Public libraries as breeding grounds for bonding, bridging and institutional social capital: The case of branch libraries in rural Denmark

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Abstract:

Public libraries are eminent providers of human and social capital, not least in small rural communities where such meeting-places are becoming scarce in many places in the world. Drawing on data from a questionnaire survey, this article reports on social capital creation at branch libraries in 62 rural municipalities in Denmark, as reported by the municipal library managers. A main empirical result is the extensive collaboration between the branch libraries and other public institutions in the local area, which as often also involves volunteers from the civic society. Hence it is shown that, besides micro level social capital, valuable social capital is created among public and voluntary institutions collaborating on local core and noncore library services. In this way, public libraries are not only breeding grounds for two well-known types of social capital – bonding and bridging (Putnam 2000) – but also for a highly valuable third type, institutional social capital (Grix 2001). It is argued that the closing down of more than half of branch libraries in rural Denmark since 1988 is partly due to politicians being ignorant of the great socio-economic value of these “gracious spaces” (Vårheim 2011: 17), which has a strong capacity to foster ‘full-scale’ community social capital consisting of all three types of social capital.

Keywords: Public branch libraries, rural Denmark, bonding social capital, bridging social capital, institutional social capital, human capital
1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been much debate on the civic role of the public library (Schull 2004; Kranich 2010). In particular, many studies have focused on the relationship between public libraries and social capital (see Vårheim 2007 for an overview). Most of these studies are strongly inspired by the work of Robert D. Putnam (1993, 1995, 1996, 2000). However, partly in contrast to most of Putnam’s work they seek to study concrete creation processes of social capital rather than operating with social capital as an abstract term, which is supposed to capture major societal trends. Overall, LIS (library and information science) studies on social capital show that public libraries are open meeting-places, which function as important providers of a long row of individual and collective benefits in local communities. These benefits consist primarily in self-education, social interaction and networking. Hence benefits may be related to one of two intangible and closely interconnected forms of capital: human and social.

Whereas human capital consists of useful knowledge inside people and therefore belongs to a single person, social capital exists between people and belongs to more than one person. In this article, I will use Putnam’s (1993: 35-36) simple and operational definition of social capital as “an accumulated stock of networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit”, that is, conducive to both individual and collective goods.

In most countries, public libraries are important and ubiquitous fabrics of intangible capital – invisible but nevertheless socioeconomically productive (White 2007). The importance of libraries as breeding grounds for human capital is obvious. Both formal education and informal learning is thriving here. Libraries are however also important breeding grounds for social capital including three important types: bonding in the form of exclusive, intra-group networks based on strong ties such as family or friends with whom you meet regularly; bridging in the form of inclusive, inter-group networks based on weak ties such as business connections or people you meet with in the local soccer club; and institutional in the form of collaborative networks comprising both public institutions and voluntary associations in the local area such as the community library working together with, among others, the local art association, the pensioners’ association and the local school (cf. Putnam 2000; Grixti 2001; Patulny & Svendsen 2007; Durston 2008). Hence, we may see public libraries as important generators of ‘full-scale’ social capital including all three types of social capital.

Drawing on data from a questionnaire survey from 2009 including 62 out of 63 library managers in rural Denmark, the purpose of this article therefore becomes to describe and analyze how social capital actually is created in situ (Svendsen 2006), that is, in libraries and between libraries and their collaborative partners. Hence the main contribution is to show that, in a country like Denmark, creation of social capital does not only take place at the micro level, at the single library, but also at the meso level leading to highly beneficial institutional social capital within the local area. The latter seems to be somewhat overseen, in library research as well as in social capital research in general. However, public libraries do not, indeed cannot, as isolated institutions build up ‘full-scale’ social capital without effective partnerships in the local area (Cart 2008). On this background, I will in the following seek to answer the main question: Which social capital engendering activities at both micro and meso levels are taking place in public branch libraries in 62 rural municipalities in Denmark, according to the municipal library managers? This I will do by answering the following three sub-questions: What does reduction in branch libraries mean for social capital creation?
How do these widespread, public institutions function as breeding grounds for social capital? And which specific types of social capital do they help to generate?

Overall, I argue that the reduction of branch libraries by half since 1988, the large majority situated in rural Denmark, is partly due to politicians being ignorant of the socio-economic value of these “gracious spaces” (Vårheim 2011: 17) that simultaneously foster human and social capital. Such invisible capital is beneficial to individuals, local communities as well as the larger society. Thus branch libraries in rural Denmark tend to act as organizational hubs in the local area, exhibiting a strong and rather overseen capacity to foster highly valuable institutional social capital. The topic of public libraries in the creation of social capital can be expected to have particular relevance for rural sociology, as inclusive public meeting-places in those geographies are scarce and those that exist – as for example the school or the library – therefore gain added socioeconomic value.

Section 2 below addresses the relationship between public libraries and social capital. First, I present definitions of human and social capital. On this background I look at public libraries as social capital providers, followed by a further specification of the three types of social capital (full-scale social capital). Section 3 presents the Danish case and addresses the three sub-questions mentioned above. Section 4 is a discussion of the results. Section 5 concludes.

2. Public libraries in the creation of human capital and three types of social capital

Intangible assets: Human and social capital

Public libraries are arguably good places for creation of intangible assets or ‘forms of capital’, which contribute to lubricate economies (Veblen 1908; Tomer 2002; Waldstrøm & Svendsen 2008). In this perspective, economies are more than what immediately meets the eye.

