
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychic Capital: Its Role in Maintaining Quebec and Other Francophone Identities

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ABSTRACT

This article will demonstrate the value of Boulding's concept of psychic capital in explaining the survival of Quebec and other North American francophone communities where French is the first language. Psychic capital holds that while in an economic unit there will be a store of financial capital which is necessary for the continued existence of an economic unit, also in a human community there is a need for a reserve of psychic capital that is vital for the survival of that community. Psychic capital does this by providing a body of positive feelings shared between individuals and larger groupings, which could be a community or a whole nation. Boulding proposed that a coherent body of thoughts, memories and emotions may be shared as psychic capital. In the case of Quebec, this is embodied in the French language and a distinct culture which has provided the foundation of its survival through many adverse events and is the basis of the desire of many of its members for independence from Canada. If Quebec were to achieve independence, this would impact other francophone communities in North America by undermining Canada's policy of official bilingualism at the federal level, with economic, social and political impacts. A store of psychic capital is thus necessary for the survival of Quebec and the other francophone communities of North America.

KEYWORDS

Psychic capital, Identity, Quebec, Francophone communities, Bilingual Policy, National identity

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1. Introduction

Kenneth E Boulding (1910-1993) was an economist who brought into social science the concepts of system, homeostasis and the similarity of functioning between the economy and a social system. One of his concepts of particular value to those focusing on the survival of social systems was that of psychic capital.

In economics, capital is financial resource which will be drawn upon as an economic unit and which functions within its environment. Boulding reinterpreted this so that capital can also be an accumulation of memories of desirable mental states which he called *psychic capital*. When at the collective level, the positive memories and emotions constituting psychic capital are an essential element in maintaining the continued existence of a community, particularly under conditions of extreme stress or adversity. In similarity with an economic unit, Boulding observed that an individual requires a store of psychic capital to sustain himself with a reserve of positive mental states which could be memories of pleasure, success, achievement, recognition and tradition, as well as the memories of the successful overcoming of adversities. He further added that in the same way, a whole society needs a store of psychic capital to sustain itself by avoiding psychic bankruptcy. Positive psychic capital could consist of the awareness, celebration and memory of achievement, which could be a language and a culture, scientific, major projects, material living standards or any one of the activities which go into making communal identity. The successful handling of adverse events can also make a powerful contribution to the building of psychic capital by providing a sense that threatening challenges that may lie in the future can be overcome, as has been done in dealing with adversities of the past (Boulding, 1950).

The process of managing psychic capital will be reflected in the self-image, or image held externally, as identity, or in the term of modern business practice, the *brand* of a community. However, unsuccessful handling of failures, disasters, atrocities, or perceived injustices and indignities (as either recipient or perpetrator) can lead to a cumulative depletion of psychic capital, which may represent a burden, similar to a bankruptcy-inducing burden of financial debt in a business enterprise. Loss of psychic capital and fear of further depletion can thus be a powerful motivating factor to those affected. As Boulding stated, "a society which loses its identity with posterity and which loses its positive image of the future also loses its capacity to deal with present problems, and soon falls apart." (Boulding, 1966). Thus, as noted by Horvath, the mere existence of psychic wealth is a question that poses a challenge for transdisciplinary approaches (Horvath, 2000).

What will now be done is to assess the role of psychic capital in the survival over two and a half centuries of people who used to be called French Canadians but who are now called Quebecers or, in other parts of North America, francophones. In addition, it can be noted that descendants of the original French settlers are described as "pure wool" (*pure laine*), (McGimpsey, 2000). as distinct from persons of other origin. Noting their survival in a harsh physical environment, one can see the building of psychic capital. To this, one could add the challenge of distance from and lack of support from France, the ever-presence of the hostile British, (whose plan was to assimilate them), the potentially hostile American actions, and lack of sympathy from the rest of Canada.

2. The Origins of Francophone North America

Although not the first Europeans to visit North America, the French were among the first to settle there. In 1534, Brittany was united with France and three years later, the King of France invited Jacques Cartier to continue the exploration of the Eastern lands which Verrazano had called America, with the purpose of finding a sea route to East Asia, previously accessed by the overland Silk Road, as reported by Marco Polo. In 1535 Cartier made a second visit to North America but was trapped in ice in the Saint Lawrence River for six months. Scurvy broke out among the crew but Cartier was advised by indigenous people the use of a recipe for a spruce drink, a source of vitally necessary vitamin C, thus enabling Cartier and his crew to survive the winter.

