

Crisis as a Source of Social Capital: Adaptation and Formation of Social Capital during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville famously discussed the propensity of Americans to form voluntary associations and engage in self-governance to overcome collective challenges. The “science of association” has proven to be important, especially when communities are confronted with crises like natural disasters. Not surprisingly, the scholarship on community responses to crises has tended to emphasize how community members deploy their social capital to respond effectively to crises. This literature, however, has not yet emphasized the potential of crises to be a “source” of social capital. After a crisis, community members do not only tap their existing networks for aid but also deepen existing relationships and develop new connections. Moreover, they adapt existing associations to serve new functions and form new associations to meet collective needs. They also reinforce or reinterpret collective narratives that help overcome collective action problems. Using data from the COVID-19 crisis, this paper explores how a crisis can be a “source” of social capital.

Keywords: social capital, COVID-19, crisis, disaster recovery, mutual aid

1. INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2, or novel coronavirus (COVID-19), is a devastating public health crisis, which has, in turn, spawned an economic crisis across the globe. The first confirmed cases appeared in China in late 2019, and since then, every region of the world has reported COVID-19 cases. As of December 31, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports over 81 million cases worldwide, and almost 1.8 million deaths as a result of the disease.¹ In the United States alone, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has attributed over 340,000 deaths to COVID-19 from almost 20 million cases.²

To help limit the spread of the disease, governments have resorted to stay-at-home orders, curfews, quarantines, and other policies to “flatten the curve” so that healthcare professionals can adequately treat those infected. While these policies and mandates have shifted over time, individuals and households have also voluntarily limited activity over the past several months. The combination of restrictive government policies and people willingly choosing to forego normal activities has created an economic crisis. As businesses, schools, and daycares have suspended their nor-

mal activities or dramatically cut back services, individuals and families have lost employment and income. The U.S. unemployment rate grew to over 14 percent in April 2020 and remains at 6.7 percent as of November 2020.³ Furthermore, 2020 second quarter GDP decreased by 32.9 percent.⁴

COVID-19 has arguably also led to a social crisis. Macroeconomic measurements of unemployment and GDP cannot accurately reflect the human suffering caused by the pandemic. Physical distancing, limited activity, and economic distress can all impact how connected and embedded individuals feel in their communities, exacerbating the challenges faced during an extended crisis. Moreover, increases in domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, loneliness, illicit drug use, and suicides linked to social isolation are particular concerns during this period.

When crises like natural disasters, pandemics, and recessions occur, social capital—or the various social connections among people—is an important factor in determining how individuals and communities respond.⁵ The disruption caused by COVID-19 might be compared to the dramatic changes that we see in the market as a result of new innovation, what Schumpeter famously labeled, “creative destruction” (1994 [1942], pp. 82-83). In the same way that prices convey information and entrepreneurs step in to repurpose resources, we can see individuals making use of social capital and repurposing social capital to respond. Social capital has been used to discuss strong relationships versus relatively weak connections, norms of mutual trust, civil society organizations (e.g., the PTA or local church), and collective narratives (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 2000; Chamlee-Wright 2008; Hodgson 2014). Beggs et al. (1996) show that individuals with social networks that are kin-based, large, or less diverse are more likely to receive informal support following a crisis. Further, on-the-ground research after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2005 and Superstorm Sandy in New York in 2012, demonstrates how associations, such as churches, neighborhood organizations, and other civil society groups, provide important resources and help promote the collective action required to rebound successfully (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009, 2011; Storr and Haeffele-Balch 2012; Storr, Haeffele-Balch, and Grube 2015; Storr, Chamlee-Wright, and Storr 2015). In this sense, post-disaster recovery is largely rooted in social connection, voluntary association, and self-governance. Individuals in these post-disaster situations leverage their various forms of social capital to overcome the collective challenges of rebuilding and renewing their communities.

Although the literature has highlighted the various ways that crises can put pressure on social connectedness and has firmly established that social capital is critical for communities to cope with crises effectively, the literature has yet to emphasize the potential for crises to become a *source* of social capital. In other words, the existing literature has tended to offer social capital as a tool to respond to and overcome crises, but has not adequately acknowledged the way in which crises can be generative for social capital formation.⁶ We argue that during and after a crisis, community members do not merely despair over the disruption of their social networks or tap into their existing networks for aid but also (1) deepen existing relationships and develop new connections, (2) adapt existing associations to serve new functions, (3) form new associations to meet collective needs, and (4) develop new collective narratives about their community. Crisis, then, can be viewed as a *source* of social capital because it initiates the formation or reconfiguration of social capital in a community.