One of the first definitions of what today is termed human capital was proposed by Adam Smith (1904, II.1.2), who talked about a capital fixed in a person in the form of “acquired and useful abilities”. During the 1960s, it gradually became popular among economists to “value man” as human capital (Kiker 1971: 51). Gary Becker (1962: 9) defined human capital as “activities that influence future real income through the imbedding of resources in people” and suggested that investment in human capital should include “schooling, on-the-job training, medical care, vitamin consumption, and acquiring information about the economic system”.

Where intangible human capital denotes the economic value and usefulness of knowledge inherent in single individuals’ bodies/brains attained through formal education or informal learning, social capital means the economic value inherent in those social relations outside the single person, which make possible “the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in [their] absence” (Coleman 1990: 302). This both includes physical capital, which is “wholly tangible”, human capital, which is “less tangible”, as well as social capital, which is “even less tangible” (Coleman 1990: 304). Moreover, Coleman (1988a, 1990) suggested that, belonging to two or more persons, social capital forms important channels for transfer of human capital – as for example transfer of valuable knowledge from parent to child, friend to friend, or librarian to library user. In this way, social relations affect not only people’s well-being but also their economic performance.

Hence, when used for economic purposes as, e.g., getting information from a friend about a job opening, social relations should rightly be seen as a form of capital, that is,
stored up wealth that yields its owner revenue (Smith 1904, II.1.2). As Putnam (2000: 19) says: "[Just] as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups." In accordance with his three-element definition mentioned above – networks, norms, trust – Putnam (ibid.) further specifies social capital as connections among individuals making up economically productive networks linked to civic virtue.

In line with Putnam, I will argue that social capital is conducive to both individual and collective benefits, the latter in the form of “spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community” (Putnam 2000: 20). Therefore, social capital should not only be seen as solely beneficial to single individuals at micro level, but also to groups and whole societies at meso and macro levels. The same is true for human capital. For example, getting knowledge from books, newspapers or the internet can profit yourself by raising your educational skills, increase your chances to obtain a job; as well as benefit the whole society by e.g. enabling you to participate in public debates or increasing your capability to get an education and/or a high-paid job and thus pay more in taxes, provide for a family, etc. Examples of individual benefits from social capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986) could be information about job opportunities from people you meet in the library or advice concerning a specific disease from internet chats with strangers, whereas examples of societal benefits are more trust and more ‘civic’ communication and cooperation among citizens across social, ethnic, political and age groups, or more positive attitudes to state institutions, i.e. formation of institutional trust.

My claim is that library studies not only, in the formulation of Gong et al. (2008: 81), should look at social capital in order to go “beyond the human, economic, and cultural capitals traditionally considered” and in this way bring a “new perspective to library science”. We should also consider the specific types of social capital produced in the single community.

Why are libraries effective breeding grounds for social capital?

When reading the literature on libraries and social capital, one finds a long list of the many blessings of public libraries.

Among prevailing human capital benefits contributing to equality of opportunity and social mobilization are free access to information for all people (Kranich 2001), increasing literacy and “civilisational competence” (Caidi 2006) and, through enlightenment, promoting democracy (Byrne 2004; Kranich 2001, 2010) and democratic participation (Alstad & Curry 2008).

In respect to prevailing social capital benefits, including productive networks, trust and ‘civic’ norms (Putnam 1993, 2000), the literature stresses the capability of public libraries to promote community building (Marcum 1996; Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Hill 2009), function as social meeting places (Leckie & Hopkins 2002; Goulding 2005a; Aabø et al. 2010) and recreational places (Harris 2007), be positively correlated with local community involvement (Gong et al. 2008; Aabø et al. 2010), link physical communities with virtual communities (Pettigrew & et al. 2002), relieve social isolation (Johnston 2012; Aabø & Audunson 2012), be places for playful learning for young people (Victoria 2010) as well as “semi-private” places for groups of women (Prigoda & McKenzie 2007), enhance social integration, in particularly of immigrants (Elbeshausen & Skov 2004; Audunson et al. 2011), create trust between diverse people (Vårheim et al. 2008; Vårheim 2009). Moreover, libraries are seen as neutral (not dangerous) public institutions represented by friendly and helpful librarians (Vårheim 2011; Aabø & Audunson 2012), places that foster civicness, civic discourse (Kranich
2010) and tolerance and openness to diverse people and ideas (Vårheim 2011), as well as builders of social responsibility, including obeying common rules (Cox et al. 2000).

But why, really, are libraries good breeding grounds for social capital? Because they allow for both introvert study behaviour (e.g. people working on an exam paper, seeking specific information or look for a job), as well as extrovert socializing, playful behaviour (e.g. children playing with each other, neighbours or friends who meet). Moreover, libraries are safe, comfortable “neutral places” (Johnson 2012: 53) with a unique capability to offer universalistic services – the public library may indeed be the most universalistic state institution (Vårheim 2009). Here all people are welcome to gather – fully voluntarily, in a relaxed and informal atmosphere and for a multitude of individual and social purposes. Rules and norms of conduct are clear and at the same time flexible and, sometimes, even negotiable (Aabø & Audunson 2012: 139). As is also shown in the Danish case in the following, there is as often close cooperation between librarian staff and volunteers from local associations leading to valuable institutional social capital, something which may explain the significant positive relation between strong local communities and usage of the local library that has been found in some studies (Gong et al. 2008; Aabø et al. 2010). Finally, compared to other state institutions citizens of all ranks and from all religious, political, age and ethnic groups hold a very positive picture of the library and its state representatives, the librarians, leading to more institutional trust as well as paving the way for more bridging social capital (cf. Vårheim et al. 2008; Aabø et al. 2010; Vårheim 2011; Johnson 2012; Aabø & Audunson 2012).

