Creating Networks of Support: The Lutheran Circle in Dublin

Christian Ritter

Although anthropological investigations have traditionally described belief systems and religious rituals, places of worship can also be analysed in terms of support networks holding its members together. The case of the Lutheran congregation in Dublin provides new evidence for the exploration of social capital. The Lutheran Church in Ireland was founded in 1689. For most of its history it was under the control of the Anglican Church, but having received financial support from the Netherlands and the Church of Ireland, the Lutheran congregation in Dublin was able to construct its own edifice in the middle of the 19th century.

In 2013 a small number of Lutheran congregations cooperate in Dublin. Their members practice their faith in different languages. Lutheran services are mainly held in Latvian, Polish and German in St. Finian’s Church. Additionally, an English-speaking service is given once a month. The German-speaking Lutheran community has 446 registered members (LCI 2013). Social and cultural anthropologists have only recently discovered the value of social capital research (Svendsen 2006). This paper provides much-needed insights into the creation of social capital at a micro level, patterns of exchange and reciprocal support can be identified.

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of reciprocal support in social capital creation. The establishment of reciprocity within social relations can be broadly termed as a social force whereby individuals give, receive and return (Mauss 1967; quoted from Torche and Valenzuela 2011: 188). Reciprocity is here defined as a voluntarily agreed interchange of goods and services for mutual benefit. After extensive research into the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Dublin, I suggest that the generation of social capital among members of this community can be ascribed to the establishment of its inner circle within which services are exchanged on the basis of generalised reciprocity. This paper is divided into three main sections. First, I will describe how the life of a Lutheran lay-preacher...
evolved within the congregation. Secondly, I cast light on the role rituals play in social capital building. Finally, the paper addresses the social dynamics behind the creation of support networks within the Lutheran congregation.

Materials and Methods

As I intended to delve into localised knowledge during my research into a Lutheran congregation in Dublin, I pursued a strategy of inquiry that combined participant observation (Angrosino and Mays de Pérez 2003) and life story interviewing (Wengraf 2001). Throughout the fieldwork the life story interview was the major method employed for gathering data. Participant observation complemented the line of inquiry given by life history data. Using these methods, social capital building can be sufficiently explored. For the purpose of this study of social capital, the life story interview is considered a means of gathering highly pertinent data because it stimulates rich narratives of everyday life and uncovers the various social relations in which the building of social capital is embedded. Studying community life with regard to reciprocal support among its members unveils how social capital is created locally and how its underlying forces evolve. For this reason, social relations within a faith-based community were explored in depth. The assessment of the creation and acquisition of social capital requires clear evidence of personal networks, membership, and voluntary engagement.

The life story interview produces invaluable data that display how interviewees make sense of their friends, professional lives, and leisure activities. Its open and undirected questioning style enables narratives of lived experiences which describe the social reality in the chosen terminolgy of the interviewees. The life story interview is usually initiated by a single question: I want you to tell me your life story, all the events and experience which were important for you, up to now. Start wherever you like. Please take the time you need. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for after you've finished telling me about your experiences (Wengraf 2001: 121).

My fieldwork was carried out in urban settings which were not as observable or clear-cut as places in, say, a village environment. Rather, they were conceived as situated in a multitude of interlocking locations filled with negotiated meanings. Retrospectively speaking, participant observation was an invaluable means of approaching potential life story interviewees, supporting the analyses of life history data and, in the latter stages of the research, verifying core findings. My fieldwork practice was guided by two related principles aimed at informing the participants as early as possible and protecting their rights. Firstly, the principle of confidentiality guided the investigation from the very start. Information provided by participants of the study has been treated with absolute confidentiality. All research-relevant information was treated as strictly confidential throughout the collection of data, necessitating password-protected storage and pseudonymised communication in academic papers. Secondly, my research was based on the principle of informed consent. However, research principles for ethnographic investigations should not be regarded as dogmatic doctrines since anthropological research ethics evolve during a series of reflected research decisions.