From 1534 to 1763 the French settlements of North America, Canada, Newfoundland and Acadia, (now called Nova Scotia), were established under the name of New France. In 1627, Cardinal Richelieu, then chief minister of France, established the Company of New France, a corporation designed to handle the growing fur trade. Part of the plan was that 200 to 300 settlers would travel from France to New France but two years later war with England began and continued until 1629 when part of New France surrendered to the English. The Company continued but only as a shadow of itself and the settlers failed to arrive. In 1663 King Louis XIVth cancelled the charter of the company. After 1663, New France became a Royal Province and thereafter some 3000 settlers arrived, and these were exclusively Catholic, but after the 1660s very few arrived mainly because of the harsh climate. In the next decade French explorers explored the Mississippi River until it reached the Gulf of Mexico and claimed it was New France. This led to another battle with the English who took Acadia, now named New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, but not the rest of New France. For a while the French took back Newfoundland and also established a colony in Louisiana in 1699 (Riendeau, 2007).

3. The Ending of New France

In 1759 Quebec fell to the British at the battle of the Plains of Abraham and in 1760 New France ceased to exist except for two small islands and some 60,000 French citizens became British subjects, formalised in the Treaty of Paris 1763. Immigration between France and New France (by now the two administrative areas of Upper Canada and Lower Canada) ceased, practically forever.

Although immigration from France had ceased, there was a population explosion caused by the excellent healthy living conditions where it was too cold for vector borne diseases and viral transmissions, plus the relative isolation of farms, plentiful nutritious food, and also the role of the Catholic Church in being against contraception and abortion.

In 1774 the Great Britain passed the Quebec Act guaranteeing the right to retain French civil law, the Catholic faith and social customs including language. The motivation of the British in passing this Act was fear of the Americans' growing power. After the American Revolution of 1776, many of those loyal to the British Crown, called loyalists, had immigrated to Canada, then called British North America. The Americans had plans to invade the remaining British colonies, while the highly religious French Canadians feared American rule even more than they feared British rule. Britain and America went to war in 1812 but the war ended the same year in a stalemate. In 1837 rebellions broke out in the British North American colonies of Upper Canada and Lower Canada which were ruthlessly put down, with a number of the rebels hanged and others sent to the Australian Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (now called Tasmania).

The British Government commissioned Lord Durham to write an official report to the British Crown. In his report, he recommended the amalgamation of the British North American colonies which would be granted self-government as a dominion of the British Empire, making the French Canadians a minority whose cultural and linguistic survival was intended to disappear, clearly a major threat to their stock of psychic capital. His intention was clearly that the French, whom he described as a people with "no history

and no literature”, would be assimilated. French Canadians thus became a minority in the dominion with the exception of the province of Quebec where they were and still are a majority, though no longer calling themselves “French Canadians”. In the province of Quebec the French language was secure but not admired in France or other French speaking countries or communities. Politically, Quebec found itself ruled by a conservative elite who ruled in conjunction with the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. Between 1820 at 1850, some 800,000 immigrants from Britain and Ireland arrived in British North America, generally preferring the anglophone areas of settlement.

The united Dominion of Canada was born in 1867, and the predominantly French-speaking community of Lower Canada, now part of Canada, turned inward to itself, but in so doing, added to its reserve of psychic capital through the ordeal of cultural and linguistic survival in a hostile environment. Some investigators identified the emergence of a “collective inferiority complex”, a condition where a community accepts a prevailing negative assessment of itself (Riendeau, 2007).

4. The Twentieth Century

In 1914, Great Britain and France and some other countries were engaged in war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany and other countries, now known as the Great War. In 1914 Canada joined in the conflict and initiated a policy of conscription. This was deeply resented and vigorously contested by many French Canadians who saw no point in going to the assistance of Britain which had oppressed them, or France which had ignored them, in a view that was deeply ingrained and reinforced in the Durham report of 1839. Many francophone Canadians questioned the need to support either Britain or France in a war perceived to be of no relevance to them, and a referendum was held on the question of conscription and was defeated. After the Great War, Canada had economic expansion until the Great Depression of 1929, and many French Canadians were forced by unemployment to emigrate to the United States. At this time, Montreal had become the business capital of Canada, where a business elite resided, worked and functioned socially in the English language though many were also francophone. Among the Canadian francophones, a small minority at that time supported Nazi thinking about Jewish people (Loewen, 2016). In World War 2 Canada again had conscription but this time with less objection.

5. The Quiet Revolution

The period 1945 to 1960 were called by many Quebecers the “dark years”. Characterised by Church control of education, health and anti-union policy, the provincial prime minister of Quebec, Maurice Duplessis, seen by some as a dark force, ruled from 1950 to 1960, practising corruption on a large scale. HydroQuebec was created in 1944, ultimately to supply some 10 per cent of the electricity needs of the New England region of the United States, bringing wealth to Quebec.