Some scholars explain the social capital ‘excellence’ of most public libraries throughout the world by their ability to unite what Oldenburg (1999) has termed the third place, i.e. a neutral, informal place between the private home (first place) and the work place (second place), as we find them in the local civic society where local dwellers can communicate freely, for example, in sports halls and community assembly houses (e.g. Fisher et al. 2000; Putnam & Feldstein 2003; Evjen & Audunson 2009; Aabø et al. 2010). Thus third places succeed in mediating between private-informal and public-formal spheres, that is, “simultaneously perceived as an arena buzzing with activity and a arena for reflection [and] as a cathedral and a daily living room” (Evjen & Audunson 2009: 172). Others explain libraries’ social capital excellence by declaring them important low-intensive arenas defined as “arenas where we meet and are exposed to people with a quite different background and values”. This in contrast to high-intensive arenas characterized by being places “where we can live out our major interests and engagements together with people who share them” (Audunson 2005: 436).

The major challenge to providing library service is that libraries are expensive, and as librarians and library leaders seldom argue hardly for their societal importance (Schull 2004), they are vulnerable to cuts in budgets. Furthermore, the literature reports on cases of social exclusion, e.g. youngsters feeling socially excluded in the local library (Panelli et al. 2003: 117). Finally, we find some warnings against libraries not actively counteracting the digital divide and hence contributing to social exclusion (Muddiman et al. 2000; Dutch & Muddiman 2001; Birdi et al. 2008).

However, the general picture is that public libraries are good at gathering people for all sorts of healthy purposes, exactly because they welcome all citizens and simply excellence in being “places for all” (Hillenbrand 2005a), in mission statements as well as in practice. Furthermore, in most librarian constitutions both the enlightening (education, democracy, civic virtues) as well as socializing (meeting place, networks, integration) mission are explicit.²
**Public libraries in the creation of bonding, bridging and institutional types of social capital**

As mentioned, my main argument is that public libraries not only create a ‘social’ capital in an abstract way. Besides valuable human capital, they appear apt to foster ‘full-scale’ social capital containing three important types of this multifaceted form of capital: Bonding, bridging and institutional. Table 1 summarizes important properties of two intangible forms of capital that are simultaneously created in public libraries.

[Table 1 here]

Regarding human capital, it is accumulated by individuals who own it, hence exclusive in nature. Regarding the first two types of social capital generated among individuals at the micro level, bonding social capital should be seen as “inward looking [networks that] tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups” (Putnam 2000: 22). Putnam (ibid.) mentions as examples “ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country groups”. However, in this category we may include families and friendship networks. Bonding social capital is highly beneficial for individuals and the whole society in that it functions as crucial, socioeconomic safety nets for individuals vulnerable to isolation and resignation. However, in extreme cases, bonded groups can develop into anti-social and ‘superglued’ networks based on aggressive exclusion and harmful to society, that is, excessive bonding. Examples are the Ku Klux Klan or aggressive religious groupings. In contrast, bridging social capital is defined as open networks that are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (Putnam 2000: 22), that is literally creating bridges between individuals in a society, conducive to social integration and generalized trust, i.e. trust to strangers (Putnam 2000; Rothstein & Uslaner 2005; Patulny & Svendsen 2007; Uslaner 2009). Finally, institutional social capital refers to “the quality of relations between certain organizations or institutions” at the meso level (Grix 2001: 199), in this context collaboration between various public and/or voluntary organizations in the local area (see also Durston 2008). As indicated in Table 1 in the category “Nature of capital”, institutional social capital may appear in both a ‘bonding’ subtype, that is, exclusive and owned by homogeneous groups (something which definitely encourage corrupt behaviour), as well as in a ‘bridging’ subtype that is inclusive and formed in heterogeneous groups, in which you get the possibility to socialize with, and learn from, people unlike yourself. In the following I will present the Danish data, followed by an analysis where I use the typology shown in Table 1.

3. Public libraries in the creation of social capital in rural Denmark

**Background**

In the public debate in Denmark, libraries are regularly described as “culture bearing institutions” (Knudsen & Krasnik 2009: 11). The term is appropriate, as Danes are proud of their librarian tradition, which goes far back in time – to the Enlightenment in the late 18th c. and the great civic movements through the 19th c., where ‘folk libraries’ were further cemented and institutionalized. This history means that Danish libraries are closely linked to taken for granted elements in a modern democracy, such as parliamentarianism, local democracy, civil rights, social mobility, civic engagement,
voluntary associations and rich opportunities for all citizens to educate themselves in both formal and informal ways (Dyrbye et al. 2005).

