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**Social Capital:
The Basic Concepts and Dilemmas**

Petr Vymětal

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**Social Capital:
The Basic Concepts and Dilemmas**

Petr Vymětal (vymetal@vse.cz)

Summary:

This working paper focuses on the basic introduction of the concept of social capital. Although it is very popular across the various fields of social science, it is still very vague. Therefore, the first chapter will attempt to introduce the original roots of the term. The definition originally came from sociology, but the concept has been absorbed into other disciplines. That's why there are many definitions of social capital in existence that complicate and blur the concept. Its basic definitions are presented in the second chapter as well as some extended general point of view. The last one introduces some deeper insight into the conceptualisation of the social capital issue – the types, dimensions, approaches, directions or measurement and a few of their implications.

Keywords: social capital, social theory

**Sociální capital:
Základní koncepty a problémy**

Petr Vymětal (vymetal@vse.cz)

Abstrakt:

Tento working paper se snaží představit obecný concept sociálního kapitálu. Ačkoli se jedná o velmi populární téma napříč sociálními vědami, i nadále zůstává velmi nejasným konceptem. První kapitola proto představuje původní kořeny tohoto pojmu, který i když původně pochází ze sociologie, se rozšířil do ostatních sociálně-vědních disciplín. Z toho důvodu existuje řada definic sociálního kapitálu, které dále kocept komplikují a zatemňují. Druhá kapitola tak vedle základních definic také nabízí určité zobecnění základních pohledů. Poslední kapitola přestavuje hlubší vhled do základních problémů, které concept sociálního kapitálu doprovází – typy, dimenze, přístupy, směr působení nebo měření, včetně některých implikací, které nabízí.

Klíčová slova: sociální capital, sociální teorie

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Reviewer: PhDr. Zdenka Mansfeldová, CSc.

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Introduction

Social capital is one of the most fashionable words of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. While there were only a few dozen studies in the mid-80s; by the end of the millennium there were thousands of them, all concentrated on social capital issues. We use the metaphor “social capital issues” on purpose, because the term “social capital” is more complicated and used in various situations; firstly, for instance, it covers the different aspects that are normally incorporated into the category of social capital; and, secondly, the term ‘social capital’ itself is a very broad and potentially vague one.

The basic aim of this paper is to attempt to clarify the term “social capital” and its definition and the approaches to it. Many layers, shapes, aspects, definitions and approaches make all attempts to analyse the term complicated. In the final analysis, we must conclude that no one definition of, or approach to defining, social capital exists.

1. The roots of the term and of the theory

The origin of the term “social capital” is not clear now. There are at least two basic roots. The first common usage of the term appeared in the 1980s, in sociology, and this is most widely accepted true, root of it. On the other hand, the term – although it probably could have meant something different – can be found earlier; but also in sociological and anthropological studies; in the mid-1960s (Jacobs 1965), or much earlier, at the beginning of the century in Hanifan’s works (Hanifan 1916).

With this background, the development of the concept is interesting. The term, at the beginning seems to have been used to describe something closely related to anthropological and community studies. Linking it to socialization was a bold step. Hanifan, the “father” of the term, for example, first explicitly used the term social capital in connection with “those intangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people – namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (Daniel et al. 2003). Socialization was seen as a tool for shaping the community, and, thus, society. Jacobs’s analyses (Jacobs 1961) highlighted the use of the term “social capital” in studies carried out on communities. But was really neither theoretically developed nor sufficiently defined. She also described – based on her experience of American cities – the crucial role played by forming strong personal relationships over time, which could help build trust, cooperation and collective action in the social networks (Jacobs 1965). These precursors; if we can call them that; mostly concerned socialization, society building and social-ties. Other authors use the term in several ways; all without

properly defining or analysing it (Granovetter 1974, Becker 1974, Lin et al. 1981, Loury 1977, 1981 and many others).

