

UNIVERSITY OF LODZ
FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT

Doctoral Thesis Summary

Omar Shaheen

**Community of practice as a space for shaping social capital in Polish
universities**

Keywords: *social capital, social capital, structural dimension, relational dimension, cognitive dimension, community of practice, Polish universities*

Supervisor: dr hab. . Ilona Świątek -Barylska, prof. UŁ

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In organizations of the twenty-first century, intangible assets play an important role in the functioning of the organization. For many years, intangible resources have been neglected by organizations in favor of financial resources¹. However, changes in the environment have forced organizations to verify this approach. Today, intellectual capital is considered a key factor in the success of an organization². Social capital is one of the components of intellectual capital, enables greater efficiency of people's activities, promotes their cooperation and intensifies learning processes³. It is therefore a real social and economic phenomenon and at the same time a mental and behavioral one⁴. Thanks to the action of social capital, the integration of people, their properties, knowledge, skills and material means takes place⁵. Social capital is an important organizational resource that allows you to achieve goals that without its involvement would not even be visible. It follows from the above that social capital increases the tendency of the organization to introduce new and develop existing activities. It is a peculiar form of social structure in an organization that reinforces proactive behaviors within it⁶.

The social capital of an organization or group is a non-transferable feature due to its individual character. F. Fukuyama writes about it. This is one of the reasons why transforming an organization by transferring experiences from one culture to another is difficult⁷. It is impossible not to mention that social capital in combination with human capital results in the effective functioning of the organization and the achievement of the set goals. Both social capital (understood as social bonds) and human capital (understood in the form of skills and knowledge) are important for the achievements of organizations .

Social capital increases the effectiveness of employees by influencing organizational behavior and motivation. It fosters the sharing of knowledge and the creation of group

¹A. Sokołowska, *Zarządzanie kapitałem intelektualnym w małym przedsiębiorstwie*. Fundacja Promocji i Akredytacji Kierunków Ekonomicznych 2005, s. 11.

²B. Kaczmarek, *Kapitał intelektualny (wiedza) a kierowanie wizji przedsiębiorstwa*, [w:] M.G. Woźniak (red.), *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy. Kapitał ludzki i intelektualny*, Zeszyt nr 7, Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, Katedra Teorii Ekonomii, Rzeszów 2005, s. 319.

³M. Bratnicki, *Podstawy współczesnego myślenia o zarządzaniu*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Biznesu w Dąbrowie Górniczej, czerwiec 2000, s. 88.

⁴J. Przybyś, J. Sauś, *Kapitał społeczny. Szkice socjologiczno-ekonomiczne*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Poznańskiej, Poznań 2004, s. 5.

⁵J. Bartkowiak, M. Herbst (red.), *Kapitał ludzki i kapitał społeczny a rozwój regionalny*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2007, s. 56.

⁶Ibidem, s. 91.

⁷F. Fukuyama, *Budowanie państwa*, Wydawnictwo Rodzinne, Poznań 2005, s. 6.

solidarity⁸. Thanks to its occurrence, employees help each other, communicate better and cooperate with each other, and feel greater loyalty to the group. As Oh, Chung & Labianca Assumes, strong group bonds lower costs, provide emotional support, and reduce opportunism⁹. The literature on the subject describes many examples of the impact of social capital on the functioning of an organization. J. Nahapiet and S. Ghoshal [1998] show the support for the flow of knowledge through social capital related to norms and trust¹⁰. R. Sparrowe, R. Liden, S. Wayne and M. Kramer. how that negative relationships in the team reduce the effectiveness of the team, and the employees with the most positive relationships are the most effective and supportive at work¹¹. Good employee relations, loyalty and identification with the group testify to the quality of social capital. R.H. Richard emphasizes the absence of certain forms of ethos – in other words, the absence of social capital results in pathology and disruption in the functioning of economic and social systems¹².

This unquestioning importance of social capital for the functioning of the organization prompts us to seek answers to the question of how to shape it. It seems that communities of practice can be a space conducive to the development of social capital. The concept of communities of practice has recently been present in the literature in the field of management. Despite the growing interest in this issue among theoreticians and practitioners, little empirical research has been carried out on this phenomenon (especially from the perspective of members of communities of practice). Most of them are short case studies, carried out on the need to implement a community of practice as part of the knowledge management system in the organization. In the dissertation, it was assumed (according to Bendkowski) *that a community of practice is understood as a group of people whose aim is to create knowledge about a common area of interest and therefore cooperating with each other realistically or virtually. As a result of this cooperation, specific ties are formed between them, enabling the effective creation and distribution of knowledge within the communities*¹³. The interpretation of the phenomenon based on these dimensions ensures the emergence of a community of practice

⁸ P.S. Adler, S. Kwon, *Social capital: prospects for a new concept*, „Academy of Management Review” 2002, t. 27, z. 1, s. 32.