Our second contribution to the literature is to highlight how the formation or reconfiguration of social capital takes place using a range of examples from the COVID-19 pandemic. While many traditional ways of connecting have been hindered due to physical distancing and quarantines, individuals and communities have also found innovative ways to stay connected and foster a sense of community. In this article, we explore several examples of the creation and reconfiguration of social capital during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community members have developed new connections and formed new associations to meet collective needs, such as internet-based mutual aid societies. These mutual aid groups have two main functions: first, they help individuals in local communities by providing them with food, medicine, and other essential goods and services; and second, they are a space for friendship and companionship. Local neighborhoods have also formed socially isolated “pods.” In these small groups, a few families come together to share childcare responsibilities, which allows parents to work and students to learn more effectively in a

relatively safe yet social environment. Additionally, communities have reinforced and reinterpreted existing narratives of resilience and togetherness to help people cope with the crisis. Thus, the new and evolving forms of social capital that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic have allowed people in various communities to meet their needs and address collective challenges.

In addition to challenging the crisis and social capital literature to consider crisis as generative for social capital, our paper may also bring forth further questions about what social capital looks like today, especially in regard to virtual connections. Putnam (2000) famously diagnosed a decline in civil society and social capital in the United States at the turn of the century. COVID-19 has only reinforced a reliance on virtual communication, raising several questions: Are these connections less robust than those derived through in-person interaction? What might be the ways in which virtual solutions reduce the cost of collective action, and therefore, encourage social activity? Or, what are the ways in which social media expands weak ties, activating a wider range or diversity of ideas, and brings about more robust problem solving? These questions point to exciting areas of research that combine crisis and disaster studies, economic sociology, and the literature on entrepreneurship and innovation.

This article proceeds as follows. In the section 2, we discuss the various conceptions of social capital and how communities leverage social capital during a crisis. Section 3, then, explores the possibility that crises can be a source of social capital. Next, section 4 provides empirical examples from the COVID-19 pandemic as evidence of social capital formation. Section 5 concludes and provides implications.

2. USING SOCIAL CAPITAL DURING A CRISES

Bourdieu, who is credited with the first systematic analysis of social capital, focuses on the social relationships through which individuals gain access to resources and the types, amounts, and qualities of those resources (Portes 1998, pp. 2-4). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 119) describe social capital as resources available to individuals or groups through their networks, or “relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” Additionally, Granovetter (1973) shows “the strength of weak ties,” highlighting both aspects of Bourdieu’s definition to distinguish between strong versus weak ties, and the types of resources that we obtain through both types. The strength of a tie, for Granovetter, is a “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (*ibid.*, p. 1361). Granovetter also emphasizes that strong ties are often connected to the same people, and therefore, a tie that offers a “bridge” to another network of weaker ties can be helpful in certain situations. Job searches, for example, benefit from weak (or informal) ties that can provide new job candidates and information useful for a successful placement (Lin et al. 1981; De Graaf and Flap 1988).

The literature on social capital as social ties distinguishes three types of connections: bonding, bridging, and linking (Woolcock 2001). Bonding social capital describes strong connections between individuals in homogeneous groups (e.g., family members). Bridging social capital refers to weak connections across heterogeneous groups (e.g., networks of university alumni). Finally, linking social capital describes connections between people from different social groups and power dynamics (e.g., connections to a local politician or industry leader). As Granovetter illustrates, these types of social capital provide access to different resources. Bonding social capital (primarily between family members or kin-groups) is often used for social support, such as childcare needs, assisting with errands, or borrowing money. Bridging and linking social capital (primarily through organizations, such as a neighborhood association) is more often used for information exchange and is associated with economic advancement (see Zhang et al. 2017; Briggs 1998).

While many studies coalesce around social capital as social ties, Coleman (1988, p. S101) offers a more expansive definition of social capital: “social capital’ is the value of these aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests.” Like Bourdieu, he describes deliberate investment. Indeed, he refers to “credit slips,” explaining that if “A does something for B and trusts B to reciprocate in the future, this establishes an expectation in A and an obligation on the part of B. This obligation

can be conceived as a credit slip held by A for performance by B” (ibid., p. S102). The volume of these types of exchanges will be impacted by the level of trustworthiness (i.e., whether people actually reciprocate) and how often people rely on one another (determined by culture and individual needs). Perhaps his most famous example is Jewish diamond merchants in New York who exchange diamonds with no formal contract (ibid., p. S98). The merchandise, as Coleman notes, may be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and yet sellers willingly allow potential buyers to take the diamonds to inspect in private. This particular example suggests social capital as norms, or informal rules that govern behavior. When individual (or micro-level) actions are repeated, they become norms that drive macroeconomic phenomenon.

Social capital has also been closely tied to neighborhood associations, churches, and other types of civil society organizations. These associations are a collection of relationships, which in some cases may be strong and represent bonding social capital (such as a small book club or bible study group), and in other cases may be weak (such as a national society). Their prevalence shows how people are connected. Scholars, most famously Putnam (2000), use the variety of different types of associations and prevalence of these groups as a general barometer of social capital. Putnam (ibid.) argues that higher levels of social capital as evidenced by the prevalence of these associations are correlated with better educational and child welfare outcomes, safer and more productive neighborhoods, and in general, economic prosperity.