However, the exact definition and conceptualization of social capital appeared in the 1980s in the works of: Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, Fukuyama and the World Bank. The ‘modern’ origins of the term’s theoretical bases are mainly rooted in sociology, but they also have a strong presence in economics’ developmental studies. But there is neither agreement nor disagreement on what is the ‘correct’ definition; each author uses it in his/her own way, depending on the field of that author’s research. That is why the term is both contextual and constructed, as well as being a multivarious and multidimensional concept. As we shall see later on, because of its various definitions, there are more approaches to, and means of, analysing social capital.

Although the basic theoretical work was done in the 1980s and later; the term’s background is rooted, almost completely, in sociology. In the beginning it was connected with some aspects of socialization and community studies. But many authors have tried to find its deeper roots in anthropology and sociology, as well as coming back to Durkheim, Tocqueville or Marx. This constructivism could be useful, but, conversely, it could be inadequate and potentially misleading. Moreover, the popularity of the term: “social capital”, and its vague meaning, has been poorly reflected in the broader context. It is a result of the differing fields of interests and analyses, different disciplines, different comprehension of the term and different definitions. That is why it could be characterized as vague, blurred and fuzzy.

Although there are many explanations of the expression “social capital”; the meaning – based on the entomological approach – is derived from sociology [social] and economics [capital]; potentially connecting those two different disciplines. Generally there are no doubts about the “social” issue, due to its concept, but sometimes the “capital” is more of a problem. Although capital could mean ‘expectation of a certain gain’; it is convertible and it needs some investment (maintenance). There are many types of capital, which may be converted into many other types of capital; but, it cannot be simply traded like other goods. Taking this view, then, social capital may be seen, rather, as a characteristic, a hidden power, to be utilised. It combines both the structural (“material”) and the cognitive aspects. Depending on its possibility of conversion to other forms, it is sometimes used as a general name for all forms of capital; which further blurs the term’s meaning. In some respects it is very specific to the issue, area, subject or discipline under analysis; it is this fact which determines its meaning in the given instance.

2. Defining social capital

2.1 General definitions

Of all possible definitions, the modern concepts are the most widely accepted. The first true definition was published by Pierre Bourdieu, who held social capital up for comparison with other capitals (especially economic and cultural). He defines social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986: 248-9). Furthermore, he points out that some levels of institutionalization which guarantee the objective relations of proximity (common name, info flow) which results in solidarity, is the mostly appreciated benefit. Social capital, then, depends on size of the network (or *relations, contacts*, etc.) and the volume of capital (generally: of all *resources* – economic, cultural, political etc.) of its members. The concept is mostly an instrumental one. The network is very often artificially established by initiation to prevent outsiders from exploiting the material and symbolic profits resulting from the relationships that could be produced.

Bourdieu has highlighted several aspects. Although social capital is closely connected with networks, the *individual dimension* is more important. For all members, the individual benefit in a given social environment coming from the membership, participation and friendship, is in some way egocentric and is a result of the the idea of the reduction of all capitals to the economic one. If the title is scarce, the circle of members tight (and small), the higher the benefit from the network, and social capital, could be. Bourdieu, in his analyses sometimes touches society as a whole; he knows the importance of social capital for the everyday life of the society; and the differences in the various societies. Furthermore, he pointed out the fact that social capital is an attribute of the individual (and, therefore, it is more private) in a social context rather than a collective one.

Coleman, on the other hand, defines social capital by its function, as “a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions by the individuals; whether by natural persons or legal entities; within the structure” (Coleman 1988: 98). His theory calls for the rational-choice approach, which is popular in economics. He made a close link between social capital and the acquisition of human capital, mostly in connection with gifts. He also made a distinction between the resources themselves and the ability to obtain and use them; for both the recipient and donor; especially in the context of small communities and families;

he suggested that social capital refers to the supportive relationships among adults and children that promote the sharing of norms and values. He tries to join both approaches – individual and collective – together.

