

Social Capital Development: A Prerequisite for Functional Entrainment in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Article DOI:

10.48028/iiprds/ijarsmf.v8.i2.05

Keywords:

Social cognitive theory, Functional entrainment, Social capital development, Networks, Social ties

Abstract

Tertiary institutions as open systems thrive on the basis of their functionality and ability to meet the changing and evolving needs or expectations of their environment. However, where the gap between functionality and environmental change is unaddressed, the tendency for failure and inefficiency becomes higher. Functional entrainment is therefore discussed from the lens of social capital development in this paper. As a theoretical review, the social cognitive theory is adopted as the theoretical framework in clarifying on the role of social ties, networks and partnerships in the actualization of functional entrainment in tertiary institutions. Review focused on the conceptualization of social capital development – specifying key features such as the involvement of networks, validity within such networks, specificity of network types, and the related benefits and advantages accruable from network membership. It was affirmed that the development of social capital through the strengthening of social ties and relations with key players within the context and environment of the institution, is crucial for enhancing the functional entrainment of related tertiary institutions – including those in Nigeria.

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Background to the Study

Organizational change emerges from the need to address the shifts and uncertainties of the environment. It involves the structuring and restructuring of organizational forms, roles and policies so as to be able to accommodate the turbulence or developments within the organizations context (Sandra and Nandram, 2013). However, not all change is unexpected or unforeseen, and yet still such change – despite their predictable nature, may yet prove to be strenuous and challenging to the organization – leading to outcomes of poor alignment and by that a lacking in entrainment. Change as Borgatti and Halgin (2011), noted results from the mix, exchange and dynamic nature of the relationship between various factors which in turn become new realities and with imposing features on the activities and actions of the organization. Yet as Bluedorn (2002), pointed out, the competencies of organizations in the face of change draws primarily from the skills and functions of its workers and the extent to which their capabilities align with the changing expectations of their environment.

Functional entrainment suggests a form of change behaviour, specific of the institutions human resource and its capabilities, behaviour or actions, with regards to predictable change events (Ancona and Chong, 1996; Sandra and Nandram, 2016). It is also a process wherein institutions are able to apply and effectively engage their human resources in ways that yield efficient outcomes during recurring, periodic or seasonal change events within the context of the organization, requiring reciprocal adjustments or changes in functions and the behaviour of the organization as well. Such functional modifications have been known to prove problematic for most organizations, including tertiary institutions in Nigeria (Amadi, 2011). Recent studies provide accounts of existing gaps in tertiary institutions course contents and the business realities of their environment; as well as the poor training of staff (both academic and non-academic) in line with the noted advances in technology, global business practices and economic relations. Such competency and functional gaps have stalled innovation within the country and stunted research within the country (Bukola, 2012).

Badriyah and Noermijati (2015), in their study observed that the failure of most organizations results from their inability to transform themselves through learning and knowledge development. This observation is echoed by Cadil, Petkovova and Blatna (2014), who argued that where there is a lack of research and knowledge driven goals, there will always be gaps in “what is expected” and “what is achieved”. According to Borgatti and Halgin (2011), organizations by their nature are open systems, and in that regard must interact with their environment, bridging differences between functions and social realities in ways that enhance the value and relevance of the institution. Krabs (2014), opined that within the institutions context lies the capacity for its development, and its transformation. Labianca and Brass (2006), agreed with this position - reiterating that through the strengthening of their contextual ties and relations with other institutions and business organizations, as well as the development of supportive networks, organizations could thrive and advance its own features in a more suitable and engaging way. This perspective describes social capital and prescribes its features as a basis for learning and advancing the competencies of institutions.

Social capital according to Kwon and Adler (2014), prescribes relationships and network ties as a source of advantage and benefit to organizations. This view is premised on the trust-based links advanced by such ties which create access to resources, information, knowledge and other related vices that aid in the pursuit of the organizations goals (Sandra and Nandram, 2013). However, literature on social capital and its implications for tertiary institutions appears to be scarce, particularly that which addresses functional entrainment. This owes to the dominant and emphatic approach towards the conceptualization of social capital from the lens of business organizations. The gap in content which also addresses the relationship between social capital and functional entrainment could also be traced to the recency and yet evolving conceptualization of functional entrainment; and even its applicability with tertiary institutions as well. This review is justified in the sense that in discussing the relationship between these variables, the stated gaps are addressed, specifically within the theoretical framework of the social cognitive theory.

