Chapter 1
What Is Social Capital?

Who Discovered It?

In this book, social capital is reviewed from the standpoint of public health and epidemiology. Only glimpses of the rich and argumentative scholar reasoning are presented in the first part of book, together with a brief overview of the long history of the concept of social capital. Originally applied in the area of education, the concept was later on theoretically defined by sociologists, to finally become a useful instrument in several disciplines. Social capital has been driven through sociology and traveled from sociology through economics to health sciences, and is now acknowledged as an important determinant of health. But who discovered social capital? Intuitively, many scholars from Antiquity to the twentieth century have pointed in their texts to the significance of human social connections in a manner that resembles current, somewhat heterogeneous opinions about social capital. For instance, in his political and social theories, Aristotle presented ideas with similarities to social capital. However, he and his followers did not mention social capital in its contemporary sense.

As described in detail below, the roots of social capital lie in the philosophy of social and political life. However, many contemporary authors like to refer to Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who during his famous roundtrip to America in 1831–1832 made precise observations and commented on the American lifestyle. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America" (Tocqueville 1951). Tocqueville observed that men settled in the South were individualists and adventurers who came without family in search of wealth, favored slavery and were not interested in the common good. In contrast, those settled in the North were educated, sober and moral family men who were involved in local associations and in the affairs of the township or parish. Tocqueville admired the public spirit of the local communities and townships in the Northern States of America. Today, of all the regions across the USA, the South still shows the lowest levels of membership in voluntary associations and the least trust in one's neighbors. The early observations of a French visitor for almost 140 years ago still hold true. Using the modern terminology, the

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rich associational activity and civic culture of the settlers in the North can be called social capital.

In America, Tocqueville encountered the most democratic nation of his days. The development he had experienced in Europe after the French revolution was quite the opposite: the post-revolutionary mass societies seemed to move away from freedom, fraternity, and equality. Perhaps he reasoned that the civic culture he observed in the Northern States of America could replace the disappearing bonds of community and kin, and the aristocratic institutions. For him, association for political, economical, social, or cultural purposes appeared as a strength of the community that may save the common liberties of the nation. In fact, his comments on the richness in voluntary associations and the involvement of American citizens in civic affairs have inspired several subsequent authors to advocate social capital as one of the most powerful positive determinants of community life – and even of population health.

Another French observer, the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim, is frequently cited by the proponents of social capital (Kushner and Sterk 2005). His well-known sociological studies on suicide rates and their relation to the religiosity of the community have much common with the current ideas concerning social capital. Durkheim divided suicides in two different types: the egoistic type was the consequence of the loss of cohesion in the religious society (typical to Protestant communities). The anomic suicide, on the other hand, was the result from the growth of industrial society that disintegrated the existing forms of social organizations (Durkheim 1897/1951). Tocqueville and Durkheim both emphasized the extinction of local collectives after the revolutions in Europe. They also warned of the control of the state and the consequential alienation of citizens from their networks if the state is to represent the only organized collectivity.

Both Tocqueville's observations and Durkheim's suicide typology and the related social theory have been frequently cited to demonstrate the link between social capital, social integration or social cohesion, and community health (e.g. Kawachi et al. 1997, 1999, Berkman and Kawachi 2000, Berkman et al. 2000, Kawachi et al. 2008b). However, a closer reading of Durkheim's evidence for his suicide typology does not support the idea of suicide rates as a marker for decreasing social cohesion. In fact, Durkheim may not at all be entitled to be named as The Father of social capital, since his register-based data on suicide rates do not fit well in his theory of social disintegration (Kushner and Sterk 2005). The advocates of a social capital approach should keep this in mind when seeking for its historical roots.