Putnam successfully popularized social capital (Putnam 1993; 2000) based on the background of civic participation in Italy and in the USA. In his work, social capital “refers to the features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of the society by facilitating coordinated action” (Putnam et al. 1993). In his later book he emphasised the people connections – social capital refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000: 19). He focuses on social capital as a collective entity that could be also characterised as a public good which is reflected in the membership in voluntary organizations or voter participation. Starting with Putnam (and others), social capital is a key component for building and maintaining democracy.

2.2 Definitions extended

The above mentioned definitions are most popular in literature. But there are other more important definitions that touch on several aspects of the economic dimension and the “good governance” issue. Some of them try to subsume all existing “individualistic” definitions in the following way: “... investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” (Lin 2001), to underpin the economic dimension and possible economic returns of social capital. It is quite interesting, that the *economic approach* to social capital is sometimes understood as the “missing link” of some unexplained economic processes, and also seen as the universal panacea. Although there is an effort to employ some societal aspects in the economy, such as the World Bank’s programme: “fighting against poverty” (“social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions”); it all deviates from the former, sociological idea of the aspects of socialization. Although Fukuyama for instance defines social capital as “the existence of a certain set of informal values and norms shared by the members of a group that permit cooperation among them” (Fukuyama 1995), he highlights the aspect of decreasing transaction costs as a result of trust in organizations. The OECD, as the representative organization of developed countries (and certainly in a different context), understands social capital very broadly as the quality of life, healthy aging, human capital, human security, the integration of immigrants, sustainable development, among other things; it is seen as an indicator of well-being, in the final analysis (OECD 2001).

The definitions are classified in various ways that reflect the different approaches to the issue (Nahapiet and Ghosdal 1998, Daniel et al. 2003, Franke 2005). First, the *micro-level* (individual level) highlights the nature and forms of

cooperative behaviour – the collective action issue. The essential question of this approach is the propensity of the actors to cooperate by identification, association and cooperation to attain certain objectives. All “cognitive based” definitions often use the game theory approach of cooperative strategies to strengthen collective capacities. Social capital is then a product of:

- the actors’ motivations (the values and aspirations or more broadly attitudes and mental dispositions);
- their behaviour (types of association that define how actors co-operate);
- their perception of collective issues (cultural beliefs and influences).

As a result of these points, mentioned above, social capital is more frequently understood as an individual resource and individual benefit, although it could have a collective impact and a collective dimension.

Second, the *meso-level* (group level) emphasizes the *structures* that enable cooperation to take place – so the *instrumental* and relational aspect of social capital is at the center of the analyses. These definitions are often inspired by the mobilization and social network theories. Social capital is based on the information exchange and support in the networks, which determine a certain type of interaction and the conditions where they occur; as well as the resources which circulate. In this approach social capital is neither only individual, nor collective; – it is both because it arises from the interdependence between individuals, and between groups within a community. At the same time, social capital is a resource, a result of social ties, which may, or may not, be used by both individuals and groups.

Third, the *macro-level* (societal level) deals with the conditions for this cooperation – for integration and social cohesion – and the *institutions* in the broad sense. The institutionalists highlight the key role of the environmental, social, political and economic structures, values and norms (conditions) that create conditions for participation, engagement, social ties, trust and reciprocity. Social capital (trust, reciprocity ...) is, then, a result of these institutions and the is mostly analysed from the collective perspective, such as the state.

All definitions, however diverse they are, have one common feature – social capital, whatever it is doing, is connected with building and maintaining ties and relationships, and is the social glue that manifests itself in various aspects, forms and kinds.

3. Indepth in social capital

Social capital is not a clear term, as we have seen. There are many definitions and standpoints due to the fact it can be constructed purely from both social capital theories themselves, or, derived from other disciplines. A single, fixed

definition – whether broad or narrow – could reduce the utility of the concept, as well as the varieties of definitions and approaches which make it fuzzy and unclear. In this chapter, the basic diversity in understanding of social capital could be introduced and labelled as forms, kinds, directions, dilemmas or complications.