The research also brought to light the limitations of the use of this type of fieldwork. One prime limitation of the life story interview is the strong dependency of the life narrative’s breadth and depth on the social relationship established between interviewee
and interviewer prior to the interview. As a result, the relevance of the data gathered varied from one life narrative to another in relation to the aims and theoretical implications of my research. A small number of interviewees only provided substantial evidence for the line of inquiry towards the end of the interview or even after the recording.

The Role of a Lay-Preacher within the Lutheran Congregation

This section sheds light on a specific life phase of a church member who dedicated a good deal of his spare time to the Lutheran cause and wholeheartedly engaged in local church life. The analysis of this life phase illustrates how social capital is built within a faith community. The problem of social capital creation has been extensively examined for instance by the American sociologists James Coleman (e.g. 1990) and Robert Putnam (e.g. 2000). Coleman's theory shifted the focus of social capital research as he identified previously unknown stocks of social capital. In contrast to the commonly held opinion, he suggested that elite groups do not exclusively create benefits and assets but marginalised communities too generate considerable stocks of social capital (Coleman 1994). A decade later Putnam pointed to a further crucial pathway in social capital research and he was one of the first to identify faith-based institutions as major repositories of social capital (Putnam 2000: 66). Against this background, my research into a Lutheran congregation provides a new empirical case and establishes the reasons why in this particular context social capital emerged.

I explore this community through the lens of social capital because ethnographic research can represent how the social dynamics of faith-based networks unfold in a local context and illuminate the sources of such capital. Studying the narrative of a specific life phase in depth reveals patterns of the social life within a given organisation and the roles its members can fill. The British sociologist John Field, a leading expert in the area, suggests exploring transitional phases in life narratives as they exemplify how social capital is acquired (e.g. Field 2008). In the context of the life story under discussion, getting in touch with the Lutheran community in Dublin and engaging in its communal life can be considered as a means of coping with the difficulties of moving from one country to another. The act of migration often opens a new page in a person's life narrative and is the point of departure for a transitional life phase.

Frank B., whose story is here examined in depth, moved from Germany to Dublin at the end of the 1990s. According to the Central Statistics Office (2012), 11,305 German nationals resided in Ireland in 2011. In the late 1990s Frank's wife was in the process of applying for a lecturing position at a university in Dublin. Once the family was informed that she could take office in Dublin, everything had to be arranged very quickly. The children, aged 10 and 12, needed to be enrolled in a local school. The fact that Frank's wife Clíona B. had previously lived in Dublin was a great advantage for the entire family. Even though she is not a native of Dublin, she had spent her youth in the Irish capital. As Frank remembers, her local connections facilitated their orientation in Dublin and the choice of school for their children:

Then an opportunity arose in Dublin. When the post was taken, the decision was taken very quickly, I had listed it earlier, June, July, August, September was the first school day. So inside three months. But we never said we do everything that we can go to Ireland.
The social integration of the family began immediately, which was highly beneficial to the children. The analysis of the social networks in the early phase of their lives in Dublin reveals how access to information and services was achieved. The existing social contacts of Clíona, for example her parents, were already an asset which provided the family with initial accommodation. However, further networks of hers proofed essential for quickly adapting to local life in Dublin. She could immediately refresh her friendship with former classmates, as Frank states in the following interview extract:

They immediately, as I said earlier on, got started with school. The funny thing was that the headmaster of this school was the former teacher of my wife. So they knew each other. My wife met old classmates in front of the school gate, which facilitated the start here in Ireland. So they were chatting: "How are you? I haven’t seen you for ages". So this helped a lot.

This passage uncovers how vital social contacts can be for a successful migration process. These contacts make up the social capital of a family since they provide access to information and deliver support. In addition to the detailed arrival story of his family, Frank’s life story illustrates how such capital can be acquired, shared and stored within a local faith-based community. His life narrative contains vital evidence for his social capital accumulation.