⁹ H. Oh, M. Chung, G. Labianca, *Group social capital and group effectiveness: the role of informal socializing ties*, „Academy of Management Journal” 2004, Vol. 47, no. 6, s. 863.

¹⁰ J. Nahapiet, S. Ghoshal, *Social Capital, Intellectual Capital and the Organizational Advantage*, „Academy of Management Review” 1998, t. 23, z. 2, s. 245.

¹¹ R.T. Sparrowe, R.C. Liden, S.J. Wayne, M.L. Kramer, *Social Networks and the Performance of Individuals and Groups*, „The Academy of Management Journal” 2001, t. 44, z. 2, s. 320.

¹² J. Przybysz, J. Sauś, op.cit., s. 22.

¹³ J. Bendkowski, *Interaktywno-sieciowy model kształtowania wspólnot działań w kreowaniu i dyfuzji wiedzy w organizacjach*, Gliwice 2012, s. 13.

both spontaneously and intentionally by the organization for the creation of new knowledge important for the further functioning of the organization, in particular the creation and sharing of classified knowledge, which is a strategic resource, enabling the effective functioning of the organization.

In Polish literature, no attempt has been made to synthesize views, knowledge or empirical research on communities of practice **in the context of the mechanisms of their functioning and mechanisms shaping the social capital of its members at Polish universities**. The analysis of the literature on the subject allows us to conclude that knowledge about the Polish realities of the functioning of communities of practice and mechanisms of shaping social capital at Polish universities is limited, so it can be concluded that this issue requires further, detailed research.

The subject of interest in this work is the mechanisms of functioning of the community of practice and the mechanisms of shaping the social capital of its members at Polish universities analyzed from the perspective of management sciences. In accordance with their interdisciplinary approach to the research area, in order to obtain a picture of the mechanisms of functioning of the community of practice and their impact on the formation of social capital at Polish universities, the perspective of management sciences adopted in the research was enriched with other aspects (sociological and psychological).

The consequence of studies on the issue of mechanisms of functioning of the community of practice and their impact on the formation of social capital at Polish universities is the formulation of the purpose of work. The **main objective** of the work is to identify the mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and methods of shaping social capital among members of the community in Polish universities. The purpose of the work defined in this way is of a general nature. It is complemented by the specific objectives set out below, which include:

1. Presenting, organizing and expanding scientific achievements in the field of the functioning of communities of practice along with the identification of methods of shaping and measuring social capital;

2. identification of mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice in selected Polish universities from the perspective of employees (members of the community of practice);

3. identification of mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice from the perspective of organizations (persons responsible for creating a community of practice);

4. identification of methods of shaping social capital among employees (members of the community of practice) in selected Polish universities;

5. determining the level of social capital among members of the community of practice in selected Polish universities;

6. determination of the level of social capital among employees who are not members of the surveyed communities of practice;

7. Indication of the possibility of shaping social capital among employees (members) of the community of practice at Polish universities.

Thesis of work. The reflections conducted in the dissertation are based on the thesis that communities of practice are a space within the organization in which social capital is shaped.

Description of the research process. The research carried out in the dissertation is qualitative with elements of quantitative analysis. The qualitative nature of the conducted research proceedings is associated with a departure from research preconceptualizations. M. Kostera emphasizes that representation in qualitative research does not consist in obtaining statistical representativeness, but is related to social reality, i.e. "substantive representation". According to Dariusz Jemielniak, formulating research hypotheses and testing them:

it works well in social research using quantitative methods, but it does not work for a significant part of qualitative projects, in which starting a research process with an assumed hypothesis is simply a mistake: the advantage of qualitative research is its exploratory nature, i.e. reaching the truth about people in a way that often goes beyond what the person developing the research project imagines, as well as in a way that is oriented towards the understanding of the perception of the world by the subjects, rather than through abstract conceptual categories¹⁴.

Therefore, as part of the research procedure, a detailed research question was formulated, which together with a description of the research methodology was presented in Chapter 4. The research process conducted in the dissertation can be divided into two parts,

¹⁴ D. Jemielniak (red.), *Badania jakościowe. Podejścia i teorie*, PWN, Warszawa 2012, s.

each part of which contributed to the achievement of the goal of the work. The first part was secondary research, which consisted in the analysis of literature in the areas of management, sociology, psychology. The review of literature (both Polish and English-language) was systematizing, explanatory and conceptual. The number of Polish and foreign publications used in the doctoral dissertation includes 374 items (Including compact sources book publications and magazines).