Historically, the Danish library tradition has been formed in urban as well as in rural areas, highly influenced by 19th c. civic movements such as the folk high school and cooperative movements in the countryside and the workers’ movement in the cities. It is therefore no coincidence that the libraries in Denmark are called “folk libraries” (folkebiblioteker), something that denotes that they were established to serve all citizens across all ranks.

Although the folk libraries often are taken for granted by the Danes (Kromann 2011), they are actually one of the most widely used, public cultural facilities, with more than 34 million physical visits in 2008 to 36.0 million visits in 2009, 36,1 in 2010 and 36,3 in 2011. Nevertheless, from 1988 to 2011, the number of libraries was reduced from 788 to 352, that is, a 55 percent decline. These closures have taken place in spite of many local dwellers fighting eagerly for their library (Svendsen 2009; Kromann 2011). Figure 1 shows the development in the number of branch libraries in Denmark 1988-2011, the large majority of which are (were) situated in rural areas.

[Figure 1 here]

The survey
The overall purpose of the survey, which was undertaken April-June 2009, was to get an overview of the quantity and quality of library service in rural areas (Svendsen 2009). Severe changes in rural library service was expected after a municipal reform of 2007 merging 270 municipalities into 98, and on the background of large-scale closures of small branch libraries in rural areas that, to a great extent, happened in close connection with the municipal mergers. The project was financed by the Danish Agency of Libraries and Media, and the questionnaire was made by the author in close cooperation with librarian leaders from the 3 municipalities that participated in the project. An important aim was to attempt to measure the quantity and quality of social capital generated at these places. The questionnaire contained 30 questions and was answered by 62 municipal library managers in 63 Danish rural municipalities, that is, a response rate of 98 percent. The 35 most urban municipalities were excluded, as the project directed a specific focus on rural areas. The invitation to answer the electronic questionnaire was e-mailed to the library managers 24/4 2009, and the survey was completed 7/5 2009. As 19 managers had various difficulties in answering the electronic questionnaire, these interviews were conducted as telephone interviews. In general, the telephone interviews gave a much more detailed insight into the issues facing rural libraries in contemporary Denmark, including cuts in budgets, rural discontent with library closures, economies of scale in municipal library service after municipal mergers, and innovations such as open libraries (open during evenings without personnel) and placing libraries in culture houses.

To highlight social capital creation, I will use responses to the questions regarding types of library services offered, collaborate partners and the managers’ assessment of their library service. All these questions were open-ended, allowing the respondents to write lengthy answers. Statements from other questions will also be included, in order to further explain and clarify the quantitative results. More specifically, to answer the first research question – What does reduction in branch libraries mean for social capital creation? – I will use answers from the questions “How would you assess the development of your library service in rural areas since January 1, 2006?” (Q23), “Explain in brief why your library service has become better/worse” (Q24), “In your
opinion, how content are citizens with library service in the rural areas of the municipality?” (Q25), “Explain in brief why citizens are content/discontent” (Q26) and “Explain in brief the most serious shortcomings in your library service in rural areas” (Q27). (See the whole questionnaire in Appendix 1). To answer the second question – How do branch libraries in rural areas function as breeding grounds for social capital? – I use answers to the questions ”With whom do the branch libraries in your municipality collaborate?”(Q6), “Besides branch and mobile library service and book depositories, does the municipality deliver other forms of library service to its rural districts?” (Q16) and “Can you mention examples of initiatives and/or collaborations at branch libraries in your community, which you would describe as very successful and well-functioning in respect to usage and user satisfaction?” (Q22). Finally, to answer the third question – Which specific types of social capital do the libraries contribute to generate? – I supplement with answers from the question “Has the municipality established cooperation with others on the librarian task, as e.g. associations, shops, sports halls, culture houses, multi-houses?” (Q17). (See also Appendix 1).

Better service – but fewer local meeting places
What does reduction in branch libraries mean for social capital creation?

Ninety percent of the 62 municipalities participating in the survey offered branch library service. Forty percent of the municipalities also had mobile library service used in areas with no branches (some of which had recently been closed). Overall, the managers reported that municipality mergers and closures of small libraries have led to positive as well as negative effects – economies of scale and a larger stock of materials on the one hand, and local dwellers strongly dissatisfied with the closure of their library on the other. Thus, asked the question “How would you assess the development of your library service in rural areas since January 1, 2006?” 46 percent of the managers assessed that, since 2006, municipal library service had been improved, 16 percent that it had worsened, while the rest found it unchanged. Managers were however more positive in regards to user satisfaction. Thus, asked the question “In your opinion, how content are citizens with library service in the rural areas of the municipality?”, 24 percent estimated that users were “very content” and 66 percent “content”, while only 8 percent answered “less content” and 2 percent “discontent”. Taking a closer look at the answers in the open questions, it appears that many rural citizens are dissatisfied not only because they lack library service at close hand, but also because they have lost an important local meeting place. Thus, a manager writes: “There is still discontent among people in areas where branch libraries have been closed. In other areas, people are content.” Similarly, a manager writes that a shortcoming is that, due to scarce resources, “service covers only a part of the rural areas”, while another states that “we don’t really have library service in the rural areas”. In other places, people are happy simply because branch library service has been exchanged by library mobile service, or because local branch libraries have not (yet) been closed: “We are, the whole municipality, one large rural area, where a lot of meeting places have been closed (e.g. wholesale grocery stores). People have a positive respect for the fact that we don’t close the branch libraries – libraries are important meeting places.” Similarly, one writes that people are content with library service, “because there are not many public services left in those 30-40 small villages we serve. The library is close to the citizen”. Examples of ambivalent answers are: “Bad: two small local libraries have been transformed to book depositories [and] opening hours have been cut down; Good: More materials, daily transport of materials (both local and national transport arrangement), more events” and “More services are offered. However, it depends on whom you ask. In some
marginal rural areas people may be less satisfied”. Likewise, to the question on whether library service had been improved during the last three years, a typical answer was: ”Yes and no. Some users have a longer distance [to the library] due to closures of 8 branch libraries, while others, who have better access, now get a better library service.” Similarly, another manager wrote: “Worse: two small community libraries have been turned into library depositories [without professional library personnel], and opening hours have been cut down. Improved: More materials, daily delivery of materials and more arrangements.” Other, more cost-benefit oriented managers estimated that their service was too decentralized: “[Library service] is too expensive. We spread resources more than can be legitimized in [library] usage.”