Finding employment proved a real challenge for Frank. After he had been employed by a number of companies, for instance a call centre, he realised that all these jobs did not satisfy him completely. The social contacts he could develop within the Lutheran church provided him with vital information on the local labour market. In his life narrative he depicted the first contact with the local Lutheran church as a turning point of his life in Dublin. He was happy to hear of the local German-speaking congregation and attended church services more and more regularly. Slowly but steadily, he built relations with congregation members, from which he would benefit later on. Frank remembered how constant participation in the activities of the congregation, be they of religious nature or social events, increased his personal well-being. He particularly appreciated the opportunity to speak his native language, as the vast majority of the church-based events he attended were held in German language. His involvement in local church life enabled Frank to build social capital. He could make numerous friends due to a shared interest in Lutheran beliefs, and he took on various roles within the congregation. He volunteered as a driver during church outings and finally became a lay-preacher. However, his membership in the congregation also helped him find an appropriate employer.

When I had set up my own business, somebody told me at church – and that is this contact – that a post as a facility supervisor was vacant in the embassy. Then I applied and I got the job. Since summer 2003 I am employed by the embassy as facility supervisor and driver, yes these two tasks... The contact was there at first. I had never thought that you can apply at the embassy. I had heard from the pastor, who knew of my situation, he knew that I was self-employed and that I didn’t have anything. And then he said: “Listen, there is a post vacant in the embassy”.

This passage indicates how membership in a community can facilitate access to information, which can improve a person’s quality of life and even help them find a suitable job. Joining an organisation whose members assemble in their spare time can increase a person’s social capital. As numerous social scientists have emphatically pointed out, faith-based organisations are
inclined to store social capital, from which their numerous members can benefit (e.g. Yeung 2004). Members of such organisations build trustworthy relations of mutual support and gain access to information.

The analysis of extracts from Frank’s life narrative brought to light how social capital can improve the situation of an individual. However, social capital is an entity that unfolds within social relations. In the early phase of his involvement in the congregation, Frank was a recipient of social capital. Subsequently, he went on to augment this asset in the course of his engagement within the community. Since Frank became an active member of the congregation, he has generated social capital for other members through his voluntary engagement in community life. As a lay-preacher, he holds services in congregations outside Dublin. Holding church services is a social practice that directly creates social capital for numerous church members as it enables them to meet on a regular basis. Such capital can be accumulated by other members who participate in church services for all the religious reasons but who also enjoy a cup of tea or coffee after the service and exchange ideas and experiences with each other. Support networks often emerge out of these informal social gatherings.

Social Rituals Hold Congregation Members together

The Lutheran church service can be considered as the focal event of the local church life. The stream of social interactions within the church centres around these events. Two types of rituals reoccur in slightly differing ways in almost all services. First, the Lutheran belief system is reproduced in religious rituals, most importantly the celebration of the Eucharist. Secondly, a number of social rituals take place within the congregation that enhance the sociability of its members and create dense support networks. It is the latter that needs to be carefully examined in order to better understand how social capital is built within the congregation and which social practices prompt its creation. I took part in the Easter service in 2011 during a long-term field trip to Dublin. This experience provided me with invaluable insights into local church life and the ways in which social capital is generated among members of the church. Each service is composed by a set of elements, which are reinvented in slightly varied forms every year. Given its importance in the Christian calendar, the Easter service was well attended in 2011, as it is almost every year. The service, which was held in a church edifice filled with excited believers, began with various hymns and prayers.

The main elements were the pastor’s sermon and the Eucharist. At the end of the service, the pastor made announcements about forthcoming scheduled events and invited the congregation to the church garden, where a table with cake, coffee and tea was already laid. After the service a lively crowd assembled in the church garden. This part of the congregational life was much more informal and people chatted and laughed over coffee and tea. This scene occurs quite regularly after the Lutheran service and is one of the main reasons why social capital flourishes among the members of the church. This social ritual, known locally as church coffee (Kirchkaffee), enables social capital generation within the congregation. Membership in the church ensures regular participation in religious rituals but it also provides access to informal get-togethers during which experiences and information are shared. Networks of support often grow out of these situations.

