



# The Impact Social Capital has on Communication within Extension Education



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## Introduction

Social capital is a research topic that has become a prominent indicator of a communities' success and/or failure over the last twenty years. Social capital refers to the "stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon in order to solve common problems" (Sirianni & Friedland, 1997). Research indicates that social capital has a greater importance in rural communities rather than urban communities. Rural communities typically have a smaller population in comparison to urban communities, and the rural population within a given area is more spread out. For the purpose of this study, rural population refers to regions that have a lower population density that covers a larger geographical area in comparison to urban centers, and the bulk of the population for a given region lives outside a city. Work in these areas is often more focused on agriculture than urban areas (Campbell, Hanania, Stenhouse & Donev, 2020). Communication is key for these rural communities to grow and prosper. Therefore, a community with sources of good communication, trust between community members, and established norms will experience good social capital (Zachariasse, 2002). As evidenced in the research, social capital plays a big component in how successful the county Cooperative Extension office is engaged and supports the local community. Good social capital in a given county will create an increase in community involvement and collaboration that will enhance informal educational opportunities such as 4-H youth development, Agriculture and Natural Resource programs, and Family and Consumer programs.

## Methodology

A literature analysis was conducted to gauge the impact that social capital plays in the role of communication within cooperative extension education. There is a great amount of research on the impacts of social capital on urban communities, but limited research conducted on the impacts of social capital and communication within education outlets (Extension). The literature identifies three variables connected to social capital that contributes to impactful cooperative county centers (Zachariasse, 2002):

- Trust
- Norms
- Shared Language

There was a thematic analysis of the literature relating back to the correlations between communication and social capital, and the role that it plays in community outreach programs such as Cooperative Extension. With the addition of trust, norms, and shared language woven into communication, increased social capital will result (Zachariasse, 2002). The indicators that productive social capital has on rural communities will include church attendance, 4-H, county fairs, and traditional youth organizations (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997).

## Figures

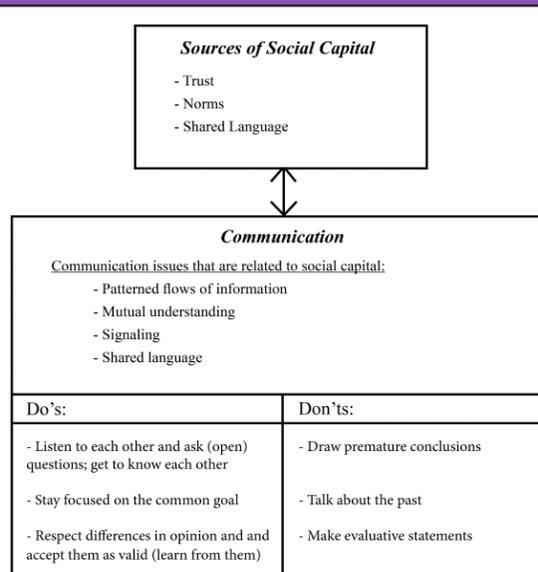


Figure 1

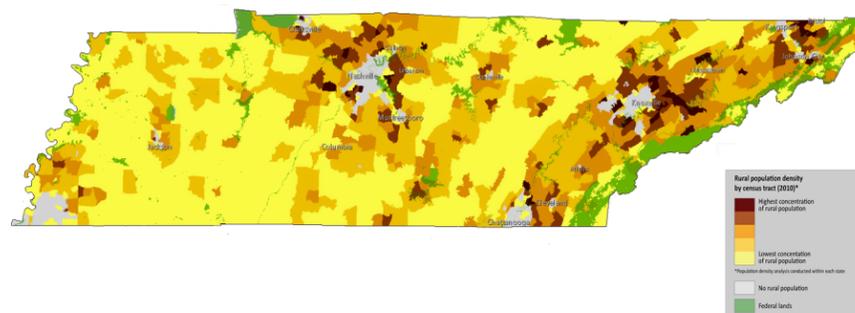


Figure 2

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Communication and social capital are interrelated and play important roles on one another (Zachariasse, 2002). In rural areas, communication and social capital is fostered by the design of county seats (the center of the county and usually where the court house sits.). Many county seats are designed and built around a central square with the intent of fostering social interaction (Debertin & Goetz, 2013). The three sources of social capital (trust, norms, and shared language) are important to the development and facilitation of social capital. According to Zachariasse's (2002), (Figure 1) recommendation for fostering communication and social capital may include, but are not limited to:

1. Listening to one another and asking open ended questions with the intent of getting to know one another.
2. Formulate a common goal and stay focused on the common goal.
3. Parties should respect differences in each other's opinions, accepting the opinions as valid, and learn from every opinion.

With the addition of these components, social capital will have a greater impact on the communities that are classified as rural. Social capital is vital for the state of Tennessee, especially for Tennessee Extension centers, as you can imagine. It is vital because the landmass that is considered rural within the state (Figure 2). Social capital has declined in communities where membership and involvement within clubs and organizations had decreased (Debertin, 1996). These clubs and organizations would include involvement in Extension outlets such as 4-H youth development, Agriculture and Natural Resource programs, and Family and Consumer programs. If community leaders, members, and county Extension centers collaborate and communicate there can be numerous amounts of fruit that can be established from the county cooperative center and the community establishing ties with one another that benefits both parties and members of the community (Debertin & Goetz 2013). Another recommendation will be for county Cooperative Extension centers to come together with their community and collaborate for the benefit of both. With these involves communication and incorporating the sources (trust, norms, and shared language) mentioned before.

## Trust

Trust is an important component of social capital that is gained and increased through the process of communication. Trust can be confusing when parties believe that it should be freely given, rather than gained. There has to be a certain degree of understanding between people for the two to finally have a certain amount of trust established (Zachariasse, 2002). Effective communication plays a major role in construction of trust among multiple parties. Parties/citizens/leaders win trust by communicating openly and often; having a clear and committed communications policy, strategy and processes; initiating formal and informal communications programs; and regularly assessing their own communications effectiveness and that of their team and their organization (Beslin & Reddin 2004). This is especially important between Cooperative Extension centers, community leaders, and community members. Enhancement of social capital, the building of trust, networks and enriched interactions at the community level are considered key to rural revitalization (Alston, 2002).

## Norms

Norms are another important component of social capital that are gained and increased through the process of communication. Norms are the prompts that cause individuals to act a certain way. When social capital has been established or is in the process of being formed, norms are being created and provide order in a society (McLeod, 2008). Having norms in society increases social capital, and also indicates that social capital is established. Strong social capital is associated with norms that encourage prosocial actions, that discourages exploitation, and that create connection and cooperation for mutual benefit (Claridge, 2020). Norms will create an environment of collaboration in a community to better work toward a common goal(s) and communication plays a key role in the establishment of norms. More specifically, Zachariasse (2002) proposes that two ways/methods insure success - processes of signaling (information is transmitted by a gesture, action, or sound) and meta-norms (mechanism that is used to promote cooperation in social contexts).

## Shared Language

Lastly, shared language is also an important component of social capital and typically refers to people developing understanding amongst themselves based on language to help them communicate more effectively (Thomas & McDonagh, 2013). First, shared language has a direct and important function in social relations, for it is the means by which people discuss and exchange information, ask questions, and conduct business in society (Zachariasse, 2002). Communication is increased through social capital causing community leaders to communicate more effectively with one another, thus causing a linkage. Linkages are an important aspect that is needed for increased social capital in rural communities. Shared language gets closer to the core meaning of what we are trying to communicate, but to accomplish this, it is important to pay attention to technical, business and design language; culture specific language; regional, national and social differences; and person first language (Thomas & McDonagh 2013). As rural communities come together, there has to be an understanding on why they are communicating with one another and the goal in which they hope to accomplish together.

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