Additionally, scholars have considered social capital as collective narratives, or shared communication and understanding of group norms, which provide insight into the mental models that community members deploy for spurring (or deterring) collective action (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2011). As Gerteis (2002, p. 609) concludes, “Collective narratives are important because they are the sites where schemas take concrete empirical form.” Collective narratives can reinforce a shared identity, and an individual’s attachment to a particular place.

Social capital can be understood, then, in reference to (a) the types of relationships between individuals, (b) as norms, or general rules that govern behavior, (c) as collective narratives which express those rules, and (d) as the associations (or groups) that exist in society. Although the numerous forms may suggest that the definition is imprecise, it also accurately acknowledges how closely related and, arguably, inseparable the various aspects of social capital are in society. Associations are collections of relationships, which may be tightly knit, or loose in nature. Further, associations are places where norms are established, such as the commercial diamond industry in New York, which has two overlapping associations—a common industry and a common ethnicity and religion (i.e., Judaism). Depending on the network, norms might be more or less constraining. In the case of the Jewish diamond merchants, bonding social capital establishes strict norms and maintains those norms because individuals’ livelihoods are tied to their reputations (i.e., their adherence to rules). These characteristics can, then, be communicated through collective narratives that spur or deter collective action.

In its varied forms, social capital enables exchange (e.g., of information across weak ties or of mutual support within a church group) and coordination (as social capital points to certain available resources or establishes expectations through shared norms). It is, therefore, unsurprising that individuals and communities leverage different types of social capital in post-disaster contexts, or when dealing with other types of crises, for informal support, money, materials, or opportunities made available by family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, or other acquaintances. In the aftermath of 1992 Hurricane Andrew, Beggs et al. (1996, p. 211) show that individuals “in networks that are more kin-dominated, denser, larger, and less diverse” are more likely to receive informal support. Still others have emphasized the importance of both strong and weak ties. Murphy (2007) compares the 2003 blackout in eastern North America that impacted 50 million people and the 2000 E. coli crisis in Walkerton, Ontario, and concludes that both strong and weak ties are sources of assistance after these disasters (also see Aldrich 2012; Rayamajhee and Bohara 2020). In the case of the 2003 blackout, individuals relied on place-based social capital, or established connections through neighborhood networks. Following the E. coli outbreak, individuals in the closely-knit community of Walkerton helped their fellow citizens and sought out support from family and close friends. Thus, the

type of connection that individuals utilize depends on the existing stock of social capital and the particular problems confronting the community.

Others have discussed the role of social capital after crises as demonstrated through civic organizations, such as churches, neighborhood associations, and youth groups. For instance, Aldrich (2011) found that the number of nongovernmental organizations, clubs, and social groups is positively correlated with post-disaster population recovery (also see Rayamajhee and Bohara 2020). Similarly, Storr, Haeffele-Balch, and Grube (2015, pp. 81-94) document how the neighborhood nonprofit Achiezer Community Resource Center, based in the Rockaway Peninsula in New York, organized Kosher meals for impacted families, helped to transport families to residences in other parts of the state, and offered financial support for clean-up and recovery after Hurricane Sandy (*ibid.*). Likewise, in the aftermath of the 1994 earthquake in Northridge, California, Bolin and Stanford (1998) describe how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stepped in to support vulnerable populations, providing affordable housing for low-income individuals, Latinos, and farm workers.

Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2011) examine the post-Katrina recovery efforts in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, which suffered widespread destruction from flooding. They found that the collective narrative in St. Bernard Parish portrayed the community as close-knit, family-oriented, and hard-working, and that this narrative led community members to adopt a disaster recovery strategy that emphasized self-reliance. Additionally, Richardson and Maninger (2016) show how collective narratives become aids in coping and also facilitate efforts for rebuilding and recovery. Using interview data from the 2008 Hurricane Ike in Downey, Texas, they note that according to the shared narrative, "... the town faced severe adversity but primarily through the will and fortitude of the citizens working together was able to overcome great odds to restore itself to an even better state than prior to the hurricane" (*ibid.*, p. 114). The collective narratives included many references to "a special little town," a "bootstrap mentality," and a "lessons learned" or "future-focused" attitude (*ibid.*, pp. 114-116). McManus (2015) similarly documents the collective narratives of women impacted by the 2010 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. In addition to a profound sense of vulnerability, survivors experienced the significant loss of aspects of self-identity. The earthquake disrupted lives and work, and people were left wondering how they could contribute to community recovery (*ibid.*, p. 33). When faced with these worries, they sought to make use of other aspects of their identity and developed innovative solutions to decorate the physical spaces that were destroyed (e.g., Gap Filler) and feed survivors (e.g., The Christchurch Baking Army and Farmy Army).

Social capital in the form of social ties, norms, collective narratives, and community-based organizations can be important tools for responding to and recovering from crises. Resilience and social capital are, thus, linked. Social capital is related to why and how successful certain individuals and communities respond to crises. This makes understanding how social capital is created critical. That crises can disrupt and destroy social capital, and that some individuals and communities might lack the (form of) social capital that they might need to effectively respond to crises, makes a focus on the *sources* of social capital even more important.