Furthermore, and as will become more clear in the following, an important trend was that noncore activities were continuously expanding, transforming the remaining libraries from reading places to social meeting places, something that in many municipalities also has implied what a manager terms “More cooperation with local actors”. Hence we see that, on the one hand, important local fabrics of social capital have been abolished. But on the other hand it appears that the remaining branch libraries have been strengthened – also in terms of their roles as social meeting-places.

In the following, I first look at social capital related activities at the micro level (among users) and then at the meso level (among branch libraries and collaborative partners).

**Micro level: Social capital related activities among library users**

How do branch libraries in rural areas function as breeding grounds for social capital?

Besides lending out materials, the branches arranged various cultural events and meetings, and many of them had drop-in centre functions. Figure 2 provides an overview of which activities were going on besides more traditional library service. Forty-nine answered the question “Besides branch and mobile library service and book depositories, does the municipality deliver other forms of library service to its rural districts?” (Q16). One respondent answered “none”. As this was an open question, answers were afterwards analyzed and sorted into 8 main categories and a category containing “Other answers”. It is possible to categorize these activities as belonging to either human capital or social capital related activities.

[Figure 2 here]

Among human capital activities leading to accumulation of prevailingly individual benefits are – besides the core library activities of lending out books and other materials – use of PC/internet, PC/internet courses, various citizens’ services (e.g. help in connection with passport, driver’s license, marriage, post office, tourist information), library service for other public institutions (e.g. bringing books to kindergartens or old people’s homes), bringing books to elders and handicapped people, who are not able to come to the library (“The Book Comes”), exhibitions, as well as offering newspapers and journals – the latter definitely underreported due to the respondents taking such service for granted. As mentioned, these activities also have a social capital aspect as, e.g., children gathering around a computer or a play station, deeply engaged in playing a game while communicating and cooperating; users seeking information from librarians; newspaper readers chatting; or friends or acquaintances discussing exhibited art. Typical answers include: “Starting up of a course in the use of internet”, “IT course for elders” and “Information meetings about the library for [school children]”.


In respect to social capital engendering activities, the two largest categories are cultural events and social meeting-place functions. Together, they include near 50 percent of all answers (although, as mentioned, newspaper/journal and, probably also, PC/internet facilities can be suspected to be underreported). As the purpose of these two types of activities are prevalingly social, they can be seen as the most important ‘infrastructure’ for creation of social capital among library users and, hence, individual as well as collective benefits. Such activities should be seen as leading to collective goods, because they not only benefit the single person but the whole community and, ultimately, the whole society. This because they foster networks and – as a by-product (Coleman 1988b; Cox et al. 2000: 7) – trust and shared norms, which contribute to strengthen e.g. social cohesion within the local community, integration of minority groups, ‘civic’ communication and behaviour and crime prevention, that is, goods no citizen is excluded from enjoying.

Among cultural events were mentioned – apart from “cultural events” – children’s theatre, events for children, lectures by authors, book discussion evenings. Social meeting-place covers a long range of prevailingly informal meetings, such as homework café for school children, meeting-place, literature/book café, baby café (for child-minders), drop-in functions, reading societies, offering meeting rooms to local associations, housing the local historian archive, arranging workshops and being an integrated library in a culture house with many activities.

Apart from this, some of the answers indicated that, generally, the branch libraries were important places for informal meetings and creation of trust, not least between users and librarians. For example, a municipal library manager tells that the users ”express that they are very happy with the library personnel – there is a much closer contact with users at a small library”. Another respondent states that users are content due to ”[a] good collection of materials, good opening hours, the personal service, however [there is] some discontent where a branch library has been closed”. And a third writes that ”the librarian knows the user better than it is possible at a larger library”. Furthermore, concerning branch libraries integrated in culture houses many stressed the increased opportunities for users to get access to other activities, events and services.

Meso level: Social capital related activities among branch libraries and other institutions

Finally, which specific types of social capital do the libraries contribute to generate?

The managers reported on a long row of networking activities with other institutions. Out of 48 who answered the question ”With whom do the branch libraries in your municipality collaborate?” (Q6), two respondents answered “none”. Figure 3 shows that the majority of collaborative partners (37 percent) can be categorized as other public institutions than schools and citizens’ service, as the local post office, tourist information, cinema, music school, independent boarding school for lower secondary students, culture houses, museums, the military, old people’s homes, sports and leisure centres, local historian archives, the church, health institutions and day care institutions. Other frequent responses were local associations and citizens’ services. Furthermore, many answers that I chose to categorize as “other answers” indicate a variety of more or less formal collaboration, including volunteers, local artists, citizens helping each other (for example, youngsters learning elders to send an sms at courses), book shops, reading societies.

