AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON SOCIAL BONDS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AN ALGERIAN MINING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: *This article examines how social bonds influence the behavior of professional groups in the mining industry, specifically focusing on the Boukhadra mine in Algeria. By employing an ethnographic methodology and conducting interviews with 43 workers, the research uncovers those informal connections rooted in familial, tribal, and community bonds are prioritized over formal professional associations. The concept of "social capital" plays a vital role in understanding the dynamics of these groups, as it encompasses the network of relationships and shared values within them. According to the findings of this research, workers tend to prioritize mediation and personal connections over formal procedures when seeking to address their rights and needs. Although the mining organization has embraced modernization, its behavior remains rooted in traditional socio-cultural norms, creating concerns about the rift between the community and modern society.*

Keywords: social bonds, social capital, professional groups, mining sector, ethnography, traditions and modernity.

1. Introduction: the research problem, objectives and method

The term "social bonds" encompasses the interconnected relationships that individuals form, representing their affiliation and inclusion in a community. The concept explores the connections that bind individuals and groups together, as well as the individual's relationship with their respective group. Scholars and sociologists, such as Ibn Khaldoun (Khaldoun, 1981), Ferdinand Tönnies (Tonnies, Communauté et société: Catégories fondamentales de la sociologie pure ''le lien social'', 2015), Lahouari Addi (Addi, 1999), Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1978), Slimane Medhar (Medher, 1999) and others, have thoroughly examined its dimensions and implications. The following questions pertain to our problem. What role do social bonds play in shaping and constructing the behaviors of groups and professional social categories in the mining sector? What are the social and anthropological contexts and implications of this?

The objective of this article is to investigate into the extension of the social bond within the mine's local community, specifically "Boukhadra." Additionally, it will explore the impact of this connection on communication and group cohesion within the economic facility. The analysis will draw upon significant Western and Algerian studies in the field of sociology.

The Boukhadra mine was subject to intermittent field studies conducted during various periods due to the health conditions in the country (COVID-19 pandemic) in February and March 2020, November 2021, and February and April 2023.

Our research methodology involved a qualitative approach, specifically focusing on the ethnographic method. This method proved to highly effective because of its utility to provide rich and significant research data. We conducted free and direct interviews and actively observed and took parts in various sites.

Our sample consisted of 43 workers selected at random from diverse occupational groups. Our research was impacted by several factors, including its nature, methodological and time constraints, as well as the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including total and

partial lockdowns and subsequent obstacles. Also by the specific characteristics of the community we worked in, as well as the need for privacy, all validate some of the methodological choices made for this study.

2. Social connection and its implications: a literature review

According to Pierre-Yves Cusset (Cusset, 2011) in his book "Le lien social", he claims that the social bond encompasses all the connections we have with our family, neighbors, friends, and even extends to the collective sense of solidarity, which is shaped by the norms and values that define our understanding of the collective.

"Social problems can be classified into two major categories: some that are negative, have a disruptive role in people's lives, and others that are considered positive, as they concern the need for development, progress, such as, for example, the computerization of education for online courses in the current period or the modernization of the medical system, to face the challenges of epidemic phenomena" (for more details on this topic, see Otovescu, 2021).

André Akoun and Pierre Ansart suggest that social bonding establishes a connection between individuals and social groups, facilitating socialization and integration into society. As a result, gaining diverse aspects of social and cultural identity. It represents different ways people socialize and control behavior in society (Ansart, 2002).

However, Rachid Hamadouche delves into the idea of the social bond as the representation of social relationships that connect a group of people in an interactive, in-person environment. Regardless of whether these connections are personal, professional, or otherwise. In his view, social bonds refer to relationships that are formed through intimacy and sociability. (Hamadouche, 2009).

In a community or social group, a social bond is constructed through a network of relationships that connect and unite individuals. The way people or groups interact and agree upon a shared philosophy or logic differs between societies and eras, influenced by their cultural backgrounds and surroundings. Solidarity can also manifest in various ways among individuals, including within families, schools, religious and political groups, and even industrial organizations. (on this topic, for more details, see Otovescu, 2012).

Social bond can be defined as the collective interactions that unite members of a community, with the nature of this bond differing based on whether the community is rural or urban. This distinction is attributed to the unique cultural patterns and norms that shape the interactions within each urban area (for more details, see Otovescu, 2008, 2012).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Social connections and professional communities: the dimensions of social and cultural capital.