3. CRISIS AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville ([1835] 2000) famously discusses the propensity of Americans to form voluntary associations and engage in self-governance to overcome collective challenges. "Everywhere that ... you see in France the government, and in England, a great lord," Tocqueville (*ibid.*, p. 896) observes, "count on seeing in the United States, an association." He describes Americans as "*constantly*" uniting and explained that, in America, associations can range anywhere from "religious, moral, serious ones, useless ones, very general and very particular ones, immense and very small ones ... to celebrate holidays, establish seminaries, build inns, erect churches, distribute books, send missionaries ... create hospitals, prisons, schools" (*ibid.*, p. 896). It is through associations, Tocqueville explains, that Americans perform both small projects and large undertakings.

Tocqueville's discussion of associations tends to focus on the uses that Americans make of associations. He does, however, spend some time describing how it is that Americans become skilled in and cultivate the art of association.⁷ The art and skill of association, for Tocqueville, is like a muscle that needs to be exercised. The more that people practice, the more they unite to undertake small and big projects, and the better they become at associational life. Tocqueville stresses that allowing citizens the freedom to form whatever associations they saw fit is critical, else their associational muscles will atrophy. According to Tocqueville (*ibid.*, p. 915),

[w]hen citizens have the ability and the habit of associating for all things, they will associate as readily for small ones as for great ones. But if they can associate only for small ones, they will not even find the desire and the capacity to do so. In vain will you allow them complete liberty to take charge of their business together; they will only nonchalantly use the rights that you grant them; and after you have exhausted yourself with efforts to turn them away from the forbidden associations, you will be surprised at your inability to persuade them to form the permitted ones.

Restricting or discouraging certain kinds of associations (such as religious or political associations) will cause citizens to lose their taste for associations and their ability to effectively engage in associational life. Governments can also crowd out civic associations if they take on activities and projects that could be done by groups of citizens working together (Ostrom 2000).

If Tocqueville is correct about how we cultivate the art and skill of association, then crises, especially large and prolonged crises, can be an important training ground because they often demand a response beyond that of any likely government response (Bauer et al. 2016). Again, similar to the creative destruction that we see in the marketplace following innovation, crises – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – can cause profound disruptions that may be repaired by social capital. When faced with a crisis, people rely on one another to obtain needed resources, share information about damage as well as recovery strategies, and participate in the community they seek to rebuild (see Haeffele and Storr 2020). They do this through their social ties, often leaning on pre-existing connections. Importantly, individuals and communities can also create social capital when they need it most. We argue that after a crisis, community members do not only tap their existing networks for aid but also (a) deepen existing relationships and develop new connections, (b) adapt existing associations to serve new functions, (c) form new associations to meet collective needs, and (d) develop new narratives about their community.

During a crisis, individuals deepen existing relationships and develop new connections. As Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) explains, the strength of a tie is determined, in part, by the amount of time, emotional intensity, and intimacy shared with the contact (see also Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2014). People often find themselves sharing stories of tragedy with others who were once only acquaintances, and neighbors come to rely on each other for electricity, a shower, or a helping hand. All of these highly personal, and sometimes intimate, exchanges serve to deepen relationships. At the same time, new challenges may require that people leverage new connections. Residents may rely on weaker connections (such as a friend of a friend, or a neighbor) to locate a contractor or find a part-time babysitter. And, groups that had never gathered before, may gather to solve new common challenges that only emerge in the wake of the crisis.

Businesses and civil society exist to meet a range of needs, and as new challenges arise, these groups may be well-positioned to meet new needs.⁸ For example, Storr, Haeffele-Balch, and Grube (2015, pp. 78-81) describe how the Rockaway Citizens Safety Patrol (RCSP) initially organized to reduce petty crime in the Rockaway Peninsula in New York and pivoted to help families pump water from basements and clear debris following the flooding from Superstorm Sandy. Local residents already trusted the volunteers and the organization already had 24-hour coverage of the community established, putting them in a position to easily adapt to new challenges within their community.

In other cases, entirely new associations may come about to meet collective needs. McManus (2015) describes how disaster survivors in the aftermath of the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes sought

new ways to contribute to their community (e.g., forming the Farmy Army and Christchurch Baking Army to leverage their cooking and baking skills to help feed those in need). Similarly, the youth in a Vietnamese community outside New Orleans organized an activist group to both protest and appeal to government for assistance after Hurricane Katrina (Storr, Haeffele-Balch, and Grube 2015).

As individuals form new organizations to meet new needs, they also reconstruct or reinterpret collective narratives about their community. In the Broadmoor neighborhood of New Orleans, the Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA) brought community members together to combat the conversion of their neighborhood into green space after Hurricane Katrina (ibid.). The BIA repeated and emphasized existing collective narratives—such as Broadmoor as “the Heart of New Orleans” or a “microcosm of New Orleans.” The BIA also helped create new, aspirational narratives regarding the Broadmoor neighborhood, saying that the area would be “Better than Before” (Storr and Haeffele-Balch 2012, p. 308). These collective narratives, both old and new, served as signals that Broadmoor could and should rebound. Ultimately, these narratives were some of the contributing factors in the successful rebuilding of the neighborhood.

