Social Capital among Professionals: a Study of Friendship Network at Work

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Abstract. This study has twofold objectives; first to identify the networks properties that generate social capital in organization; and secondly to map them systematically and visually. The study conducted at Berjaya Holdings Berhad in Kuala Lumpur, narrowing into a department, namely Department A. The respondents consist of 20 employees, where the data gathered by using questionnaires and structured in-depth interview. The relational data were then analysed using UCINET6. The study examined five main behaviours practiced by the employees to generate stocks of capital among them (viz., mutually helping, mutually concern, mutually giving motivation, sharing problems, and knowledge sharing). Result shows informal social networks or friendship has been the catalyst of social capital development in the department, emphasized by the activities they do together and the behaviours they protruded among them as both friends and colleagues. The elements of trust and reciprocity and instilling of norms in these relationships firmly suggest there is social capital exists and promotes harmonise workplace, besides enhancing the process of gaining organizational goals.

Keywords: Social capital, social network analysis, organization, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

The idea of social capital has been long debated and posses theoretical and application enrichment in many aspects. These deliberate discussions have helped many in converging between agreements with disagreements, and clarify those unclear. Social capital perceived to be the stocks of capital that is important to ensure the survival of a community, and as gluten that holds society together. Without these 'social and cultural coherence' that served to be the informal support system to the society, there would be many hindrances to materialize economy, social and cultural development (Ismail Serageldin, 1999).

The concept of social capital can be simply described by Field (2003) as 'relationship matters'. This basic conception lies on how important human generates connection with the others and maintain the relationship overtime; and the benefits would arise as the friendship grows. The original concept has been championed by Bourdieu (1985) as he drawn his definition as "benefits accruing to individuals by virtue of participation in groups and on the deliberate construction of socialibity for the purpose of creating this resource..." (in Portes, 1998, pp. 3). He emphasized on 'membership' benefits that individuals would enjoy and this element is said to be the unifying tool for individuals to remain in the group, hence enriching their economic capital as well as cultural capital. This can only happen when there is participation in group. It is socially constructed through 'investment strategies' that demanding the outcomes in the form of benefits (Portes, 1998). This consideration is in line with Chong Sheau Tsuey (2010) argument that the capital is featuring the group properties rather than an individual's. Thus a group that have strong social capital would have better social outcomes, such as better education level, better employability and lower poverty (Putnam, 1993). Coleman (1988) on the other hand coined that actor's behaviour is governed by the social structure, where the structure normally facilitates the action of the actor within the structure. He emphasized the elements of norms and reciprocity to generate actor's sense of obligation in repaying for his virtue within the

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social structure which formed by those who have similar characteristics. In reality, we incline to be closed with someone who is similar to us. The interaction between similar people would be positioned in a set of networks properties which contributing to possessing of the same attributes with regard to demographic factors such as sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, values *et cetera*. It binds people together with norms and the social interaction would generate a cob web of networks.

The involvement and participation in groups would breed positive consequences since the members allowed to use the sources for their own good. This basic conception is in line with the classical sociological perspectives and have been exhaustedly articulated ever since (*c.f.* Durkhiem in anomie; and Marx for his observation of the class struggles between *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat)*. The best part of such capital is the benefits not only lay on monetary aspect, but also the non-monetary benefits, letting an individual mobility possible (Bourdieu, 1988). To make it clear, Putnam (1993) had extracted the attributes of social capital, namely trust, norms and networks. The three characteristics defined in a manner that social relations have the tendency to create strong ties and strong bond among the actors. In the year 2000 in his book titled 'Bowling Alone', he discovered many Americans have becoming more individualistic where engaging into civic life is no longer in fashion. In a different end, i.e., organization, the absent of teamwork would fail to achieve the corollary of organizational goals.

However, in a conflicting view of Burt (1992), argued that non-reciprocal ties or any absence of ties in relationships (which he named it as structural holes) outweigh the strong ties which promotes embedment of norms. According to him, weak ties facilitate individual mobility since it will bridge himself to greater resources. Similarly, Granovetter (1973) noted such individual would have the opportunity crossing greater distance in the networks to reach other resources. This brings us to an understanding that weak ties, like non reciprocal ties also have the potential to equip the actor with the same weight of mobility. This has been supported by West, Baron, Dowsett and Newton (1999); and Guiffre (1999); to name few.