[Figure 3 here]
Answers to other questions in the questionnaire show that particularly cooperation with groups of volunteers is becoming increasingly important. For example, a library manager from a small island (functioning as an independent municipality) wrote: “Little place where people trust each other. People tell you if they are dissatisfied. Lot of voluntary work.” Similarly, others wrote: “[We cooperate] with volunteers and the Culture and Library association of Nørre-Snede on the library service as well as culture events”; “All branch libraries have extensive cooperation with locals about [cultural] events.” Others mention that volunteers (often pensioners) bring materials to disabled people, mostly elderly people. Many managers also stressed that a lot of cooperation with culture houses, or with co-partners in culture houses, is taking place. Typical statement are ”Involvement of users (culture houses): Absolutely positive, no cooperative problems”; ”Extremely well-functioning cooperation in the culture house/library in Asnæs”; ”Well-functioning cooperation with local associations in two culture houses. In both places the branch library leader is strongly engaged in the activities.”

[Figure 4 here]

Finally, a third relevant question in connection with social capital engendering activities is whether the manager “can mention examples of initiatives and/or collaborations at branch libraries in your community, which you would describe as very successful and well-functioning in respect to usage and user satisfaction” (Q22). Figure 4 shows the responses, distributed in 8 main categories. As can be seen, nearly 20 percent of the managers, who answered the question, cannot mention any successful initiatives or collaborations. More than 17 percent of the answers indicate cooperation with public institutions, including e.g. citizens’ service, kindergartens, school libraries, cooperation with institutions for old people or disabled people. The other 15 percent indicate cultural events, including e.g. a book café, evening meetings with users, the local theatre, school for writers, various events for children and workshops, while 10 percent indicated “The Book Comes” arrangement, a little more than 5 percent collaboration with culture houses, while 3 percent mentioned homework cafés and mobile library service. Again, we see a lot of core and, in particular, noncore library activities being arranged in collaboration with a variety of public and voluntary partners.

4. Discussion

Public libraries in rural areas as fabrics of human and social capital

Until now, studies of public libraries as hotbeds for social capital have one-sidedly focused on social capital related activities within the libraries, that is, at micro level among users or among users and librarians. Furthermore, most studies have applied the concept of social capital rather undiscriminating, as an umbrella term for all kinds of social interaction. I have however argued that there is a need to discern between three types – bonding, bridging and institutional – when accounting for social capital generation at public libraries. What regards the third type, this study has shown that it may be fruitful to trace social capital creation at the meso community/local area level as well, in order to account for the overall institutional library service network that, if dense, secures that the social capital created not only increases the quantity and quality of library services but also serves to coordinate and reinforce local collective action.
aimed to achieve shared goods. Branch libraries in rural Denmark simply seem to ‘lubricate’ valuable cooperation between local public and voluntary organizations, the latter including many volunteers. Hence, they render larger socio-economic benefits than those obtained by conventional library service per se, within the single libraries.

Moreover, in order to make the rather abstract term of social capital more substantial, it may also profit research in general to localize social capital creation at specific spaces – for example, at public squares, in public schools, in the sports hall canteen, or in the scouts’ club house. As the LIS literature on social capital reveals, public libraries appear to be particularly good at providing both human capital and ‘full-scale’ social capital.

Figure 5 summarizes the main points of this article. It shows a ‘map’ containing a typical local rural community in Denmark. As can be seen, this community is enriched by its public branch library in many ways. Hence, the Danish survey shows that, besides human capital, bonding and bridging social capital is created, reinforced by trust to the librarians. However, what appears more surprising, a significant amount of institutional social capital is generated. This happens in the form of more or less formalized collaboration between branch libraries and various organizations, such as public schools, kindergartens, old people’s homes, citizens’ service, health care institutions, art associations and other local associations, amateur theatres, reading societies, groups of pensioners and culture houses. Such cooperation – all focused on improving core and noncore library services – leads to positive externalities in the form of institutional trust, community engagement, strengthening of the local community identity as well as its reputation in the surrounding world. At the micro level, bonding and bridging types of social capital are generated as well, providing many collective and individual benefits, as mentioned earlier.

[Figure 5 here]

A topic of growing importance in most of the world is how much rationalization and centralization of public services can take place, before life conditions among rural populations are seriously damaged – be it health care service, elder care, postal service, public schools and kindergartens, library service or public transport (e.g. Higgs & White, 1997; Woods, 2006; Hargreaves, 2009). Another aspect is discursive presentations of the ‘economic rationality’ in closing down public service in scarcely populated areas (Cruickshank et al, 2009; Winther & Svendsen, forthcoming).

