Social Capital
AT WORK

An Interview with Chen Honglin
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By
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INTRODUCTION

The programme of interviews entitled ‘SOCIAL CAPITAL: AT WORK’ has been developed by Assist Social Capital to promote social capital activity everywhere, in our efforts to bridge the gap between academic and theoretical understanding of social capital and its successful application.

This is the 2nd interview in an ongoing series of interviews with people working on social capital initiatives from around the world. If you would like to take part please contact colin@social-capital.net

INTERVIEW: January 2010

Name: Chen Honglin
Job Title: Research Fellow
Work Place: University of Hong Kong

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How long have you been working on social capital?
I've been working on social capital for four years now, since late 2005 when I began my PhD.

So it was through your PhD that you started working with social capital?
Yes, that's right. My supervisor introduced me to the terminology after reading my PhD research proposal. The title of my PhD is: “Successful ageing in urban Shanghai: Social capital and the quality of life among older people.” (See LINK below)

In order to facilitate research on social capital among Chinese older adults, as well as making suggestions on policy formulation and service recommendations on successful ageing within the social capital framework, my thesis study tries to explore the profile of social capital among groups of older adults with different demographic backgrounds. It also aims to investigate how both individual social capital and the perceived community social capital affect the quality of life of the older adults in an urban Chinese community.

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The study also bears the purpose of empirically applying social capital measurement and testing its property in a Chinese context.

**There are a number of different definitions for social capital, which do you work to?**

The one from World Bank and a few scholarly works, e.g. Robert Putnam; Coleman, Portes, Lin Nan, etc. The definition including factors of network, trust, reciprocal relationship, collective power. 'Social capital is a collection of networks, social relations, norms, values and informal sanctions embedded in social structures that enable people to achieve quantity and cooperative quality of social interactions and desired goals.' (Dasgupta & Serageldin, 2000; Newton, 2001; OECD, 2001; Putnam, 2000; World Bank, 2009).

**Where do you find support for your initiative?**

My supervisor, a few famous scholars, academic books, journal papers. I would particularly like to thank Prof. Robert Putnam, Lin Nan, Peter Saunders, Dr. Donna Wong, and Dr. Jiaxijin, who kindly provided me suggestions when I was wondering at the crossing of measuring social capital. I emailed them early in 2006 when I was quite confused with social capital measurements and the relevant research methodology. To my surprise, their replies were very prompt and provided me with functional strategies as well as their sample works. I was quite encouraged when reading their suggestions and thinking of how busy they were.

**Does an understanding of social capital have an impact on better community development practice?**

Yes, for sure. There are few community projects that I’ve engaged in, especially on evaluation basis. I've witnessed some positive outcomes of the participants, including quite a few vulnerable individuals/groups. The guidance from the social capital ideology shaped the approach of social work practise in these programs. For example, there is a program for new migrant mothers to Hong Kong. The project tried to integrate these new arrivals (who do not speak Cantonese or English) into the community and empower them for mutual support. The pre and post evaluation presented a positive increase on social capital indicators among these migrant mothers.

**Social capital is multifaceted, which element (if any) do you think is the most important?**

Trust! The other elements could all be generated based on trust.
Who do you work with locally, nationally and internationally?

Mostly individual scholars and research teams local, national, and international, e.g. Professor Joe Leung, HKU; Dr. Wong YuCheung, HKU; Professor Steven Shardlow, Salford University; Dr. Tina Rochelle, City University of Hong Kong.

Is the internet a positive platform in terms of building social capital?

Yes. If the internet resource is properly motivated it is a good platform. The internet platform should generate a norm for each individual who use and contribute to it; a norm of mutual trust and reciprocal benefits that are respected by both the institutions and the individuals; a norm to keep the internet platform safe and fruitful. Any deviate behaviour could be properly avoided or diminished.

Social capital is said to have a 'dark side' do you agree with that theory?

Yes, the dark side of social capital somehow needs proper management. Researchers could provide theoretical implications for the possible dark side of social capital that might happen and in what capacity it could be properly managed. Practitioners or individuals could keep alert on these possible dark side impacts according to the research implications and try to minimize the negative effects.

What is the biggest barrier you have faced in working with social capital?

Measuring social capital and comparing social capital.

What is you biggest success working with social capital?

Measuring social capital in Chinese urban community, adopting a quantitative approach to explore social capital through a systematic random sampling and face-to-face questionnaire interview among the older adults in an urban community of Shanghai, China. The CSC-IQ (basically an integrated tool from World Bank, Canadian Policy Initiatives, and Social Capital Questionnaire Bank from UK) for measuring social capital was adopted and developed for this study. Altogether 413 residents ages 60 and above in the selected community were successfully interviewed. Items addressing different theoretical dimensions of social capital were coded and analyzed through factor analysis.
Is understanding of applied social capital increasing? Why do you think this is?

Yeah. Along with the academic promotion on social capital in various fields, many practitioners, including the community social worker in particular are working on collective action with an understanding of social capital theory and its functions.


Assist Social Capital would like to thank you Honglin for taking the time to speak to us and we’d like to wish you all the best with your future endeavours.

FIN

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