Literature Review

Social Cognitive Theory

The social cognitive theory is adopted as the theoretical foundation and premise for this paper. While initially proposed by Bandura (cited in Luszczynska and Schwarzer, 2005) as a psychological framework for explaining individual experiences and the formation of behaviour through the observation of others within social settings, the social cognitive theory has evolved overtime through its application in the behavioural, social and management sciences. Carillo (2010), stated that the social cognitive theory clarifies on the nature of relationships and how organizations are moulded and shaped by their exchanges and interactions with other organizations. The author observed that social ties and networks account for most of the changes and developments in organizations – especially with regards to functional structures and the emergence of competencies. The social cognitive theory identifies the environment or context of the organization as a defining factor; one which from this perspective can be considered deterministic in nature.

Borgatti and Halgin (2011), noted that as open systems, organizations are constantly influenced and also, influence their environment. This goes to demonstrate the interdependency between the organization and the constituents of its environment. This reiterates Camps and Marques (2014), observation that organizations, apart from their financial goals, also have social goals. Leenders and Dolfsma (2015), stressed on social goals as even more important as in actual sense, the financial goals depend on the health of the relationships the organization experiences within its social context. In furthering this view, Krebs (2014), identified social capital as an imperative for organizational effectiveness – emphasizing on the criticality of social ties and partnerships for the survival and wellbeing of organizations. His positions tallies with the observations of Camps and Marques (2014) who also argued that the process of knowledge acquisition is not an isolated one, rather one which draws from interrelated activities such as partnerships, strategic alliances, group engagement etc.

In their study, Zhang, Wu and Wei-Ping (2013), hinted at the sensitivity of interpretations or discernment in organization decision-making. Their interest stemmed from concerns about the clarity and consistency of knowledge forms and the application of such within specific contexts. But as Carillo (2010), opined, the social cognitive theory is a specific theory and such that emphasizes on individual experiences. At the organizational level, assumptions about social realities and the experiences of the organization are such that are particular to each context and how the organization relates or interacts within such a context. This way, each relationship, network, social tie group is considered as unique, having its own distinct qualities and impacting on the experience as well as behaviour of the organization in a specific way, distinct from the way other ties, relationships or networks within other environment or context may impact on the same organization.

Social Capital Development

Relationships and social ties are important and serve the interest of institutions, even tertiary institutions in Nigeria. However, the concept of social capital implies much more. The narrative on social capital and its conceptualization is such that has according to Chiu, Wang, Shih and Fan (2011) been misunderstood by some to focus on just the links and not the resulting advantage or strength accruable from the link. Related studies identify social capital as the emerging benefits and positioning anchored on the institutions validation and trust within specific social networks, partnerships and groupings (Hsu, Chang and Yen, 2011; Chen et al, 2018). Key to this definition are four features – (a) the involvement in social ties or networks, (b) the validation, trust and recognition within such social ties and networks, and (c) the specificity of such ties or networks (d) the benefits and positioning.

First, social ties and networks advance the reach and visibility of institutions. These enable institutions to be able to relate more extensively with others and to be able to grow socially. Primarily, social ties deepen the institutions relationships and level of interaction with significant others considered to share similar characteristics, concerns or interest with them (Maurer et al, 2011; Alguezaui and Filleri, 2010). As a feature of social capital, it suggests connectivity with others and a sense of placement within a wide range of socio-economic frameworks. Second, the validation and trust within ones network is imperative to their acceptance and access to its resources. Carpenter et al (2012), argued that as an institution, it is possible to identify with a particular group or network but fail to meet the “social criteria” for that group. Thus, relationships and interactions with the group or networks members is only superficial as one is yet considered an outsider and not privy to most of its resources or information.

Third, the specificity of social ties determines the extent of its usefulness and the nature of benefits to be attained from its membership. Most often, institutions tend to focus on relationships and networks that align with their interests and line of focus but as Etzkowitz and Zhou (2017) pointed out, networks could also extend beyond direct lines of focus to other groups that may not share the same goal or interest but yet stand to benefit from the partnership. A good example would follow the partnership between tertiary institutions and business organizations (e.g. manufacturing, telecommunication firms).

While the interests of these groups may appear to differ substantially, they are nonetheless plagued by the deteriorating academic standards and the degenerating quality of graduates spewed from most of these institutions (Kwon and Adler, 2014). Such partnerships could drive practical skills and knowledge which in the long-run enriches the quality of graduates – thus facilitating a pool of quality local manpower for the firms to draw from.