In rural Denmark, public and semi-public meeting-places are becoming increasingly scarce due to a general cut in public institutions such as primary schools, kindergartens, post offices and police stations (Winther & Svendsen, forthcoming). Therefore, ‘gathering’ places such as the library become even more important. As indicated in several statements from the Danish municipal library managers, the socio-economic functions of branch libraries might be further strengthened, if they are integrated in multifunctional centres/culture houses, where people already gather for at multitude of purposes (recreation/sports, shopping, public services, etc.). Apart from attracting more users (and creating more human and social capital), co-location will lower running costs due to economies of scale (Svendsen 2010). In this way, there might not be a problem in local ‘small-scale’ centralization of public services, including library service. Indeed, the results from the questionnaire study indicate that many of the remaining branch libraries in rural Denmark seem to have been strengthened – both as study, recreational and meeting places and, besides, that libraries integrated in culture houses are managing well. The problem is however that, in a country like Denmark,
branch libraries – and, generally, library service – risk to be wiped away from rural areas due to one-sided centralization of services in urban centres, thus damaging rural reputations and exacerbating rural exodus in a vicious circle. Major investments in e.g. local culture houses, on the other hand, are often abandoned these years due to cuts in library budgets (which does, however, not hinder large-scale public service houses to be planned and built in urban centres).

An example of the difficult conditions in most peripheral Danish municipalities is the municipality of Tønder, where the manager gave the following response to a question on whether library service had been improved in recent years: “The expenditure per capita to the library sector [in Tønder municipality] is low compared with the national average. When in addition the municipality is the country’s fourth largest with the second-lowest population density, it goes without saying that it’s a great challenge to establish a good and easily accessible library service, which also takes into account less mobile citizens. The municipal reform [municipal mergers] has not led to improvements of public transport. The short answer to the question is therefore: A good library requires a large population base in the local area. This does not exist in the municipality of Tønder. Rural areas should be operated with mobile library service or branch libraries based on self-service. But the establishment and operation of this is not economically feasible within the library budget, as it at the moment has been decided by the municipality.” Similarly, from the municipality of Rebild we get the following answer to this question: “Difficult to get things to work together in a municipality without an urban centre. It would be much easier just to centralize it all somewhere. The economy is tight, and we have reached the bottom in terms of library expenditure per citizen. A new library [...] near a culture centre has been postponed due to bad economy. It is difficult to reach all areas.”

5. Conclusion

In recent years, a new branch of social capital studies has developed, focusing on the unique ability of public libraries to function as catalysts of creation of social capital. These studies have primarily been inspired by civic society studies by Robert Putnam and Ray Oldenburg. Overall, the attempt has been to detect how social capital actually is generated in situ and thus make this popular term less fluffy. I however argued that there has been a certain bias within studies on the relationship between libraries and social capital, namely a preference for looking at social capital engendering activities solely at the micro level – that is, among users, or among interacting users and librarians. Therefore, using data from a 2009 questionnaire survey including library managers in 62 Danish rural municipalities the aim of this article was to shed more light on how social capital is actually generated – not only in libraries but also between libraries and their collaborative partners, that is, at the meso/organizational level as well. This was done within a theoretical framework consisting of three distinct types of social capital that were found particularly relevant in this context, namely bonding and bridging social capital at the micro level, and institutional social capital at the meso level. The Danish case showed that the stock of institutional social capital belonging to typical rural branch libraries was quite substantial – in fact, the large majority of core services as well as the abundance of noncore library services were performed in collaboration with other public institutions (kindergartens, schools etc.) and/or voluntary groups (art associations, pensioners, the local historian archive etc.). Hence, public branch libraries in rural Denmark should indeed be seen as important breeding grounds for not only bonding and bridging social capital, useful for individuals as well as conducive to much socio-economic growth. They also foster highly beneficial
institutional social capital by acting as organizational hubs for local, coordinated collective action. Hence, Danish politicians at all levels should make serious considerations about the socio-economic consequences for local areas before they decide to close more of these truly universalistic, public institutions with their unique capacity to generate both human capital and ‘full-scale’ social capital.

Notes
1 The term resembles what has been named “linking social capital” (Woolcock 2001) defined as vertical bonds that knit together common local dwellers with powerful, resourceful individuals outside the community, something that allows for getting access to “resources, ideas, and information from formal institutions beyond the community” (Woolcock 2001: 13). However, the two crucial differences are, first, that institutional social capital is built at an organizational meso level and, second, that this type of social capital may both consist of horizontal and vertical ties, that is, cooperation between equally powerful representatives of public institution as well as, for example, cooperation between powerful state employees and common citizens doing voluntary work. Institutional social capital is connected to trust to public institutions and employees (institutional trust), while the negative side is risks of corrupt behaviour. In the library context, trust based relations between library users and librarians may be seen as linking social capital. However, regarding the linking type as a sub-type of bridging social capital I will not include it in this typology.
2 For example, in a library system in the U.S. the mission is “to inform, empower, inspire, and entertain through service and resources that respect individuals and ideas, foster discovery, and build community” (cited from Vårheim 2011: 15). Likewise, in the recently revised Danish Law of Libraries of 2008, it is stated in paragraph 1 that the main objective of the Danish public libraries (folkebibliotek) is to “promote information, education and cultural activity by making available books, journals, audio books (..) as well as materials containing music and electronic information resources, including internet and multimedia”.

References


Durston, J. (2008) “The emergence of an indigenous social actor in southern chile: *mapuche* social capital and a contentious social movement in *la araucanía*”. LILAS, University of Texas at Austin.