Crises, then, can give community members an opportunity to not only flex their associational muscles but also to train and exercise them. This is certainly true after national disasters like hurricanes and floods. This has also proven to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. SOCIAL CAPITAL FORMATION AND RECONFIGURATION DURING COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, social capital is an important component of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Wu forthcoming). Government lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have changed the way we interact with others by promoting physical distancing, remote work, and limited travel. Prolonged isolation can negatively impact mental health, productivity, and wellbeing, and some have warned of the potential of a “loneliness epidemic” that could exacerbate public health and economic crises (see Newton 2020; Pitas and Ehmer 2020). Indeed, in an online survey we conducted in August 2020,⁹ 17-31 percent of respondents reported feeling less connected to family, friend, work colleagues, neighbors, strangers, and members of religious organizations and nonprofits.¹⁰ When asked to elaborate on why they felt less connected, many respondents mentioned the need for physical distancing, fear of contracting COVID-19, feeling isolated, and having opposed political views with others.

To counter these challenges, people are finding ways to adapt their social ties and networks (see Chamberlain 2020; Marston et al. 2020; Newton 2020; Pothen 2020). Stuck at home, people are interacting with others online, including joining new groups to discuss shared interests, and trying out new hobbies and sharing their progress on social media. 97 percent of the respondents to our survey noted utilizing technology—specifically phone calls, texting, video calls, and social media—to connect with others. Furthermore, 44-77 percent of respondents reported feeling just as or more connected to family, friend, work colleagues, neighbors, strangers, and members of religious organizations and nonprofits. Many pointed to having more free time, fulfilling a need for connection, wanting to check in on others’ physical and mental health, and a renewed sense of what matters in life as reasons for connecting with others.

These ways of connecting can be utilized to increase community embeddedness, enforce norms, and shame others, just like in-person interactions; online platforms have become another venue where people can find common ground or express their opposing views. Viewed this way, social capital continues to be an important factor during the pandemic in fostering collective action and enforcing social norms. Research is starting to show that social capital has had an impact on sustained physical distancing, decreased mobility, and lower cases of COVID-19. Specifically, several studies have highlighted how a sense of civic duty (or broad social and political trust) positively correlates with successful mitigation measures, whereas community engagement negatively correlates (Bai et al. 2020; Ding et al. 2020). Another study shows that while bonding social ties correlates with more COVID-19 infections, more diverse ties correlate with fewer cases (Aldrich 2020). However, other studies suggest that social capital more broadly defined (combining both of these factors), positively correlates with successful mitigation measures (Bartscher et al. 2020; Borgonovi

and Andrieu 2020; Makridis and Wu 2020). While these studies focus on macrolevel comparisons of social capital, this article focuses on the microlevel innovations and adaptations of social ties that may foster connections as a way to cope with and recover from the pandemic.

a. Deepening existing relationships and developing new connections

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for individuals to expand existing social connections and create new connections. Several respondents to our online survey reported forming new or deeper connections since the beginning of the pandemic. For instance, 30 percent said that they are now spending time with people who they did not interact with before the pandemic. When asked to give more details on these relationships, respondents mentioned meeting new significant others, reconnecting with old friends and family members, and forming bonds with neighbors and coworkers. Furthermore, 13 percent have joined organizations and 26 percent have joined new online groups. Respondents reported joining charitable organizations, such as Meals on Wheels and the Red Cross, and activist groups, such Black Lives Matter, as well as educational programs, support groups for mental health and parenting, book clubs, hobby groups, job boards, and dating sites. Respondents also joined various groups for entertainment, including on topics like TV shows, gaming, crafts, cooking, cats, and wine. These new social connections range from casual entertainment to domestic partnership and have had a significant impact on people's lives.

One particularly interesting example is online “groupsourcing,” or when communities use social network platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to coordinate activities in particular geographical regions (see Chamberlain 2020). In the United Kingdom and the US, groupsourcing has allowed individuals in both small towns and large cities to create mutual aid societies to render services and ask for help during the pandemic. These virtual platforms are highly conducive for deepening existing relationships and developing new connections because it allows for easy, low-cost communication among people in the same geographical locations who want to engage in mutual aid. People have formed associations in the same vein as what Tocqueville described in the 1830s—a non-government, non-market form of community organization that provides for the members of local communities. While modern mutual aid societies are using technology that did not exist in the past, the concept is largely the same.

COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK is a volunteer organization that lists over 2,000 local support groups in the UK.¹¹ For example, bluebell-19 is a Facebook-based mutual aid society in Cambridgeshire that is run entirely by volunteers who want to help vulnerable individuals by running errands, distributing information, and providing emotional support. The group's description states, “We recognise that everyone is at risk of being affected by this pandemic, but that a pandemic doesn't hit everyone equally. That's why we're organising to support the most vulnerable, including the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions during the outbreak.”¹² Another group is Community Coronavirus Care in Surrey that matches people in need of assistance with those who are willing to give it. Their descriptions states, “Are you self isolating, worried about going out or need some help? We are a group of people from the surrounding community that would like to help.”¹³ Individuals in need of assistance can call to request the assistance they need. The details are then passed along to volunteers, who will contact the person directly and set up arrangements to render service.