Fourth, the benefits and positioning feature is fundamentally the core ingredient of social capital which however is anchored and premised on the evidence of the preceding three features (Ben-Hador, 2016; Davis, 2016). By benefits and position, one describes the resulting advantages such as access to resources, technology, support and stronger bonds with significant and more experienced organizations within ones context. These however as stated, are preceded by the institutions satisfactory placement and validity within a specific and useful network which may or may not share its interests but which contribute and could aid substantially in its growth and development (Melissa and Sadik, 2018). Benefits and positions also involve the knowledge transfer and by that skill acquisition, funding and access to strategic alliances that enhance the institutions experiences and aid in the development of its course content, administrative as well as functional capabilities.

Functional Entrainment

The concept of entrainment draws on a rather systemic perspective with regards to the relationship between the organization and its environment. Its conceptualization is rooted in biology, drawing on the noted behaviour between organisms and their habitat or environment (Dibrell et al, 2015). Entrainment within business and organizational studies details the organizations behavioural modifications or adjustments in line with the overarching and periodic or expected changes or developments in its environment. Within tertiary institutions, such changes range from the growing imperatives and dynamics of research, to the periodic demands on functions every year or semester, or the increasing emphatics on changes to course content in line with the dynamic changes that currently shape the environment of these institutions. Functional entrainment thus describes the capacities within institutions and the extent to which related roles, responsibilities and skills match the demands and gaps in the environment or context of the institution (Dibrell et al, 2015).

Perez-Nordtvedt et al (2008), asserted that the functions of the institution play a critical role in how well it adjusts and is able to make sense of its situations. Bluedorn (2002), noted that the functions of the institution detail the specific tasks, roles and responsibilities in the institution and the extent to which they are substantially expressed – enabling efficiency and effectiveness. Sandra and Nandram (2013), opined that functions need to be aligned with the values and goals of the institution; but tantamount to these is the fact that functions must draw and anchor on the features of the institutions environment. Dibrell et al (2015) argued that human resource development programs are lacking in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria with scarce reference to administrative

actions channelled to driving staff capacities and competencies. This is as the author noted that within most of these systems, staff are left to build themselves using whatever opportunities that avail them, hence suggesting weak functional entrainment values and priorities. Sandra and Nandram (2013), further stated that while functional capacities and competencies are reflected in the human resource of the organization – such, where effectively applied and decoded, transform the organization and drive its overall success and wellbeing.

Social Capital Development and Functional Entrainment

Inkpen and Tsang (2005), observed that relationships are essential for learning and knowledge development. According to Inkpen and Tsang (2005), while the interaction between parties may be geared towards service outcomes or other product-based objectives, their exchanges often involve information or data transfer, functional support, manpower support and training where required. Krebs (2014) argued that institutions which are recognized and can be considered as valid within their various contexts often have easier access to collaboration and funding from related stakeholders or concerned agencies. Davis (2016) opined that validations often emerge from the reputation or noted operations of institutions – suggesting perceptions of competence and reliability by the validating party. Another basis for validation is also based on the number of years institutions have been recorded to operate or even recommendations from other already validated network member.

Studies (Labianca and Brass, 2006; Ben-Hador, 2016; Zhang et al, 2013) indicate that organizations often draw from the experiences and competences of significant others whom they are partnering with – however, as earlier noted, much of such skill, technology or knowledge transfer is premised on the extent of validation and trust. However as Carpenter et al (2012) argued that skills have a high tendency of rubbing off with the more experienced or effective institution tending to lead and in most cases supervising the activities of the less experienced or younger institution. Omodia (2009), observed that related collaborations between institutions also enrich research outcomes, advancing a more elaborate and engaging approach towards anchored on a multiplicity of views and observations. These actions have a strong tendency of contributing towards the development of the institutions functional entrainment – strengthening capacities and enabling the institution adapt and modify its features in line with its experiences and interactions within its network.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In Conclusion Functional entrainment reflects the change related competencies of the institution and demonstrate its capacity for effectively meeting and addressing its responsibilities. It is as discussed, both an individual and organizational level construct which draws on the institutions learning and knowledge development actions. The review nonetheless identifies social capital as a basis through which such learning and knowledge development actions are enhanced and thus the improved actualization of functional entrainment. It is recommended that position on the imperatives of social

capital development is anchored within the social cognitive theory which clarifies through its framework the interdependency between the institution and the constituents of its environment and as such specifies social ties and networks as being necessary for effective functional entrainment. It is affirmed that the development of social capital through the strengthening of social ties and relations with key players within the context and environment of the institution, is crucial for enhancing the functional entrainment of related tertiary institutions – including those in Nigeria.

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