One of them is the *direction* of operating and effecting social capital. There are basically two opposing concepts. The first one emphasizes that social capital is the cornerstone precondition for participation, networking and trust in society, and it could be one of the missing factors of economic growth, well-being and development. These interpretations – that a certain “stock” of social capital is needed for advanced levels of development, and that these “stocks” differ among societies in quantity and quality – are popular, e.g. for economic interpretation of differences among countries. Social capital is a cause and source of many related issues. The second point of view focuses on the different direction – social capital is a result; a consequence of trust, associating etc. This different causality is clear – participation, social ties and contacts strengthen and increase social capital. Social capital is, then, a final product. Finally, mixing both directions is popular – it is due to the reflexivity of the term (Beck 2004) and self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948, 1968) that it could be a cause and a consequence at the same time.

Next, social capital is the only *one of the capitals* that, unfortunately, is constructed, and is very difficult to measure compared to a natural or economic one. Furthermore, social capital could often be converted into other forms of capital; it is liquid, convertible and although it could be highly accumulated, it could not be used for any purpose (and from the economic point of view is inactive and wasted). That is why it is often called the general roofing capital on the one hand, or the residual capital for clarifying unexplained problems. Both interpretations are very vague and inaccurate, and could lead to more confusion.

In this perspective, the development of the “stock” of social capital, depending on the “health of society” is interesting. If social capital could be replaced by a trust indicator, then, at the start-up, consolidation and maturity phases, it would be relatively high compared to its level at the crises phase. On the other hand, social capital during these stages varies in quantity (because it could be converted into other capitals) as well as in the forms and quality (intensity of ties).

One of the questions is also how to *approach* this phenomenon. The neutral description of the term and concept are frequent and probably useful. In this aspect, social capital itself is a neutral source facilitating every activity in society, as Coleman has described (Coleman 1988, Putnam 1993). Social capital is then left for a description of causes, consequences, manifestations and forms. On the

other hand, there is a prescriptive and normative approach that accent moral and ethical values (Putnam 2000), such as trust and active civic engagement etc.

The individual/collective *dimension* was discussed above. The individual social capital dimension concerns individual benefits resulting from the inclusion of the individual within his/her social environment. This includes kin relationships, work relationships, or participation in groups or organizations where the individual could forge ties with others. Collective social capital then refers to the collective benefits arising from participatory and associative dynamics (socially or territorially defined among, or within, a community) (Franke 2005: 11).

Fig. 1: Individual or collective social capital?

Relationships in/between groups or individuals	inside	- inside the individual - between individuals - between „fractions“ in a group
	outside	- individual x group - group x group - insiders - outsiders

Source: Own construction.

Both are mixed, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between them – the individual level of social capital influences the collective one as well as the collective one influence the individual one. A strict division is very often impossible, and many authors also take the other dimension into consideration and circulate in between both extremes.

Moreover, some difficulties could be caused because of the different points of view on whether the structural approach (organization structure, membership, hours spent on volunteering etc.) or the transactional/relationship (strong or weak ties, intensity of relationship etc.), dominate. Although the structural characteristics are easier to identify and potentially easier to measure; the qualitative characteristics of social capital connected with relationships, ties, trust, etc., are very loosely observed and many “proxies” are used.

From the perspective of *ties* formed, there are two basic kinds – strong ties and weak ties – that importantly influence the social capital among network’s members. The strong ties are characterised by frequent contact among members accompanied by emotional intensity and the mutual support. They create dense groups in which members share the same attitudes and resources, and meet often. The weak ties are the opposite – less frequent meeting/contact, networks are very liquid, and resources create bridges among groups, where the fresh information or resources circulate. These two ties (Burt 1992), reflect also the

value of non-existing ties (denoted as “structural holes”) with their possibilities for using new resources through the strategic positioning of certain network members (“brokers”) who can serve as bridges between otherwise isolated individuals or groups (cited in Franke 2005: 16).