The minority church can continue to hold services for its members because of the voluntary engagement of its core members. The lay-preachers are a good example of
religiously motivated voluntarism within the Lutheran congregation. However, the church requires many more volunteers to keep its congregational life going. For instance, the youth group is organised by volunteers and the church council that is in charge of administering and governing the faith-based organisation is almost completely comprised of volunteers (LCI 2012). As a result of extensive analysis of the data about this congregation, another social force which enables the generation of social capital could be identified.

The Social Dynamics behind the Creation of Social Capital

Social and cultural anthropologists have explored the exchange of goods and services within small-sized groups ever since the discipline was founded. Since social capital is a social phenomenon which occurs within networks, analysing the circulation of goods and services therein can illuminate how this type of capital is generated and how this is brought about. As the aim of this article is to better understand social capital creation, an assessment of the ways in which services are exchanged within a Lutheran congregation can shed new light on the social dynamics within faith-based communities. Some life stories collected in the Lutheran church contain very detailed information about the ways German-born congregation members have supported each other during their predicament of emigration. These clusters of evidence reveal how social capital generation within the Lutheran congregation in Dublin has evolved and how the community is kept going. I recorded life story interviews with a number of people who, in the course of their membership of the church, engaged voluntarily in church life as they became active members of the church council. As explained in the bylaws of the German-speaking Lutheran Church in Ireland (LCI 2012), the church council is elected for three years and consists of four to eight people, including the pastor. The roles and responsibilities of the council members are chair, vice-chair, treasurer, and secretary. However, the roles can also be tailored according to the needs of the local community. In the late 2010s a building committee was set up when the church was being refurbished, and its chair was assigned the status of council member. Frank also acted as treasurer for the congregation.
before he volunteered as a lay-preacher.

...I was asked to become a member of the church council and I was elected later on. Because of my educational background, I had some knowledge of accounting and I became the treasurer. Well, that's my destiny.

Many congregation members support the community by imparting their knowledge or even professional expertise to make community life more enjoyable. With the exception of the pastor, the believers who are elected onto the council work on a voluntary basis in their spare time for the benefit of the local Lutheran community at large. The church council is a social entity within which the circulation of services differs from the exchange practices of the late modern market society. As in many other faith-based communities, a circulation of services, such as engineering or accountancy skills, prevails within the community. The highly active members of the church council have established a support network based on generalised reciprocity (Putnam 2000). The identification of this type of reciprocity as a major source of social capital is the main outcome of my empirical research into the Lutheran congregation in Dublin. Since this social force has evolved within the Lutheran circle, this community has built a sustainable stock of social capital.

Another piece of evidence illustrates how reciprocal support evolved among Lutherans. Judith who was acting as the chair of the building committee experienced the interchange of services within the congregation. She offered her professional expertise as an engineer to the Lutheran community. The community as a whole benefited from her engineering skills during the construction of an additional building, in which some meetings of church members are hosted. Her engagement was motivated by a need to find further support after arriving in Dublin and to establish close relationships:

...the German-speaking community has become a sort of big family because to me it is quite small, quite manageable. You get easily in touch with others. There is a group for young adults which does just that. That's where my friends actually are.