Employees are important as the hands in work processes. In private companies, where the mere objective is generating profits, employees are the catalyst of the business whom need to be working together to achieve individual goals. Even though it seems like they merely depend on their manager for day-to-day operations, informal relations such as friendship is mutually important for their survival (Graham, 1989). Simultaneously, the existence of social relations accumulates a capital that we refer to social capital. Since the capital allows the members luxuriate themselves with the benefits out of the networks, as a tools to achieve personal objectives. In Social Networks Analysis study, the properties of social relations exist in the form of direct, reciprocal and intertwine with other actors' relations are anticipated. They will shape a very complicated web that then also known as social network. Some would generate small groups or cliques (Scott, 1991). Social capital is perceived as an important structure to have, and some has deliberately seen it is the earmark in human capital creation. Thus, this study is interested to prove two objectives, which are: 1)the employees develop informal networks, and deriving the social capital characteristics such as trust, norms and generate networks; 2)the patterns of social networks can be mapped systematically.

2. Methodology

The orientations of the study were both quantitative and qualitative as they are suitable to describe and exploring the social relations that emerge in a department. The unit of analysis was the individual employee of Department A in Berjaya Holdings, Kuala Lumpur. Since the department consists only 20 employees, the study had undertaken population study in order to generate a complete mapped of informal networks that developed therein (Babbie, 2008; Neuman, 2003).

2.1 Measurement/ Instrument

The study had run interview session with 20 respondents to identify the traits and behaviour that integrate them together as a friend. Five behaviours were determined and were tested. A questionnaire was constructed using sociometric individual nominations. The data were presented in series of matrices which show the numbers of people occupying each of a number of structurally defined positions (Scott, 1991; Scott, 1996) – viz., the attributes and behaviours. The measurement of informal networks, also known as friendship networks among the respondents was done in two steps: 1) ascertain the behaviours that being the keystone

of the informal social relations; and 2) identify whether the networks are formed direct and/ or reciprocal ties. Should these two steps abided, then the friendship network was perceived to be existed. Direct relation with non-reciprocal ties was also vital as the initiator to consolidate and perpetual the present relations. For the purpose of visualizing the relations, red ties were used to depict direct and reciprocated ties; while blue indicate direct ties.

3. Findings and Discussion

The research findings discovered that all of the informal relations or friendship established intertwined with formal relationships, which define the context of the research. Most of the relationships described almost all employees nominated having a good relationship with their immediate supervisors, which at the same time refers them as their friends. The employees also disclosed that they were mutually helping each other in both formal and informal tasks. Based on the interview, majority respondents felt the behaviour had assisted them in lubricating daily transaction and communication in the office. It also promotes fast speed of information received (namely formal and informal) compared by using solely the formal communication channel. According to Krackhardt and Kilduff (2002), friendship would help in shorten the decision making process and effectively disseminating the information in the organization; and later securing the fluency of daily delivery. Such relations developed comes with opportunities which beneficial to the members. Data from the interview proved the statement, i.e., an employee received news of the department's opening from one of her friends that work in the department. Despites drawing the behaviour as a norm in the department, it manifested the sincerity of the friendship thus keeping them firm together. This has been expounded by Putnam (1993) who explains that the existence of social capital could 'facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits'. It too enhances on the improvement of the physical and human capital.

The second behaviour tested was 'mutually concern' among the employees. This behaviour was examined as a nature of the office management that requires dependency to complete work processes. The findings identified most employees who adopted this behaviour not only involved in work related issues but also into the personal matters of their colleagues cum friends. The interview data suggested such behaviour is perceived vital in the department as it accommodated employees with psychological mechanisms, i.e., counselling. Partly in Figure 1 recorded the employees have developed cliques, and 23 others reciprocal ties. Jacob (1974) highlighted that informal relations emerged in formal setting would generate cooperation among members and lowering down the chances of social conflict to happen. Simultaneously, interview data had confirmed this activity helped them to reduce their personal tense and solving the less like routine problems in the department.

Similarly, the findings discovered the respondents also 'mutually giving motivation' among them and the behaviour was said to help increase work and personal performance. Five reciprocal ties and 26 others were direct ties marked the existence of friendship ties among them. Despite that, the interview data confirmed that this activity has boosted their confident level, transforming them to be positive thinkers and appreciating any attainments in their life. In the other words, friends were taking the role as a mirror, making sure they see what others might overlook in their friends. Moreover, friendship could be the source of channel for them to reach to the hot gossips in the organization, and getting the feedback from the others about themselves, and should there any muttering uttered beyond their knowledge. Interview data also perpetuates that it could build a good emotional image of them knowing self is not under fired by others.