COVID Mutual Aid USA is another group that aggregates and lists local mutual aid societies. Although local groups are independent and can provide assistance as they see fit, COVID Mutual Aid USA helps to raise awareness of local groups, creates a shared space for people across the country who want to engage in mutual aid, and shares knowledge through mutual learning and collaboration among groups.¹⁴ For example, in northern Virginia, the group Arlington Neighbors Helping Each Other Through COVID-19 has over 12,000 members on Facebook. The group's description states, “This group was created as a space to ask for help, share information, and connect to our neighbors. Many of us are still healthy and able to lend a hand to those who may be at higher risk.”¹⁵

b. Adapting existing associations to serve new functions

Existing associations may also adapt to serve new functions, as established in the institutionalist literature, especially by the work by the Ostroms related to polycentric systems and co-production (for example, see Ostrom 1973; Skarbek 2014; and Rayamajhee and Paniagua 2020). Skarbek (2014), in her description of civil society responses to the 1871 Chicago Fire, illustrates how a collection of existing organizations were able to step in and effectively provide food and shelter for disaster victims. Skarbek points to the importance of actors with “skin in the game” (in the case study, an interest in the future of the city and personal reputations at stake) and access to local knowledge, including how to obtain key resources (*ibid.*, p. 172).

Indeed, many local communities and religious organizations have preexisting, dense social connections and robust community-based systems of mutual aid that were able to adapt to address current challenges. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the LDS or Mormon Church, is known for its unique and far-reaching social connections and high levels of social capital (Loft-house and Storr forthcoming). The social capital structures in the LDS community facilitate robust forms of mutual aid internal to the members of the Church as well as large-scale humanitarian aid projects (Goodman and Herzberg 2020).

During the pandemic, the LDS community has adapted formal institutions and informal social capital structures. On March 12, 2020, the Church’s First Presidency suspended all church meetings worldwide. Although formal meetings were cancelled, the LDS’s women’s organization, called the Relief Society, continues to provide assistance to local communities during the pandemic. Each local ward (similar to a parish) has a Relief Society with a number of adult women who have important roles in administering mutual aid at the local level (Goodman and Herzberg 2020). In May 2020, local Relief Society groups in Utah joined the Intermountain Healthcare and University of Utah Health to recruit tens of thousands of volunteers to sew five million masks for health care workers (Walch 2020a). In Los Angeles County, a group of women in a local Relief Society made 6,000 cloth facemasks for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department to keep inmates, nurses, and deputies safe.¹⁶ In Avon, Indiana, Erika Pike, a local Relief Society member started a non-profit group called Sew and Serve Indy to sew masks for frontline health workers and first responders in Indiana. More than 6,000 volunteers, who are both LDS and non-LDS members, have worked with Sew and Serve Indy to create and distribute over 90,000 masks and surgical caps across the state.¹⁷

Additionally, the LDS Church has adapted its formal, centralized welfare institutions to provide monetary welfare and humanitarian aid in direct response to COVID-19. For example, they transported thousands of pounds of food each week from its central humanitarian storehouse in Salt Lake City to several other organizations that help provide food to the needy (Walch 2020b). In April 2020, Latter-day Saint Charities donated \$5.5 million in cash to five American relief agencies, including Convoy of Hope, Feeding America, Partnership With Native Americans, Salvation Army, and United Way (Walch 2020c). Church President Russell M. Nelson said, “The COVID-19 pandemic has now become the largest-ever humanitarian project of the church. Any way you want to measure it, this is now the largest” (Walch 2020b).

In addition to religious organizations, businesses have adapted the ways in which they use their social capital to meet people’s needs during the pandemic. In early 2020, as people stocked up on products in preparation for lockdown, there were shortages of key items—such as toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and hand sanitizer. Many stores responded by rationing such items, limiting the number customers could buy during each visit. At the same time, other businesses were seeing sales fall as consumer demand decreased, or state orders prohibited businesses from operating. In response, some businesses adapted their business models to provide newly demanded goods and services.