The strength of social bonds indicates the amount of social capital present in a given society. It is described by Fukuyama as a system or set of informal values and norms that are collectively embraced by members of a particular group, enabling them to collaborate effectively (Fukuyama, 1999). In a group, it is typically expected that members will engage in behaviors that are based on trust. Consequently, this helps them maintain their strategies and presence for a longer period.

Despite the legal regulations that govern the miner's connection with the mine as a contemporary establishment, our field observations indicate that informal interactions and dynamics among workers and professional groups are prevalent. This is particularly evident in terms of communication, which primarily occurs orally and face-to-face. Additionally, these interactions tend to occur within the context of family or tribal groups, providing a sense of security and protection for workers against institutional regulations, such as those related to professional errors or absences.

According to a professional worker, "the way to handle any problems with my supervisor or the management is to contact him in writing. While this seems logical, I personally

prefer to address them directly and have a verbal conversation since I already have a relationship with them and they know me well"

One of the managers states:

"When it comes to dealing with communication involving worker, the administration, or anything related to, we prefer an informal approach. We believe in fostering a sense of unity within our household, making formal procedures unnecessary".

In the workers' conversations, the term "Dar Wahda"("One House" that symbolically means the Family) frequently arises, highlighting the strong social bond within the local community. The mine, as a modern organization, mirrors this sense of community, where familiarity and relationships based on family and neighbors prevail. The workers' culture and movements within the mine are heavily influenced by the social environment, which encompasses family ties and interactions with neighbors. We observe that social connections, kinship ties, and clan affiliations play a significant role in shaping the collective mindset of these groups, often superseding the formal protocols established by the institution.

Social capital, a vital element of social cohesion, is constructed through cultural mechanisms such as religion, customs, sociocultural values, and informal norms. These mechanisms encourage individuals and groups to engage in behaviors that foster continuous and meaningful communication and cohesion, without relying on formal structures.

In the same context, Bourdieu formulated field theory and described social capital as the total resources that an individual has by virtue of possessing a strong network of relationships and mutual recognitions. (Bourdieu, 1986) He directed his attention towards social capital and its role in facilitating specific actions within social structures. According to one of the maintenance workers:

"Sometimes we need document from the administration, considering our network with them beyond the mine, their cooperation may present obstacles or prolong the process."

As stated by other maintenance worker:

"In many organizations, we have observed a pattern where they prioritize ease of access for citizens but create obstacles for their employees, limiting options to their special needs of holydays as example. It's a relief that we don't have to depend on anything or anyone when we visit any service here. We have a strong sense of community, where your brother could be your cousin, neighbor, or friend."

Bourdieu defines social capital as the means by which specific goals can be accomplished, and these goals can only be attained through it. (Coleman, 1990) However, Syrett, Stephne, and Evans. M examined social capital as the result of an individual's utilization of their network of relationships within specific professional and social groups. (Syrett, 2007) Hence, social capital is a crucial component of relationships and plays a vital role in facilitating various social and professional activities. It entails investing in social connections within local communities and industrial organizations to gain personal advantages. This is what we observed based on the conversations of maintenance workers.

From the previous argument, we can conclude that social capital is created by the socio-cultural backgrounds that individuals and groups embrace in their ideas and understanding of social connections. Based on this, Lin discussed social capital as the resources embedded in social networks that individual's access and utilize to achieve their objectives. As a result, these actions naturally involve the utilization of underlying resources or intangible wealth and the strategies for leveraging these resources to attain individual and communal objectives (Lin, 2001).

It should be acknowledged that social capital is established through two key factors: social networks and relationships, as well as a value system that is often centered around solidarity, cooperation, and unity. This aligns with Sara Ferlonder's perspective, which emphasizes the influence of values on social capital. Ferlonder defines social capital as a relational framework involving the exchange of benefits, cooperation, and diverse forms of support (Ferander, 2007).

3.2. Prioritizing informal relationships over formal ones

What we are referring to is how informal relationships are more effective than formal professional relationships, which are based on regulations and organizational structure, in meeting and fulfilling the needs of workers. This, of course, is dependent on the worker's level of social capital within the company.