It is interesting to notice that also Robert D. Putnam, the prominent advocate of social capital, has compared the political and social affairs between South and North as Tocqueville did in USA, but in this case between the southern "Mezzogiorno" and the northern "Padania" of Italy (Putnam 1993). Putnam's neo-Tocquevillean comparisons concerning the Italian society have strongly influenced the current discussion around social capital and its relationship with population health. When trying to find an answer to the question "who invented social capital", one must be cautious of not being over-enthusiastic about the classical sociological theories as they may not fit well with the current theories of social capital (e.g. Portes 1998, 2000, Kunitz 2004, Kushner and Sterk 2005). Similarly, it may be somewhat

artificial to resort to the mid-nineteenth-century American democracy as a model of the present-day social capital, but nevertheless, it symbolizes well how social capital relates to the dimensions of civicness and the practice of democratic communities (Putnam 1993, 2000).

The track from Tocqueville's observations about the mid-nineteenth-century American communities to the neo-Tocquevillean and communitarian definition of social capital is favored by many Anglo-Saxon scholars. The communitarian idea of social capital focuses on "features of social organization such as civic participation and trust in others" (Kawachi et al. 1997) whereas the idea of the network and individual social capital can be reverted to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who in his seminal works defined and described social capital as one of the three capitals, the others being the economic and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1979, 1980, 1986). The school of network social capital focuses on social relationships and networks, and access to resources (Lin 2001, 2008, van der Gaag 2005, van der Gaag and Webber 2008). The communitarian definition operates at the collective level and the network-based definition mainly at the individual level. These differences and what follows from the communitarian vs. individual views on social capital and health will be discussed in the following chapters, but before the more detailed reviews, let's have a cursory look at the philosophical roots of the concept "social capital".

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical roots of social capital can be found in the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (350 BCE). His famous expression "man is a political creature" *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE XI, 9) is often interpreted as meaning "human beings are social animals". In sociology, it has long been commonplace to think about society as a system that contrasts individuals with collectivities. During the last three, or perhaps even more decades, neo-liberalism has been the dominating ideology in the economy and politics of Western societies. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher brought this opposition to its ultimate edge in her famous neo-liberal talk by exclaiming: "There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals!" The Aristotelian teleological – and nowadays, neo-Aristotelian – standpoint differs radically from individualism and the neo-liberal ideas: Individuals are not contrasted with society, because individuals can only function in a social context and they are an inseparable part of this context. Aristotle called his political philosophy *politike* and presented it in the first Book of *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE I, 2–1094 a 1–1094 b 27) and in *Politics*. Basically, *politike* concerned the virtues of citizens acting by themselves or as members of associations and communities. It emphasized the associational engagements of individuals that seek for virtue *(arête)* and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Each individual or member of the community contributes to the common advantage of the community and to its ultimate "end".

Aristotle set *eudaimonia*, i.e., happiness or well-being, as the ultimate end of human beings. He identified the best of the human soul as happiness or joy that pervades the good life. According to Aristotle, sociability and virtue belong to the human art and separate human beings from the animal kingdom. Everyone reaches out for happiness, and to be happy is equal to good life and well-being and to succeeding in life. Aristotle further describes several internal and external conditions for good life, among which trustful friends and good health are given as important prerequisites. It is interesting that Aristotle emphasized social networks as an important outer factor that is necessary for happiness and good life. For him, friendship networks seem to be an essential qualification for human happiness, well-being, and solidarity – and even for health (NE VIII, IX).

Aristotle defined friendship as "the wishing all good things on the other but not on himself and the acting with all one's might towards the desired goal". In the eighth and ninth Books of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he offered several examples of good friendship and community, characterizing friends as persons who feel similarly and experience we-attitude (e.g. NE VIII, 1159 b–1163 a 23, and IX, 1171 b–1172 a 15). Also, by writing about human happiness and friendship circles, Aristotle transfers social networks to the area of the philosophy of health promotion. For him, health does not only concern body and soul, but also the social structure surrounding single individuals. An individual cannot exist and become a person in isolation, but in community with the others. Aristotle's idea of man in community (*polis*) has later been referred to as the individual-in-community theory. In modern terms, his ideas can be helpful in elucidating the concept of social capital and its significance for community health. In a broad Aristotelian sense, we approach social capital that can be defined as an asset created by reciprocal friendship, solidarity and social cohesion that are embedded in individuals of a collective or community.