The second part of the research process consisted of two stages of empirical work: identification research and in-depth research carried out at Polish universities. The first stage was aimed at collecting information enabling the identification of Polish universities where the community of practice operates and the selection of 3 universities for further deeper research. This stage of research was carried out on the basis of:

- analysis of the literature of the subject (desk reserach),
- a survey addressed to employees of Polish universities (about 25 universities).

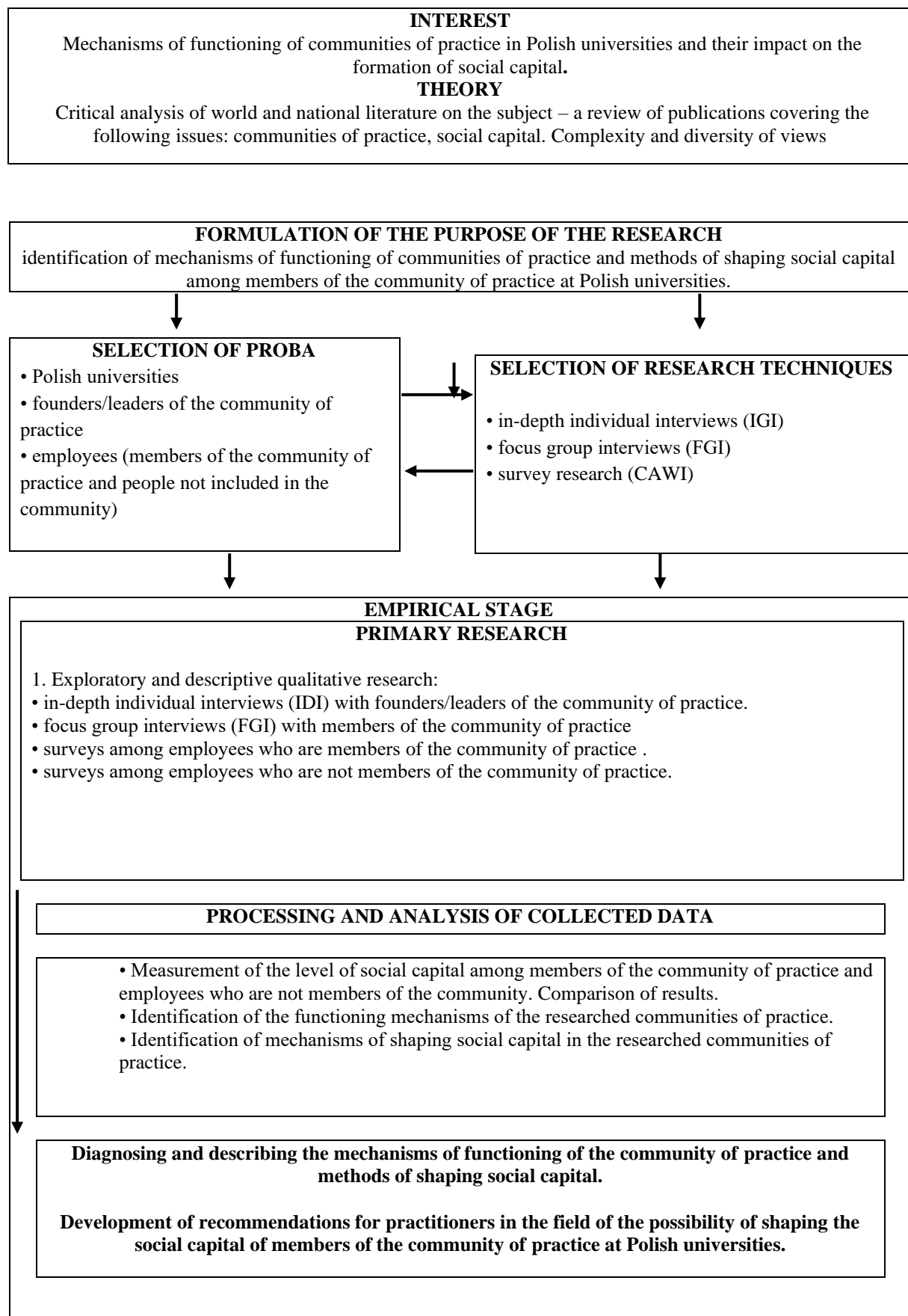
The second step of this (empirical) research stage consisted of two parts. The aim of the first part was to seek answers to questions about the functioning of communities of practice and mechanisms for shaping social capital among members of communities of practice at Polish universities.

In empirical studies, information was collected taking into account the perspective of two parties, :

1. University perspectives: in-depth interviews with people responsible for the creation and functioning of communities of practice,
2. Employee perspectives: focus group interviews with members of communities of practice.