While conducting research at the mine, we had the opportunity to observe a female miner (who held a position as an engineer in the studies office) advising a worker to intervene with the human resources officer. Her intention was to boost her productivity by exaggerating her performance beyond what she was actually capable of.

Once our conversation settled, we proceeded to ask the employee we mentioned earlier if they were involved in any accounting-related positions within the administration. Surprisingly, the participant revealed that he is only a maintenance worker, but he has personal connections with a manager-in-chief at the department.

The professional groups in the mining organization utilize their network of relationships to accomplish their goals and strategies. According to Pierre Bourdieu social capital can be seen as a social bond, just like any other type of capital (Canada, 2003)

Our field investigation revealed that mediation (El-wassita) has become a prevalent phenomenon within the mining organization, and it is now considered a fundamental aspect of social interaction. It has even become an integral method that shapes the daily lives of professional groups, without which obtaining rights in a flexible manner is impossible. There was a comment from one of the employees in the studies office:

" At the Mine, informality is the norm, if we conducted via formal proceed it resulting a prolonged disruptions procedure. The strong sense of community extends beyond this location to the mine, where people have personal relationships with friends, family, and neighbors."

This statement indicates that the primary foundation and unity of social relationships within professional groups stem from social connections. The link provided depicts the complex social networks and relationships found in the local community within the mining environment. The basis of this link is a traditional local reference, encompassing family, blood ties, neighborhood, and friendship.

By conducting a focus group interview, we inquired the group of truck drivers employed at the mine about their ability to engage with the organization in a formal manner, adhering to the hierarchical structure and without relying on informal professional groups. The respondents provided negative responses. Workers are hesitant to solely carry out their professional tasks within the mine, as it isolates them from their family connections and social networks. These ties, which encompass both neighbors and friends, typically exist outside the traditional framework of social media and conventional solidarity based on social relationships. Our understanding of the mine and the workers' perspectives is derived from our observations and their speeches.

From this, it seems that the social structure in the mine, adopted by individuals and groups, is built upon various influences that go against the idea of a modern organization in the mining industry. Simultaneously, it exhibits a powerful ability to communicate and foster social harmony.

This commentary aims to highlight that communication activities, particularly oral and intra-group interactions, extend beyond verbal expression to encompass grouping patterns, social behaviors, and attitudes. This showcases one of the methods through which social organization is established in day-to-day existence, with intricate dynamics involving the interplay of local factors and the realm of influence. Anthony Giddens highlights the complex sociocultural patterns that emerge from relationships formed in local contexts, where various social and cultural networks are constructed and sustained. (Giddens, 2013)

When we revisit Ferdinand Tönnies ideas in "Community and Society," (Tonnies, 2010) which explore various social connections, particularly those between tradition and modernity,

we find that society, within this context, can be seen as a manifestation of modernity. On the other hand, communities represent the traditional values of these societies, and Tönnies believes that the family and various points of reference are crucial symbols and integral elements of social connections that are deeply intertwined with community existence. (Tonnies, 2015) He states that the foundation of community life is family life. In social groups where the position and role of each person are traditionally determined by factors like gender, age, and status, cohesion is maintained through customs, shared values, and the collective memory that shapes upbringing, as Tönnies describes it. (Tonnies, 2015)

4. **Conclusion**

The statement above implies that the kinship circles within the mining unit's occupational groups are not restricted to biological ties, but rather encompass the social connections and cultural norms shaped by the dominant social environment. In this occupational setting, individuals reside in a shared space, utilizing kinship and clan systems to successfully reach their desired outcomes.

Our field investigation revealed workplace behaviors that appear to be inconsistent with the modern organizational culture. In this setting, professional groups carry out their daily professional activities in a way that reflects their commitment and adherence to the traditional social and cultural context, which defines the rules and regulations of their work. In his analysis, Mostefa Boutefnouchet highlights the paradoxical nature of Algerian society, which is both modernized and traditional at the same time. Despite serious attempts to embody modern organizations and integrate with current developments, traditional patterns of resistance to systems of acculturation remain entrenched in the representations and behaviors of the groups (Boutefnouchet, 1986) . Sociocultural backgrounds and the tendency to express traditional manifestations (Chrit & Begami, 2024) remained the primary reference and guide for every action, and this was clearly evident in what we observed through our observations and interviews with sociohumanist groups.

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