Her story exemplifies how generalised reciprocity evolves within the networks of church members. She provided her professional skills to the church and, in return, she could access information and services after having expanded her social circle. Reciprocal exchange has puzzled anthropologists for a long time. Classic authors of international reputation, such as the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2001 [1923–24]) and the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972), explored the phenomenon. Putnam (2000) ascribed the blossoming of social capital within local communities to the establishment of a system of social networks in which generalised reciprocity has been achieved. This means that all members of the community do favours for one another without expecting the same person to offer an equivalent service in return. Such a reciprocal exchange is balanced because all members of the community give and receive. Even though any congregation member can be called upon to provide mutual support, such social dynamics primarily evolve because of the council members' engagement. This form of reciprocal exchange is most likely to occur within dense social networks. Those extremely efficient systems of generalised reciprocity mainly emerge in voluntary associations such as choral societies, sport and leisure clubs, NGOs, neighbourhood societies, places of worship and so forth (Giordano 2008).
Christian Giordano’s exegesis of Putnam’s works on social capital provides an avenue for anthropological research exploring social micro-cosmoses such as a faith-based community. The Swiss anthropologist underlines that the ‘anthropological analysis of society and culture’ shall investigate systems of mutual support and reciprocal exchange more intensively (Giordano 2008). In doing so ethnographic researchers capture how such social entities evolve and establish the very reasons for their existence. Members of the Lutheran congregation in Dublin exchange services on a reciprocal basis that transcends the individual or family level. Friendship and most family networks are often dual support systems, which are comprised of a small number of people. Small-sized communities such as the Lutheran congregation set the social dynamics of generalised reciprocity in motion. In contrast to friendship-based support systems, services circulate among numerous people within well-run organisations. My study into a Lutheran congregation in Dublin revealed that its members accumulate and share social capital because reciprocal support could be established within the core of the community. Reciprocity is a vital source of social capital creation in small-sized organisations. Reciprocal support within a community can become a social force which prompts the creation of social capital. A circulation of services emerged since long-term and active members of the Lutheran congregation did not expect an equivalent in return for services provided. Even though the core networks of the church are small in size, they include enough people to transcend mutual aid within a family network. In this way, social capital as a public good is generated, which is accessible to anyone who joins the church and endorses its values. Since the church depends to a considerable extent on voluntary engagement, the circulation of services is not always stable, indeed over the last decade the church has experienced various crises due to a lack of members and engagement. However, reciprocal support within the church council has kept church life going and enabled the building of social capital. Reciprocity works as a crucial social force which enhances the creation and distribution of social capital within a local community. This paper unfolds the story of a Lutheran congregation in Dublin and its particular ways of generating support networks in a specific local context.

**Conclusion**

Social capital research can be advanced by anthropological fieldwork since ethnographies of social organisations can examine *in situ* how social capital is built. Drawing on life history material, I suggest that the Lutheran congregation in Dublin was able to develop dense support networks because of the voluntary engagement and reciprocal support within its inner circle. The Lutheran case provides new evidence for the creation of social capital within faith-based communities. Based on the materials studied, it could be shown that social rituals, such as church coffees following services, enable social capital creation. Additionally, social capital is built by the assignment of internal roles. The Lutheran lay-preacher is a telling example of how social capital is shared within the congregation. Thanks to the personal engagement of lay-preachers, the church can deliver its services in Dublin and other towns on the island. In this way,
attendees of the service gain access to information or can create support networks based on their shared Lutheran beliefs. In addition to voluntary engagement, social capital can flourish within the congregation because a specific constellation of social networks evolved. The core members of the faith-based community offer their services to the community at large. A circulation of services emerged which is founded in reciprocal support. Reciprocity is a driving force of social capital generation in this congregation, as in many other social organisations such as charities. Finally, the creation of social capital among Lutheran believers in Dublin can be explained by the evolution of a system of reciprocal support. The inner circle of the church is comprised of highly active members ensuring that church life can be maintained. As the Lutheran congregation in Dublin has a relatively high number of active members, it has been able to establish a vibrant church council whose members exchange services on the basis of generalised reciprocity. The church council can be considered as the repository where most of the social capital is stored. However, the research outcomes need to be put into perspective. Only a fraction of German nationals living in Dublin are members of the Lutheran congregation and other, more integrative acculturation strategies have been chosen as well.

Future qualitative investigations can address the various ways of building support networks which have been established in other places of worship, online communities and debate clubs. Every social organisation that creates a sense of togetherness among its members tells its own unique story, and today in the early part of the 21st century anthropologists have only just begun to collect the diverse narratives which evoke the human need to find and engage in a local community.

REFERENCES