Another interesting feature from this book's standpoint is the Aristotelian idea that one must work to reach *eudaimonia,* happiness and well-being. Aristotle was one of the first thinkers to emphasize the necessity of action and participation, instead of being a passive observer, in aspiration for happiness and well-being. According to the current health promotion ideology, it is quite obvious for modern people that well-being and health cannot be reached without continuous effort and active exertion.

In his famous work *Utilitarianism* (1861/1998), John Stuart Mill pursued Aristotelian ideas of happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the principal aim of human action. Even though Mill did not deal with all of Aristotle's ideas of the human art, he emphasized the sociability of human beings (Mill 1861/1998, III). Mill thought that human beings are sociable by nature. His trust in human sociability was so strong that he even argued that, in the future, new factors will continuously evolve that will enhance our sense of belonging to the human community. Mill's ideas seem to approach the present-day communitarianism, especially when taking into account that in 1833 he published, under a pseudonym, a critical essay protesting against the atomistic individualism presented by the Father of Utilitarianism, Jerome Bentham.

Neo-Aristotelian Concepts of Social Capital

The Aristotelian standpoint has led to various neo-Aristotelian thoughts exemplified by social capital (e.g. Young 2004). Aristotle wrote in the first Book of *Nicomachean Ethics*: "For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states." (NE I, 1094a–46). If one replaces here "state" by "community", as many translations of Aristotle's text actually do, one approaches the modern idea of social capital. However, neo-Aristotelian conception of the roots of social capital has its limitations, due to the great variability of Aristotle's expressions. For instance, Aristotle mentions trust as a virtue of friendship, although social reciprocal trust has been regarded as the most important determinant when defining social capital. It is also a bit risky to claim that Aristotle was the first to speak openly for the social prerequisites of population health since he also mentions elsewhere in his texts that individuals aspire after happiness in the first place for themselves, rather than for others.

In line with Aristotle's *politike* and *eudaimonia*, the political neo-Aristotelianism has referred to the natural togetherness and solidarity of human beings, which is also the fundamental element of communitarian movement (Etzioni 1993). Neo-Aristotelian communitarians wanted to abandon the old politico-economic debate between the left and right and focus on the role of the community, culture, and virtues, rather than on either the private sector or the government. Ideologically and ethically, communitarianism looks to the social individual or collective and to the significance of reciprocity, trust, solidarity and coherence, all of which is in this book discussed as "social capital". In neo-Aristotelianism, *eudaimonia* is regarded as a deep moral obligation, demanding one to take other human beings into consideration. The philosophical neo-Aristotelianism emphasizes the moral core and the teleological goal of human life. Also, it proposes that the real virtue is prudence that insists on human social action.

If we take the contemporary neo-Aristotelian view as our guideline to the roots of social capital, it offers us several positive orientations: egalitarianism, teleology, and sociability as the theoretical and practical assets leading to happiness, well-being, and health. In this context, happiness and well-being mean that people respect other fellow citizens and place themselves in the secondary position (contrary to Aristotle's idea). So, quoting Aristotle, "Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (NE, VI, 1140a–1140b). Practical wisdom requires knowing how to live well, and it is the human virtue that inevitably leads to such human actions that profit other human beings. With these interpretations of the original sources, the neo-Aristotelian modification of Aristotle's thoughts can help us to track human sociability and social practices.

As mentioned above, trust or social trust was not important for Aristotle's *politike*, however, trustworthiness has become a virtue term in the neo-Aristotelian sense. Since trust is the cornerstone in the definition of social capital, it is interesting to look at its theoretical background in the light of the neo-Aristotelian tradition. The themes of trust and responsibility and their links with social capital have recently been discussed by Timo Airaksinen, a Finnish moral and social philosopher (Airaksinen 2008). Trust is divided in weak trust, or reliance, and full trust, corresponding with reliability and trustworthiness. Trust that is social-dependent, for example, trust in social systems and institutions, can be called weak or nominal notion of trust. On the other hand, when one trusts a person, one does not focus on the reliability in satisfying one's own desires but this kind of trust is based on reciprocity, on mutual benevolence. It can be called full trust or social trust because it is based on value similarity, with a shared value basis that varies across context and time. Hence, social trust or full trust leads to egalitarian cooperation and socially compatible goals. The presence of trusting people is easily accepted in the community, and the members of the community find it easy to trust them. The reason to trust another person is that he or she trusts you, making full social trust symmetrical. This idea fits well in the current definition of the mutual trust as the important dimension of social capital. Accordingly, full trust does not only contribute to social capital, but it is a form of social capital in itself. We can say that trust has a community forming function: people are members of a community because they trust each other. According to the theoretical analysis (Airaksinen 2008), social trust is needed to form a community. The empirical studies investigating whether this is true in the causal sense will be reviewed later in Chapter 6.

