources of social capital from the sociological literature:

- shared values or cultural beliefs. Despite diversity across Indigenous peoples there are also commonalties e.g. the importance of kin in everyday life;
- solidarity from people being in like circumstances e.g. being subject to and meeting external economic pressures;
- reciprocal nature of exchanges in Indigenous society, e.g. demand sharing balanced between what is appropriate to demand and what is appropriate to refuse.
- enforceable trust which maintains reciprocal obligations and social norms existing within an Indigenous community.

However the paper argues from the literature both positive and negatives consequences of social capital for contemporary Indigenous Australians. For example:

- positive aspects are that social capital provides a mechanism for social control, a source of family support and that it secures network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family.
- negative aspects relate to: exclusion of outsiders (including external agencies of service delivery); possible excessive claims by some members on other group members (that is, excessive demand sharing not contained within overall reciprocity), restrictions on the freedom of individuals and fourthly a downward leveling of norms.

The paper concludes by calling for a modest interpretation of social capital that focuses upon the structure of social networks.

Educational implications:

Whilst this paper has no direct implications for the delivery of education it does forewarn of the dangers of placing too much emphasis on the development and role of social capital within Indigenous communities to the detriment of ignoring the acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary for gaining employment and other aspects of interacting with mainstream Australian life.

Relevance:

Domain 2: School and community educational partnerships
Cross-cultural understanding of purposes and value of education

Related papers: