

RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN: STUDY IN THREE BELGRADE URBAN SETTINGS

Relevantnost i implikacije socijalnog kapitala za decu: istraživanje u tri beogradska naselja

APSTRAKT Namera je ovog rada da preispita neka teorijska i metodološka pitanja relevantnosti koncepta socijalnog kapitala za decu, kao i njegove praktične implikacije. Analiza se zasniva na podacima iz ankete manjeg obima i osam grupnih intervjua sa decom starom 13-14 godina u tri beogradska naselja. Koristeći operacionalizaciju koju je razvila V. Morrow (2003), autorka ispituje validnost, u slučaju dece kao subjekata, komponenti socijalnog kapitala kao što su: društvene mreže, osećaj pripadanja i lokalni identitet, zajednica i građanski angažman. Nalazi pokazuju da svaka od ovih komponenti ima svoje osobenosti kada su u pitanju deca, što treba imati na umu kada se socijalni kapital koristi kao teorijski koncept i metodološko oruđe. U zaključku autorka otvara pitanje da li bi, uzimajući u obzir društvena ograničenja kojima su izloženi, bilo bolje razmišljati o razmatranim komponentama socijalnog kapitala kao o "društvenim resursima" pre nego kao o "kapitalima" kada su u pitanju deca kao društvena grupa. Ovaj argument ima i specifične praktične implikacije.

KLJUČNE REČI socijalni kapital, deca, Beograd, društvene mreže, zajednica, osećaj pripadanja, građanski angažman.

ABSTRACT The paper aims at questioning some theoretical and methodological issues of relevance of social capital concept for children and its policy implications. The evidence for the analysis comes from the small-scale survey and eight focus group interviews with 13 – 14 year old schoolchildren in three Belgrade urban settings. By using the operationalisation developed by V. Morrow (2003), the author explores the validity in the case of children of social networks, sense of belonging and local identity, community, and civic engagement as features and components of social capital. The evidence shows that each of these features has its particularity when children and young people are concerned, which has to be kept in mind when using social capital as theoretical concept and methodological tool. The validity of the concept of social capital in its broader terms for children is questioned in the paper. Considering different kinds of social constraints, one could ask whether it would be more

helpful to think about the defined components as “social resources” than as “capital” when we consider children as a social group. This argument has also specific policy implications.

KEY WORDS *social capital, children, Belgrade, social networks, community, sense of belonging, civic engagement*

The concept of social capital is at an early stage of conceptual development: its fast proliferation has allowed a variety of approaches, which has led to situation where there is still no consensus on its definition (Baron, Field, Schuller 2000: 24). The conceptual and methodological problems, such as definitional diversity – with questions of coherence and unity of the concept, its analytical productiveness, operationalisation and heuristic utility, relation to issues of social conflict and social exclusion, its political and social implications – are also relevant when one applies social capital to children as particular social category.

Soon after it was introduced to social studies, there has been a continuous debate on the validity of social capital as the concept for particular social groups. For instance, there has been a substantial critique that the concept is “gender blind”, and overall not sensitive enough for different social groups and phenomena (Morrow, 1999; Baron, Field, Schuller 2000).

Substantial critiques could be directed towards classical understanding of social capital when we consider children as subjects. Virginia Morrow states that concept of social capital is “poorly specified as it relates to children” (Morrow, 1999: 744). As she has shown, American studies based on Coleman’s conceptualisation have top-down - from parents to children - view to social capital: parents influence children’s future by investing in them. Thereby these studies tend to blur potential action of children. A more diversified conceptualisation, in line with the sociology of childhood, would focus on active potential of children in making and maintaining their social networks, generating their social capital by making their own connections and also links for their parents (Ibid: 751).

In this paper, I intend to explore, by using the operationalisation developed by V. Morrow (2003), the validity in the case of children of social networks, sense of belonging and local identity, community, and civic engagement as features and components of social capital as formulated by Putnam (1993). My intention is to show that each of these features has its particularity when children and young people are concerned, which has to be kept in mind when using social capital as theoretical concept and methodological tool.

The research is based on small-scale survey on a sample of 309 children aged 13 and 14 in three urban settings in Belgrade¹. The second phase of the research

¹ According to UN Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) term ‘children’ is used to indicate persons under the age of 18. Nevertheless, different cultures attribute term ‘young people’ to persons who

included a survey with their parents (N = 241), while third phase included eight group interviews with 48 children selected from the sample. The research was carried out from November 2003 to June 2004. The locations have been chosen as representatives of different types of urban settings, which are marked with unequal level of development of the elements of social infrastructure (schools, child care institutions, playgrounds, communal centres, culture and leisure facilities, etc.), as well as by different type of organization of residential space (individual or collective housing or housing block/estate). One location (Blok 45) is a housing estate in New Belgrade by the river Sava 10km far from the city centre. The other (Rakovica) is residential part of an industrial zone at Belgrade suburbia cca. 15 – 20km far from the city centre. The third (Vračar) is an inner city residential and multifunctional area not far from the city centre.

The research topics included: leisure time and after-school activities, social contacts and networks, positive and negative sides of neighbourhood, risks and strategies to deal with them, ideas how to improve social life in school and/or in the community.

Social networks

The study indicates that children's social networks are mainly informal networks and are specific since they are mostly based on friendship, much less on family members and even less on neighbours. Some of the children are involved in voluntary networks (in Putnam's terms, 1993) stemming from their engagement in sports or other after school activities, while no children are involved in formal community networks nor they take part in any actions linked to local authorities.

Children in the study tend to spend their leisure time mostly with a group of friends (44% of responses), then with the best friend (24%) and then with family members (20%). Although favourite leisure activities are watching TV (60% of all responses)² and listening to music (54%), socializing is also very important – whether it is playing with friends (54%) or going out with friends (33%). Typical weekend activities include, besides resting (84.5%) and studying (71%), spending time with friends in the neighbourhood (60%) and going out with friends (59%).

Our study shows evidence very similar to that argued by V. Morrow in her research that friendship is of greatest importance to children of this age group (Morrow, 2004). Friends are significant source of emotional support: as it is evident

passed certain point in transition before the age of 18. Similar to many Western countries, in Serbia the 'rite de passage' is transition to secondary school. Therefore, our respondents who attend higher forms of primary school are here referred as 'children'.

² Adds up more than 100% since respondents could choose more than one response.

from the interviews, they are “trustful” persons, with whom you share your secrets, problems and your free time.

Central place of friendship for children is evident from the fact that they stressed availability of friends and places to meet with them as positive features of the neighbourhood. Asked to describe positive sides of their neighbourhoods, the children responded:

There are places where we gather ...

I have a good group of friends here, there are also nice places, but friends are first.

Going out with my friends in Blok [estate] – Blok is cool, it is the best!

Children's social networks carry significant symbolic capital: it is important to be «one of us» (or «with us») as opposed to «one of them» (or «with them»):

K: Yes, there are little groups. Everyone belongs to a group.

Different groups rate differently in their symbolic capital:

I: So, one can distinguish them [different groups – S.T.] in the final year [of primary school – S.T.]?

K: Yes, they are doing it [smoking and drinking – S.T.] in the groups. There are 'faces' ('hot shots'), they are those – problematic. There are 'normals' – they are in the middle, and there are 'go-getters' ['grinds', 'nerds']. 'Faces' are always problematic.

Becoming a final year of primary school student brings a symbolic ascribed status that is sometimes associated with risk behaviour, like smoking, drinking, fights, etc. Boys in particular have to establish their privileged position – commonly by setting group fights with boys from other school at the beginning of the school year³. Children's symbolic status in school comes from belonging to certain group and/or social network.

Local identity and sense of belonging

Unlike the situation described in V. Morrow's study, where children's perceptions of their town and neighbourhood were generally negative (Morrow 2003: 169), most of the children in our study expressed positive attitude towards their neighbourhoods.

³ Usually those fights are prevented by teachers or school security, but sometimes they take place and sometimes with rather serious injuries of children.

We have identified several major dimensions of positive perception of a neighbourhood: physical features, urban infrastructure, and its social characteristics together with sense of belonging.

Various features of the three rather different locations – their proximity to the city centre, existence of parks, woods or the riverbank etc., together with elements of social infrastructure – especially sport grounds, playgrounds and shopping malls, were perceived differently by children as benefits of their neighbourhoods. For instance, the children from inner city area stress proximity of the city centre⁴ and having all the facilities they need nearby, while the children from the industrial area insist on their neighbourhood being calm – not much traffic, and green – surrounded by woods. The children from the housing estate (that is urbanistically planned) stress proximity of the river, lots of walking paths, playgrounds for sports, shopping malls with cafes etc.

The children also pointed at negative sides of their neighbourhoods: risks (violence, drug addicts and alcoholics, suspicious strangers, crime, dark places, stray dogs, etc.), pollution (dirt, garbage, ruined buildings, parks and other places, etc) and not enough places for young people.

Although physical features of the environment together with the urban infrastructure are mentioned quite often as positive sides of the neighbourhood, social networks – friendship and belonging are given more importance: they are mentioned in every second response. Thus they constitute the major source for positive identification with the neighbourhood. Here are some responses that describe positive sides of the neighbourhood:

My good company with whom I spend most of my free time, the river Sava, walks, sport grounds.

My best friend lives in the next street, while others are also near.

We all go to the same park and know each other, and therefore we are harmonious.

There are nice parks and playgrounds; there are nice neighbours and friends.

It interesting to note that the children from the industrial area are the only ones that mentioned neighbours, which is maybe related to do a kind of semi-urban way of life in that area where informal social networks usually include neighbours (see e.g. Tomanovic, 2004).

It is also interesting that the only children who stressed belonging as one of the positive sides of their neighbourhood, come from the housing estate in New Belgrade:

⁴ That, as the research findings show, gives them more spatial autonomy in an earlier age compared to children from other areas in the study.

I have been here since I was born.

I adore it! [the estate]

It's my Blok and I adore it - are some of the responses.

Perhaps a part of the explanation lies in the fact that the estate has clear physical boundaries, unlike the other locations, which the children are very much aware of. Some of them also underline lots of facilities available:

... I feel as Blok 45 is a small neighbourhood totally separated from the whole of Belgrade; it has everything you need (supermarket, school, health centre, shopping mall ...).

Although they express positive feelings towards the place they live in, our findings support Morrow's thesis that children do not feel as they 'belong' to particular geographical location, but rather their social relationships are, from their point of view, crucial for their sense of belonging and local identity (Morrow 2003; 2004).

Community

Consequently, community is not located in geographical location but in the sense of belonging stemming from relations with other people (V. Morrow 2003: 177). This community of friends - a kind of «virtual community», which is situated in spaces around the school, streets and other favourite places – such as parks, playgrounds, shopping malls, friends' houses etc., extends beyond physical limits of the neighbourhood. It is especially so when those physical boundaries are not distinct, as in the case of the inner city area.

The same logic applies when the school is concerned. Unlike in the case of neighbourhood, most of the children have rather negative attitude towards school. The only source of positive identification with school, the only good thing about school, is that it is a community of friends that we can socialize during school hours. In a certain way, community of school friends is a kind of counter culture opposed to school system.

Civic engagement

The last feature I consider from Putnam's formulation of social capital is possibility and actuality of civic engagement.

As mentioned earlier, none of the children is involved in any local formal networks while just a few of them participate in activities linked to the community they live in.

The survey data show that children in 73% of cases think that their rights are respected (52% state they have enough rights for their age, 21% state that all their rights are respected), while only 10% wish that their right to express the opinion is more respected⁵. Also, 55% of children feel as if they have enough influence, while 21% would wish more influence among peers, but only 11.5% - in the school and 6% in the family⁶.

These data apparently contradict with perceptions and attitudes expressed by the children during the interviews where they stated that they have no influence, that no one listens to what they have to say or takes them seriously, that no one respects them. Here are some typical responses:

A: We are not convincing enough.

I: Is there anybody you can turn to and ask?

A: I think no one would care if we would suggest something like that [an after school activity ST].

I: Why?

A: We don't have enough influence on those who are in charge.

K: No one takes us seriously.

J: My Dad would say: »Go out and play. When you grow up, you'll see things differently«.

I: Tell me, what can you do to feel safer in school and in the neighbourhood, concerning all the problems you mentioned?

T: To grow up.

Ig: Either to grow up or to hire bodyguards.

O: Oh yes, that would be the only thing possible. The only thing.

I: How can you make stronger your influence in school?

M1: There is no way we can. We have been trying for two years ...

K: We have no, literally no rights in this school. Some rules have been set up for us as how to behave in school that we have to obey, otherwise ...

M1: School rules they can read to us and we can respect that. But we want them to respect their rules, we'll respect ours if they respect theirs.

M2: We want them to respect us.

⁵ The children were asked: *What is your opinion on your rights?* Several options were offered.

⁶ The children were asked *Would you like to participate more and have more influence?*

This discrepancy of the two sorts of responses indicates that, although they perceive that they are powerless, muted and marginalized, the children are not sensibilized to perceive that their rights are violated by having no influence. From the analysis of our data, I came to the conclusion that I could not agree with V. Morrow's observation that »children learn 'healthy scepticism' early in life« (Morrow, 2003: 177). I would argue that feeling powerless teaches them to remain passive even in situations where there is an obvious channel for them to increase their influence. For instance, our team asked, as the part of PAR project Spaces for young people – everyone in action, the children in one of the schools to develop and elaborate any idea on after-school activities, whether in school or in the community centre. The children had great difficulties first in accepting the idea of after-school activity, and then they held our research team responsible for making the plan into reality. Nevertheless, the final workshop, which gathered together children, teachers and civil servants from the local community, proved to be very successful in terms of empowering children and in opening channels of communication and cooperation between the three parties.

Concluding remarks

In this concluding part, I would just like to raise a couple of points relevant to the issues of social capital in general and to social capital of children in particular.

First is an analytical problem: when and how does a resource (for instance social network) constitute social capital or, to put it differently, is every resource social capital?

It is apparent that the children have what we would call strong “bonding” social capital in their social networks of friends. But we can also ask whether it is capital in strict sense of term. Children’s social networks are potential social capital in broader sense, which could be activated in the future, provided that the networks sustain. In their actual form in the present, children’s social networks are social capital in narrower sense – the one that provides emotional support and thus contributes to well being of children.

In order to become social capital in broader sense, resources (social networks) that children have must be activated in order to meet some of their interests. At this point, we should acknowledge Bourdieu’s concept of sociability (the ability and disposition to maintain and use one’s networks) as a component of social capital: actors should recognize their networks as resources in order for these networks to constitute social capital (Morrow, 2003: 178). This aspect is missing in the process of children making their “bonding” into “linking” social capital, the one that would provide them access to power structures and influential people (Ibid: 177).

This discussion leads us to Bourdieu's understanding of inequality inherent to social capital and generated by it; according to this author the value of an individual's networks – 'volume of social capital possessed by a given agent', depends on the number of connections they can mobilise and the volume of capital (cultural, social and economic) possessed by each connection (Bourdieu, 1986: 249). It is evident that children's social networks consist of so called "weak ties" that lack power. That is the cause as well as the consequence of the fact that children very seldom appear to use their networks in pursuing their interests.

