Review of: "Corralling a Chimera: A Critical Review of the Term Social Infrastructure"

Elisa Bienenstock[1]

1 Arizona State University

Review of Corralling a Chimera: A Critical Review of the Term Social Infrastructure for Qeios

The term social infrastructure, over the years, like many terms in social science, has referred to many things. This paper reports on a systematic review of the literature from across fields that have used the term, to report on the differences, but also to advocate for the narrowing of the use of the term, from this point onward, to refer explicitly to infrastructure that facilitates the building of social networks.

The paper is well organized and the story is clear. The authors point to several conflicting themes in the use of that two-word term. In the past, starting in the 1960s some people from some fields used the term to indicate physical infrastructure associated with social programs that benefit the public, especially health, education and welfare. In some instances, the term infrastructure explicitly referred to the build environment and buildings that support social welfare, but in other instances infrastructure was used metaphorically. This was the case with Biden's recent push to fund programs to support child and family care under an "infrastructure" bill. Similarly, in many instances it referred to healthcare, education or transportation. Making explicit and laying out of these disparate uses by scholars from different discipline the major ways the term has been employed was interesting and is also useful. The problem identified in the paper is one every scholar who has ever tried to do a literature on the topic is aware of and so the effort of these authors to name and identify the themes and threads should be appreciated.

Overall the paper is well done and a fun read.

There are a few minor corrections I would recommend:

First, in the formatting: at this time, it appears that bolded text causes words to merge so that spaces are missing. This is true in several spots (although I might have missed some.

Page 3, Para 3 "of education"

Page 4, Para 5 "is healthcare"

Page 4 last line "involves housing"

Page 5, Para 5 "of transport"

Page 6, Para 2, "involves networking spaces"

Second, a typo appears to be on page 8, paragraph 3 line 6 "present in*weather,* whiter areas" should be changed to *wealthier.*

Third, the same paragraph appears twice in the manuscript. Both page 3 and page 4 include the paragraph the begins: "The earliest reference we found to healthcare came from a 1960 New York Times article explaining….." and citing Schmidt 1960).

The forth issue is on page 2 paragraph 5 is more subtle. In the last sentence before the Data and Methods section the authors state: "the best solution for increasing clarity of the future of research in this field is to streamline the definition of social **capital** into one that focuses on network social **capital** aspect of the term." Did the authors intend to say**social infrastructure** in these two instances?

Other than these corrections, if I had an issue with the paper it was that it did not go far enough in explaining why these many legacy definitions of social infrastructure need to be exposed and scholars need to be explicit about the way they use the term. The paper fell short of demonstrating how too broad a use of the term undermines its usefulness. The concerns expressed compliment other recent work pointing out the lack of specificity of the term so the paper is timely and on target. For example, in a recently published paper, *Nelson, J. R., Bienenstock, E. J., Palladino, A., Barrera, E., & Grubesic, T. H. (2022). Social infrastructure as a proxy for social capital: A spatial exploration into model specification and measurement impacts in Los Angeles, California. Journal of Urban Affairs, 1-19* https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2133724), the authors present recommendations and warnings about being too inclusive when utilizing social infrastructure as a proxy for social capital. Their objective was to introduce a new approach for using data on the build environment as a proxy for social capital. In their coding of social infrastructure they did include schools, but not as places of learning, but as places where parents of children can meet other parents, or as locations for community social events. Hospitals were not included at all so as not to conflate social capital with hypothesized outcomes. Given that there is so much research on the benefit of community social capital to outcomes like community health or economic growth, these authors were careful to only include places that facilitated gathering. Including hospitals, banks, or buildings strongly associated with the outcomes of social capital would make it hard to argue that it was the social (networking) aspect of the buildings that mattered.

Overall, the authors made many excellent points. There does appear to be a need for an unambiguous term. The only remaining question is: is it possible to stop others from persisting in the use of the term to mean things other than social networking infrastructure. And if it is, might it not be more fruitful to abandon the use of the ambiguous term and instead begin using the term "social networking infrastructure" than in trying to convince others to abandon other uses?