Figure 1: Number of branch libraries in Denmark, 1988-2011. Source: Styrelsen for Bibliotek og Medier and Statistics Denmark, Statbank.
Figure 2: Answers to the question: “Besides branch and mobile library service and book depositories, does the municipality deliver other forms of library service to its rural districts?” (n=49, total number of answers: 154). Absolute numbers.
Figure 2: Answers to the question: “Besides branch and mobile library service and book depositories, does the municipality deliver other forms of library service to its rural districts?” (n=49, total number of answers: 154). Absolute numbers.
Figure 4: “Can you mention examples of initiatives and/or collaborations at branch libraries in your community, which you would describe as very successful and well-functioning in respect to usage and user satisfaction?” (n=59, total number of answers: 91). Absolute numbers.
**Figure 5:** Creation of human capital and three types of social capital and the benefits derived hereof in a typical branch library in rural Denmark.

**LOCAL RURAL COMMUNITY**

**MESO LEVEL**

**Institutional social capital**
- Coop between library and other public institutions in the local area
- Coop between library and groups of volunteering local citizens

**MICRO LEVEL**

**Bridging social capital**
- Interaction between strangers
- Interaction between users/users-librarians
- Diverse people helping each other
- Networks of volunteers

**Bonding social capital**
- Regular interaction with the family
- Regular interaction within homogeneous groups

**HUMAN CAPITAL**
- Formal education (e.g. courses)
- Informal learning (e.g. reading newspapers, books, using the internet)

**PUBLIC BRANCH LIBRARY**

**Collective benefits**
- Institutional trust
- Community engagement
- Community identity & reputation
- Economies of scale
- Improved public services
- Coordinated collective action

**Individual benefits**
- Useful connections
- Useful information

**Collective benefits**
- Social and institutional trust
- Norms of reciprocity
- Civic discourse and virtue
- Relief of social isolation
- Social integration

**Individual benefits**
- Useful connections
- Useful information

**Collective benefits**
- Well-functioning families
- People in small groups helping each other

**Individual benefits**
- Useful connections
- Social safety nets

**Collective benefits**
- Increased literacy
- Civic/democratic skills
- Improvement of work force
- Social trust
- Economic growth

**Individual benefits**
- Useful knowledge
- Improved work skills
Table 1. Public libraries in the creation of intangible forms of capital: Human capital and three types of social capital.

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<th>HUMAN CAPITAL</th>
<th>SOCIAL CAPITAL</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Definition</td>
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<td>Useful knowledge achieved through either formal</td>
<td>Intra-group networks based on regular face-face contact with people you know</td>
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<td>education or informal learning</td>
<td>very well as e.g. family and close friends</td>
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<td>Intergroup networks based on trust to people you don’t meet regularly and don’t</td>
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<td>know so well as e.g. business connections or co-members of a local area</td>
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<td>Seeking information, reading books and newspapers, writing exam paper, seeking job</td>
<td>Seeking information, reading books and newspapers, writing exam paper, seeking job</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mothers playing with their children, friends chatting</td>
<td>Mothers playing with their children, friends chatting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Getting to know strangers, talking with the librarians</td>
<td>Getting to know strangers, talking with the librarians</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Public library collaborating with local kindergartens and the local art association</td>
<td>Public library collaborating with local kindergartens and the local art association</td>
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</table>
Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. Which municipality?

2. Does the municipality deliver library service to its rural districts in the form of branch libraries?

3. (If yes in question 2) In average, how many citizens do the branch libraries serve?

4. (If yes in question 2) How many opening hours do the branch libraries have in average per week?

5. (If yes in question 2) What do the branch libraries offer besides lending out materials?

6. (If yes in question 2) "With whom do the branch libraries in your municipality collaborate?"

7. Does the municipality deliver library service to its rural districts in the form of mobile libraries?

8. (If yes in question 7) In average, how many citizens are served at a single mobile library place?

9. (If yes in question 7) In average, how many hours do the mobile library spend at each bus stop?

10. (If yes in question 7) Do you offer flexible mobile library services, for example to kindergartens, book a mobile library etc.?

11. (If yes in question 7) With whom do you cooperate on the mobile libraries?

12. Does the municipality deliver library service to its rural districts in the form of book depositories?

13. (If yes in question 12) Where are these book depositories placed?

14. (If yes in question 12) How do you undertake the work on the book depositories?
15. (If yes in question 12) With whom does the municipality cooperate on the deposits?

16. Besides branch and mobile library service and book depositories, does the municipality deliver other forms of library service to its rural districts?

17. Has the municipality established cooperation with others on the librarian task, as e.g. associations, shops, sports halls, culture houses, multi-houses?

18. If library service has been changed [since January 1, 2006], then briefly explain how.

19. Did you obtain funding to R&D activities?

20. (If yes in question 19) Did you publish anything on these R&D activities, for example a report?

21. Do you have a master-plan for library service offered in the municipality? If yes, does this plan explicitly describe library service in rural areas?

22. Can you mention examples of initiatives and/or collaborations at branch libraries in your community, which you would describe as very successful and well-functioning in respect to usage and user satisfaction?

23. How would you assess the development of your library service in rural areas since January 1, 2006?

24. Explain in brief why your library service has become better/worse.

25. In your opinion, how content are citizens with library service in the rural areas of the municipality?

26. Explain in brief why citizens are content/discontent.

27. Explain in brief the most serious shortcomings in your library service in rural areas.