As we have seen from this brief analysis, the children do not perceive the need for associating in order to pursue their interests (one of their participation rights from the CRC). They sense the power of structural constraints, based on their social position and construction as children, and thereby "learn helplessness". Having that in mind, I would argue that children as a social group are facing a kind social exclusion based on age and its construction. Considering different kinds of social constraints children are facing, I tend to agree with V. Morrow in her viewpoint that it would be more helpful to think about the described features as "social resources" than as "capital" (Morrow, 2004: 70).

I would argue further that children do not have social capital (in the strict sense of term) themselves, but they are generators and users of social capital of adults. The active role of children initiating and developing social networks of their parents – for mutual interest, has been documented in few studies (e.g. Morrow, 1996; Brannen et al. 2000; Edwards, 2002; Tomanović, 2003; 2004), as opposed to Coleman's concept of social capital that tends to treat children mainly as objects of their parents' investment.

One of the theoretical and methodological conclusions would be that we have to acknowledge that features of social capital have specific meaning when children and young people are concerned. As I have tried to show, social networks, local identity and community have specific meaning and significance for children. It has to be kept in mind when using social capital as theoretical concept and methodological tool. Furthermore, participation in Putnam's terms is not a relevant feature of social capital for children and young people, since their social position as minors significantly limits their opportunities for civic engagement.

I would suggest greater validity and higher heuristic utility of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of dynamic interrelated capitals linked to the issue of power when children are concerned. The study shows that social and symbolic capitals are tightly woven in the children's sense of belonging to a certain place or group. The role of cultural capital in maintaining and activating social capital for children still has to be explored.

A conclusion concerning policy implications is neither new nor radical. We simply have to ask children and listen to what they have to say, thereby encouraging

them to participate in school and community life. Empowering children, by involving them in participation – opens channels for them to become not future but today's citizens with social capital.

References

- Baron, S., J. Field and T. Schuller (eds.) (2000) *Social Capital. Critical Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) "The Forms of Capital", in J. G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press: 241-58.
- Brannen, J., Heptinstall, E. and K. Bhopal (2000) *Connecting Children: Care and family Life in Later Childhood*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990) *The Foundations of Social Theory*, London: Harvard University Press.
- Edwards, R. (ed.) (2002) *Children, Home and School: Regulation, Autonomy or Connection*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Morrow, V. (1996) "Rethinking childhood dependency: children's contribution to the domestic economy", *The Sociological Review*, 44 (1): 58 – 77.
- Morrow, V. (1999) "Conceptualising social capital in relation to the well-being of children and young people: a critical review" *The Sociological Review* Vol. 47, No. 4, Nov. 1999: 744 – 765.
- Morrow, V. (2001) "Young people's explanations and experiences of social exclusion: retrieving Bourdieu's concept of social capital", in *Explaining Social Exclusion*, ed. by J. Jarman *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 21 No. 4/5/6 2001: 31 – 63.
- Morrow, V. (2003) "Improving the neighbourhood for children. Possibilities and limitations of 'social capital' discourses", in P. Christensen and M. O'Brien (eds.) *Children in the City. Home, Neighbourhood and Community*, London: RoutledgeFalmer: 162 – 183.
- Morrow, V. (2004) "Networks and Neighbourhoods: Children's Accounts of Friendship, Family and Place", in Ch. Phillipson, G. Allan and D. Morgan (eds.) *Social Networks and Social Exclusion: Sociological and Policy Issues*, Ashgate, Aldershot: 50 – 73.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tomanović, S. (2003) "Negotiating Children's Participation and Autonomy within Families", *International Journal of Children's Rights* Vol. 11: 51 – 71.
- Tomanović, S. (2004) "Family Habitus as the Cultural Context of Childhood", *Childhood: A global journal of child research*, Vol. 11 No. 3 August 2004: 339 – 360.