With the election of the Bloc Quebecois party led by Lucien Bouchard, more radical government came to power in Quebec in 1980 and a quiet revolution took place at official level. Education was secularised, health care responsibility transferred from the church to the state, and industrial relations were able to take place in a more and equal playing field. Total human fertility dropped from 3.8 in 1962 to 1.7 in 1970, a reduction unparalleled in the world. In 1977 Bill 101, the Charter of the French Language, was proposed, affirming the position of French as the sole official language. When it was passed it became the only official language of Quebec at provincial level. Eight of the remaining provinces did the same for English at the provincial level with only one, New Brunswick, becoming officially bilingual.

In 1967 Quebec’s isolation from France, characterised by Voltaire’s hurtful description of Canada as “several acres of snow” (*quelques arpents de neige*), symbolically came to an end (Thorner & Frohn-Nielsen, 2009). General de Gaulle, President of France, on an official visit to Canada, addressed a crowd at the City Hall Montreal with the words *Vive le Québec Libre* (Long live French Quebec) thereby affirming France’s ties with Quebec and insulting his federal Canadian hosts and the other provinces with these words. Thus the isolation from France for nearly 200 years came to an end, but Canada’s challenge of integration in two official languages assumed a new level. Canada no longer had a subservient minority of French Canadians held in check by defeatist rulers.

The quiet revolution began with the death of Maurice Duplessis, who had been a very controversial ruler. The Church had used its influence at the political level to maintain its rule while Duplessis had used the Church to provide young priests and nuns as cheap labour to staff schools and hospitals as well as other basic social welfare agencies.

In 1968 Pierre Trudeau came to power as Prime Minister of Canada, introducing a policy of official bilingualism and biculturalism. The bilingual policy was implemented in 1969 and French became official throughout federal Canada as did English in Quebec. However, biculturalism proved unacceptable to many substantial minorities. Trudeau’s solution to that objection was that Canada would become officially bilingual in English and French at federal level, and officially multicultural, in the sense that any culture which was backed by sufficient people would be recognised by the official federal government.

In 1977 Quebec had passed the Charter of the French Language making French the sole official language of business and certain other spheres of activity in Quebec. In 1988 Quebec organised a referendum proposing political separation from Canada which was unsuccessful by a narrow margin. Another referendum was held in 1995 but was also unsuccessful. The reason for this was

that “non-pure wool” residents of Quebec did not want to leave the Canadian federation. The city of Montreal, for a long time the business capital of Canada, forfeited this role as many large corporations shifted their headquarters to centres in other provinces, particularly to the city of Toronto. Clearly “non-pure wool” Quebecers (Salée, 2011) such as the indigenous, those from francophone Africa and the Caribbean, and long settled groups such as the Jewish (Yarosky, 1979), (Freedman, 2021), were unsupportive, fearing separatism as they did. Many of the francophones established outside Quebec were fearful that Quebec’s departure from the Canadian confederation would bring with it an end to official bilingualism at the federal level.

6. The Meech Lake Accord

In 1997 talks were held at Meech Lake, Quebec, with the federal and provincial governments in attendance. The purpose was to approve some changes to the Constitution which would recognise Quebec as a “distinct society”. Discussions continued until 1982 when the Meech Lake Accord was rejected by two Provinces, Manitoba and Newfoundland. One consequence was the formation of a political party in Quebec the Bloc Québécois, which was committed to the separation of Quebec from Canada (Swinton, 1992).

Overall, the language situation today is that 22% of people in Canada’s total population of 39.8 million, declare French to be their mother language, while one in three Canadians speak French and 70% are unilingual Anglophones. Smaller indigenous French-speaking communities exist in some other provinces (Statistics Canada/Statistique Canada, 2023).

7. Conclusion

Boulding’s significant contribution to social science is the concept of psychic capital. Just as in an economic unit where a store of capital or positive wealth is necessary for continued existence, Boulding proposed that a store of psychic capital or positive feeling is necessary for the psychological survival of the individual and for society. In the case of Quebec and other francophone communities in North America, a rich reserve of psychic capital has helped them to survive. By giving a shared sense of meaning, psychic capital has provided a vital link for the survival of the individual and the collectivity. In this connection, it is clear that the “pure wool” Quebecers will continue to seek independence from Canada but in this, they may not have the full support of “non-pure wool” francophones. In final conclusion, it could be said that the likely outcome of the presence of a store of psychic capital as something valuable and worth keeping, is continuity of the status quo, for Quebec and other francophone communities in North America.

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