Sharing problems among employees are common activity since it would reduce the psychological burden in office stress. The finding identified the respondents in Department A have engaged in sharing problems activity among their friends. Six cliques, two reciprocal ties and 34 others direct ties have been developed in the research context. Based on the interview, they reckoned that the habit of sharing problems was common to them however, they would only disclosed their uneasiness or issues to those who they perceived as close friends. This activity too relies on the trust that has been build since the relationship developed. Sharing problems is an important item that would bring calm and instil rationality when the employees in a great anxious and depression concerning work and personal matters. The data demonstrate the evidence of trust exists among the respondents and norms such as betrayal avoidance is seen has been socialized in the department generally. Trust on the other hand can be the guidance for the respondent 'to act fairly'; and

indirectly drive members to abide the laws if they are treated equally by the immediate supervisors cum friends (Putnam, 1993). This scenario reflected how inculcation of the citizenship among employees could be preserved.

Knowledge sharing among the staff likely would bind them together and promotes cooperation in both formal and informal activities. Based on this behaviour, the findings indicated six cliques, seven reciprocal ties and other 44 direct ties have formed a web of friendships relation. These ties encouraged the staff to share their knowledge in their work thus equipped informal knowledge sporadic in the department. The knowledge sharing too impacted on the density of the relationship, where the property of such network has the propensity to be closer knit. As Coleman (1993) stressed, "Like other form of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence...." It explains the characteristic of the sources tend to be cumulative in nature over time, rather than 'physical capital depletes if it is *not* used' (Putnam, 1993). Provan and Sebastian (1996) reckon that friendship would embark meaningful relations among the actors. The relations appreciated by imposing work stability and realizing one's social needs such as emotionally and psychologically. These behaviours have proven to provide consistency on daily communication among the employees, implementation of tasks, and generate harmonious work place. Concurrently, the interview session had shed some light on how the respondents appreciated their colleagues. Majority of the respondents have given positive remarks on their friends.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The research has been undertaken to look into how social capital co-exist in social networks, i.e., friendships. In Department A, the characteristics of the friendships ties confirmed social capital emerged in human interactions, namely, trust, reciprocal and norms. The findings have proved that the communication and activities that they performed together could enhance the proximity and density of the networks. Five behaviours were identified yielding the result. Figure 1 portrays the entire friendships networks shaped by the five behaviours practiced by the respondents (red ties refer to direct and reciprocated ties; while blue indicates direct ties). The findings shows majority of the traits developed direct friendship networks and reciprocated ties in the department. Needless to say, direct ties were also significant in these findings. This type of tie is important as the catalyst to warmth, close and its ability to construct meaningful relations in future. Nevertheless, the behaviours which they protruded on each other can be the element to maintain such networks. These findings too, depicted the integration and cohesiveness appears in the department that drives to the end goals of the employees. Although the relations are merely generating informal networks in this context, these mini 'civic engagement' is the distinctive features of a successful workplace and work processes, as predicted by Alexis de Tocquiville in his projection of successful cities. A virtue of any development always starts informally, building its foundation through interaction among them, establishing social relations, later then the networks organization will be based on trust and confidence apparatus. Thus, social capital existence clearly brings good outcomes in this context.

The research is important to establish and appreciating the informal networks that appears in any relationships. The study also mark a point that any employers should be aware on the existence of social relations in the organization which the manipulation of such relations can be undertaken for the purpose of the embodiment of corporate culture via socialization, i.e., information sharing. For future undertakings, bigger samples is hoped to be achieved in order to ensure the findings can be generalized. Despite that, such study could be expanded to other institution such as military, hospitality, police and other government offices, as an alternative way to observe how the networks developed. The data also can be manipulated to meet the other end; for example application of other functions in UCINET6 to investigate the power of social networks.
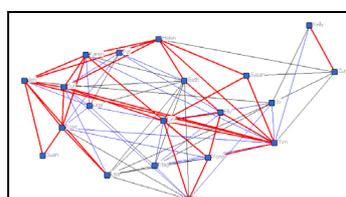

Fig. 1 Overall friendships network in Department A, Berjaya Holdings Berhad

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