Craft breweries, a booming business before COVID-19, experienced declines because they had fewer in-person or wholesale customers, were forced to close, or had to reduce the number of guests that could enter their stores. With excess craft beer on hand and no way to get it to customers, craft brewery entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to repurpose their product into alcohol-based hand sanitizer. The craft breweries teamed up with distilleries, which took the beer and put it through a two-step distillation process and

then bottled and prepared for distribution. And, in order to encourage the production of hand sanitizer, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a temporary change to its rules, provided guidance on hand sanitizer production, and made it easy to register as a producer online (LaGrand 2020). For example, Aurora, Illinois-based sister companies, Two Brothers Brewing and Two Brothers Artisan Spirits, distributed their hand sanitizer to hospitals, senior living facilities, and police and fire departments both within and outside of the state (Gribbins 2020). Similarly, Chicago-based Koval Distillery partnered with local breweries to create and donate 500 gallons of alcohol-based hand sanitizer that was distributed to Metropolitan Family Services, YMCA of Metro Chicago, Sinai Health Systems, among others (Laabs 2020).

c. Forming new associations to meet collective needs

People formed new associations to address challenges directly related to life during the pandemic. The pandemic has drastically altered K-12 education, with a rise in online schooling, hybrid models, and home-schooling. Many parents are faced with working from home or finding childcare so they can go to work while their children attempt to learn from home. In response, a new type of association has emerged known as the “pod” or social “bubble,” where small groups of several families band together to share in the responsibilities of childcare and education while also maintaining physical distance from others. Members of pods often agree to certain rules, such as always wearing masks in public or foregoing restaurants or gyms, to mitigate the pod’s exposure risks (Garcia-Navarro and Lichfield 2020). Such pods have three main purposes: allowing parents to work more effectively, allowing students to learn more effectively, and providing needed socialization.

Within pods, a designated adult serves as a caretaker to make sure that the children are staying on task with virtual school. This promotes a more conducive learning environment for the children and also allows the other parents to focus on working from home or to physically go to their workplace. In some cases, parents take turns teaching or supervising children during the day. In others, families hire a teacher or tutor that can be available throughout the week. Some parents now help others organize their own pods. For example, the *New York Times* reported that Ivan Kerbel, a father in Seattle, was planning to organize pods that he calls “nano schools” for many Seattle families (Moyer 2020). Kerbel’s Facebook group now has over 6,000 members, and its description states that Seattle’s nano schools are “exploring new ways to deliver education ... via home-based instruction, in a time of great economic uncertainty and with pandemic-related public health constraints.”¹⁸

Learning pods have serviced families across income levels. Although relatively wealthy families may have the resources to hire tutors and caretakers, less wealthy families have devised systems of mutual support by drawing on their social networks. That said, not all families have access to a network of other parents with jobs that are flexible enough to share care and schooling. Some have also expressed concern that pods may not be very diverse because of economic and racial segregation and have advocated for public funding of learning pods to promote equity and diversity (North 2020). Although pods are not a perfect or completely equitable solution for all people in all circumstances, the emergence of these new associations to meet collective needs speaks to the propensity of people to use their social capital to creatively solve problems.

d. Developing new narratives about community

During the pandemic, people have devised new ways to emphasize, reinvigorate, or reformulate collective narratives that influence the types of strategies adopted to cope and recover from the crisis. For instance, communities are articulating narratives around the efficacy and the meaning of masks, and what the consistent wearing of them says about their communities (Behr and Storr 2020). Additionally, “Dreem,” a Toronto-based artist, created hundreds of posters with the phrase “We’re all in this together.” The posters were intentionally written in the same font as the storefront signs of a Toronto shop called Honest Ed’s, which

is well-known locally for its “corny idealism.” “That place represented a side of Toronto that’s really special, hopeful, a sign of community—blind optimism and faith in our neighbours. You walked in that place, and you’d find people of all walks of life buying two-dollar socks,” noted Dreeem (Pelley 2020). They hung up 200 posters in the windows of shops around the city that had been closed down due Ontario’s lockdown policies. Dreeem said, “I looked at the news from China and Iran, and I looked at the streets outside my window, at a city going about life as usual, and I just knew it was all about to change. And the virus wouldn’t stop at imaginary borders, and soon people would be going through the same radical disorientation. I wanted to do something about that” (ibid.).

Colleges and universities faced a big challenge in fall 2020 as they were tasked with fulfilling their missions and finding ways to keep students, faculty, and staff safe. Columbia University’s “Columbia Together,” is an example of an online platform for university employees to share their experiences during the pandemic. Employees who contribute to the platform engage in a form of collective storytelling that is meant to reflect community solidarity and perseverance, as well as offer solace to those who feel isolated. On the platform, university employees can write short or long pieces, make videos, or compose poems to share their experiences (Glasberg 2020). Additionally, Columbia University’s human resources department is encouraging employees to share images of working from home and expressions of gratitude to colleagues as well as to use the hashtag #ColumbiaTogether on personal social media accounts (Columbia University Human Resources 2020).

The Columbia Together project has been a platform to shape the collective narrative within the community at Columbia University, and it has also fostered new associations to meet collective needs of people both inside and out of their community. For example, Dr. Yelena Akelina of the department of orthopedics formed an online Facebook group for surgeons and professors around the world who were interested in building an e-learning community after feeling frustrated that her lab and traditional way of teaching was closed down. She writes, “We post lectures, exercises, people share their experiencing, etc. and ask questions. It became very popular very quickly! ... my story tells that in a time of crisis you can always find something to do to be helpful and creative and stay positive!” (ibid.).