Because people share their values in a social context, social trust is always contextual and therefore relevant for the theoretical foundations of social capital. In contrast, weak trust or reliance is not sufficient for cooperation and social capital, because it is not basically contextual, mutual, or egalitarian. Alternatively, weak trust seems to suit for the theoretical basis of so-called linking or institutional social capital but not for bonding and bridging social capital, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter (see textbooks, Castiglione et al. 2008, Kawachi et al. 2008). Even the negative side of social capital can be explained by weak trust, because it may be founded on competence-based responsibility. Airaksinen is one of the first to discuss responsibility and competence in relation to trust and social capital. He points to the fact that responsibility is usually based on liability and therefore not relevant to full social trust. Social responsibility must be distinguished from competence-based responsibility, and it belongs to a person as a member of community or as a citizen. Social responsibility, in contrast to competence, is shared by other people belonging to the community or group. This is also the weakness of social responsibility as a characteristic of social capital: it is usually limited to a certain group and separates "us" from "them". Airaksinen (2008) argues that neither social trust nor cooperation can extend across the border between "us" and "them", and he underlines that the us/them opposition is problematic for the theory of social capital. He refers to the recent neo-Aristotelian and communitarian social theory

that discusses social capital in the context of restricted (or closed) communities, such as Mafia or religious fundamentalist groups (e.g., Portes 1998, 2000, Fassin 2003).

Social Practices

Another contemporary Finnish philosopher, Raimo Tuomela has presented a new theory of social practices (Tuomela 1983), and developed a mathematical model to support it (Tuomela 2002). The philosophy of social practices is based on the methodology using the program of social constructivism. The main theses of this philosophy are the following: social practices are central for full-blown conceptual thinking and acting; social practices in their core sense are repeated collective social actions based on collective intentionality in the sense of shared we-attitudes; social institutions conceptually depend on collective acceptance (on the relevant we-attitude of the group members) and on the social practices satisfying and maintaining those we-attitudes (Tuomela 1983, 2002).

We-attitude is a collective attitude that is the shared social reason for any collective social action or practice. A person has the we-attitude X (a joint goal, intention, or belief) if he has X and believes that the others in the collective also have X and believes that there is a reciprocal belief in the collective that the members have X. The so-called we-mode of we-attitude points to the reasoning and acting in accordance with the perspective of the collective. It expresses a notion of the collective sociality that is typical of, for example, social capital. In contrast to the we-mode, the I-mode of we-attitude concentrates on the agent's own benefit and action, and therefore is not suitable for the theoretical analysis of social capital. Tuomela (2002) regards social practices as repeated collective social actions that are performed on the basis of shared we-attitudes. Some social practices are customs, in other words, they have transformed into the cultural and social norms of the collective.

In a general mathematical model, Tuomela showed in what ways social practices are initiated and maintained. He formulated in precise mathematical terms how the we-attitudes serve to initiate and guide social activities, and how the relevant social structures are created and maintained. The analysis indicated that long-term collective goals and views are maintained because reaching or maintaining them is satisfactory for all members of the collective (Tuomela 2002).

In many aspects, Tuomela's analysis approaches the above-mentioned Aristotelian, neo-Aristotelian, and utilitarian theories of human social action. The roots of social capital as discussed above may be regarded artificial but, on the other hand, the intellectual history of social capital still remains to be published.