The aim of the second part was to measure and compare the level of social capital among employees-members of the community and employees who are not members of the community of practice. The course of the test process is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The course of the research process



Source: Own work based on E. Babbie, *Badania społeczne w praktyce*, PWN, Warszawa 2004, s. 128.

Layout and content of the work. The layout of this work was determined by the defined interest of the research area, the goal and the thesis. The work consists of four chapters.

The first chapter presents the interpretation of the concept of "social capital" on theoretical grounds. Due to the complexity and ambiguity of the term, the definition was reviewed, highlighting the characteristics of social capital. Interpenetrating theoretical threads from the area of management, sociology and psychology reflect the complexity of the problem studied in the work. This chapter discusses and analyzes in detail social capital as a theoretical construct covering the issue related to history, the issue of social capital, the definitional context of the concept of social capital, the systematization of theoretical approaches to social capital and social capital in the organization.

The second chapter is devoted to two groups of issues. The first part of the chapter presents the dimension of social capital in the organization. This part presents the dimensions of social capital, in which J. Nahapiet and S. Ghoshal, on the basis of management theory and organization, integrated various aspects of social capital, and then defined its three dimensions (structural, relational and cognitive). The second part discusses the role of social capital for the functioning of organizations. This chapter concludes by describing the different ways of measuring social capital in practice. In this chapter, as a consequence of literature studies, the concepts of social capital were presented as the starting point for empirical research in this work.

The third chapter extensively presents the concept of community of practice. This chapter presents the interpretation of the concept of "community of practice" on theoretical grounds. Later, communities of practice were presented as a social space by discussing characteristics. The community of practice has been described in several perspectives: the life cycle of the community in the organizational environment, social aspects of functioning, participation in the community of activities and roles performed by members of the community. Finally, typologies of communities of practice and differences between the community of practice and other organizational structures, such as the project team, functional organizational unit and informal network of employees, are presented. This chapter concludes the presentation of the importance and role of the community of practice.

The fourth chapter presents the methodology of own research. This chapter presents in detail the description of the research problem, the objectives of the work, research questions, research procedure, identification and selection of the research sample.

The fifth chapter presents the results of research that allowed to identify the mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and diagnose methods of shaping social capital among community members and measuring social capital – comparative analysis (inside the community and outside the studied community of practice). In this chapter you will find conclusions and final recommendations.

The presented dissertation closes with the conclusion, which contains a summary of the conducted research proceedings and outlines the possibility of further scientific work.

The specific objectives of this dissertation included a review of the global acquis in the field of social capital as a theoretical construct, its dimensions and ways of measuring and the functioning of communities of practice. The results of the research in this area are presented by the author in the first three chapters of this study (theoretical level). The empirical level concerned the identification of mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and the mechanisms of shaping social capital among employees (members of the community of practice), diagnosis and assessment of the level of social capital among members of the community and comparison with the level of social capital among non-member employees, indicating the possibilities of shaping social capital among employees who are members of the community of practice at Polish universities. The results of the implementation of the above objectives are presented in detail in the fourth chapter, presenting the organizational and social aspects of the functioning of the community of practice, the analysis of the comparison of the level of social capital of employees who are members and employees who are not members mechanisms for shaping the social capital of members of the community of practice. The fourth chapter proposes recommendations for practitioners regarding the scope of possibilities of shaping the social capital of employees (members of the community of practice) at Polish universities.

The analysis of the answers obtained as part of the quantitative study made it possible to obtain a positive verification of the main hypothesis (i.e. the level of social capital among members of the community of practice is higher than among non-members). The answers obtained as part of the quantitative study and their analysis were the basis for positive verification of some of the partial hypotheses, which are described in detail in the fourth chapter.

The most important conclusions obtained as a result of empirical research in the dissertation made it possible, firstly, to positively verify the thesis (i.e. communities of practice are a space within Polish universities in which the social capital of its members is shaped); secondly, to achieve the main objective of the dissertation, which is to identify the mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and mechanisms for shaping social capital among the members of the community; thirdly, to positively verify the main hypothesis, which assumes that the level of social capital among members of the community of practice is higher than among non-members of Polish universities; Fourthly, to obtain answers to all the research questions posed in the dissertation, enabling the solution of the research problem, which concerns the mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice in Polish universities and their impact on the formation of social capital of its members. The above-mentioned most important conclusions contributed to the development of recommendations for practitioners and contributed to the theory of the discipline and enabled the systematization of knowledge and filling the research gap. Recommendations for practitioners concerned launching the area of mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and the possibility of shaping the social capital of members of communities of practice at Polish universities. The results of the conducted analyses of the mechanisms of functioning of communities of practice and mechanisms of shaping the social capital of members at Polish universities contributed to the systematization of available knowledge and contribution to the fragmentary development in Polish literature.