Beloit College is a small liberal arts college of 1,200 students in Beloit, Wisconsin, and is, in many ways, a tightly knit community (approximately 90 percent of students live on campus). Beloit College has leveraged that identity to challenge one another to take precautions, establishing the narrative, “Self-care is community care,” and asking community members to physically distance, wear masks, and perform daily check-ins (i.e., self-assessments of health). The college’s website, social media accounts, and weekly newsletter feature photographs of students “masked up” with #WhosThatMask and stories of how they are adapting to the pandemic version of campus life. Throughout campus, messaging highlights how these public health strategies are consistent with community values and norms, making what could be perceived as burdensome rules easier to follow.

Beloit College has also received media attention for how its students have responded to the pandemic and engaged in effective collective action (Chamlee-Wright 2020). As a small community practiced in the art of association, students decided to make amendments to their own student statement of culture and include a commitment to following certain practices to curb the spread of COVID-19. Students and staff together crafted “behavioral expectations,” which established expectations around residential life and hosting events. Importantly, there was not a moratorium on social events. This bottom-up approach helped establish realistic expectations and helped students feel empowered. Indeed, two students, Saad Ahsan and Nayomi Neelangal (2020) explain that, “Our faculty and administration realized that they don’t experience campus life the same way as students do, and telling college students not to party or to ban everything wouldn’t be safe—or realistic. Instead, it would lead to gatherings that would be very secretive, unregulated, and probably take place inside, without masks.”

5. CONCLUSION

People across the world have a propensity to form social connections and voluntary associations to overcome collective challenges. When these communities are confronted with crises, community members deploy their social capital to respond effectively and overcome crises. While the literature highlights the important nature of social capital in post-crisis recovery, our contribution in this article is to highlight the potential of crises to be a *source* of social capital. During and after a crisis, community members deepen existing relationships, develop new connections, adapt existing associations to serve new functions, form new associations to meet collective needs, and develop new collective narratives. In this sense, crises can foster the creation, adaptation, and reformulation of social capital within a community.

The crises associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have provided many real-world examples of social capital being created, altered, and reconceived to allow people to address and overcome unprecedented hardships. Individuals have formed new ties and joined organizations since the start of the pandemic to form friendships, receive support, and help those in need. Social media platforms have allowed local communities to develop and expand robust mutual aid societies. Religious organizations have reorganized and redeployed their charitable-giving structures to meet pressing challenges. Parents have formed learning pods, which allow them to work and parent more effectively while also allowing for the effective education of their children. And communities have reinforced and reinterpreted collective narratives to foster a sense of resilience and togetherness. These few examples, among many others, show that not only is social capital an important factor in a community's ability to cope and recover from crises, but it can also be created when circumstances require it.

NOTES

- 1 Data obtained from the “WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard,” found here: <https://covid19.who.int/>.
- 2 Data obtained from the CDC’s “United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State” dashboard on December 31, 2020, found here: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days.
- 3 Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics “The Employment Situation—November 2020,” found here: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf>.
- 4 Data obtained from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, found here: <https://www.bea.gov/news/2020/gross-domestic-product-2nd-quarter-2020-advance-estimate-and-annual-update>.
- 5 In this paper we take a broad view of social capital and define social capital as (a) the types of relationships between individuals, (b) as norms, or general rules that govern behavior, (c) as collective narratives which express those rules, and (d) as the associations (or groups) that exist in society.
- 6 There are a few studies that do explore this possibility, most notably, Bauer et al. (2016).
- 7 See Behr and Storr (forthcoming) for a discussion of how Tocqueville believed Americans cultivated the art of association and on how markets offer participants greater opportunities to nurture and grow Tocquevillian habits of association.
- 8 The literature also notes that participation in voluntary organizations increases after crisis (for example, see Lee and Fraser 2019).
- 9 The survey, administered through Qualtrics, targeted United States residents over 18 years old and asked a series of questions about pandemic-related community connected, regulations and policies, and changes to work and education. We received 1,105 total responses and used 967 for our analysis (removing those that included multiple nonsensical answers). The sample was fairly diverse with fairly even distribution across regions (with less respondents living on the west coast), age, gender, education, employment, and marital status. However, the population was predominantly white (75 percent).

- 10 Respondents were asked about their connections to each social tie type separately. Ranges are reported rather than results by social tie type.
- 11 For more information, see <https://www.mutual-aid.co.uk/>.
- 12 See their Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/235056557676023>.
- 13 For more information, see: <https://www.bookhamresidents.org.uk/community-coronavirus-care>.
- 14 For more information, see: <https://www.usacovidmutualaid.org/about>.
- 15 The Arlington group's Facebook page can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/212126776694852/>.
- 16 For more information, see here: <https://twitter.com/LASDHQ/status/1251309377635577856>.
- 17 For more information, see: <https://sewandserve.com/about/>; <https://www.facebook.com/sewandserveindy/>; and <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/relief-society-in-action-may-5-2020>.
- 18 For Kerbel's Facebook group, see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/seattle.micro.schools>.

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