In many studies, three basic *types* of social capital may be identified – bonding, bridging (Putnam 1993; 2000), and linking (Woolcock 1998). *Bonding* social capital refers to relationships (ties) formed between relatively homogeneous groups of individuals. These very strong and close ties are significant for small communities, such as clubs, traditional societies (rural societies), immigrants’ communities, internet communities or criminal gangs. Its function is clear – to bond, to unite, to strengthen and to allow the community to operate inside. The ties are mostly created between similar people and in the horizontal form mostly. *Bridging* social capital explains the ties (weak mostly) appearing between relatively socially heterogeneous and distant groups or individuals. The ties are weaker compared to bonding ones and their main purpose is to connect and bridge differences between the groups. This glue is important for the functioning of society as a whole, government, communities, because it enables dialogue, communication, consensus, conflict solving etc. The *linking* social capital describes ties across groups or individuals that are very socially, culturally or economically distant from different strata, society or culture and which could explain trust, respect and cooperation across them.

Consequently, the question of *formal and informal* ties is highly important. For building up a social capital, the formal institutions and organisations are important, but are only a small piece in the puzzle. Influence and the explanatory potential of indirect and hidden informal relationships and ties is often underestimated. The informal relationships could very often be a variable that facilitates the cooperation and operating of individuals, communities and societies, and finally increase the social capital. The research on informal relations is now developing, but there is still a big area to be covered. However, it is too broad a topic to be described easily. The formal (structural) approach dominates.

More research was done on the *character* of the social capital. The positive causes, consequences and character are most often appreciated in the case of social capital. In this positive way, in particular, the concept is referred to – about the participation of the public in public affairs, communication, dialogue, forming opposition etc. Negative social capital is sometimes described, also, but not very broadly analysed – as in the case of criminal gangs, ku-klux-klan, mafia, terrorist organizations, mobilisation of radical political groups, etc. Only little attention was paid to the differences in the causes of characters of social capital, as well as the implications and consequences resulting from them. Portes has shown four basic *negative* consequences of social capital:

exclusion of outsiders, such as economically (clubs, professional organizations) or ethnically, based;
excessive demands placed on group members, that could limit of members' initiatives, but also limits the free-rider problem;
restriction of individual freedom, excess demand for conformational behaviour, and, finally, the restriction of internal democracy;
downward leveling norms as a result of individual success stories undermining group cohesion (Portes 1998: 15-18).

Social capital is unequally distributed among individuals, communities, and societies. It is neither (equally) available to everyone due to the different social, educational or cultural context and isolation, or due to geographical isolation. The difference is also in the in the resources potentially available to the individual, groups and society, and the ability and willingness to share them and to cooperate – the question of access to, and the mobilisation of, social capital.

Consequently, if we try to describe the resources and impact of social capital and to present any findings and conclusions, some *measurement* is needed. Both approaches are often employed, the structural and the transactional (behavioural), as well as the individual and collective one. There are many approaches and various indicators have been developed for measuring social capital, the most widely used being:

concerning the network structure, especially the size (number of members) and the density (degree of interconnectedness) of networks – the more extensive and higher density of networks, the higher the social capital and the greater the possibility of finding someone to provide resources or to find other members with similar resources;

concerning the characteristics of members, describing the diversity of members and making links between the individuals' social position and the type of resources they possess. These characteristics then could refer to the bonding (strong homogenous ties), bridging (weak homogenous ties) or linking (heterogeneity in the social status) social capital;

concerning the relational properties among members, like the frequency (number and duration of contacts), intensity (strength and the nature of relationships) or spatial distance or proximity (face-to-face, virtual, long-distance contacts, etc.) (Franke 2005: 13-16).

All the above described indicators are static ones. Therefore, another popular method is measuring the dynamics of social capital, or more precisely, measuring the conditions for the creation and mobilization of networks and membership (or more generally, social capital itself). It refers to the conditions under which the networks function; such as, how they are established, transformed which resources they use and produce, etc. It is a question of resources available and resources really used and mobilized, support, internal

change and the development of networks, the environment and the preconditions established for the operation of social capital, etc. (for more details see Franke 2005: 16-21).

Conclusion: Social capital – a concept for ... what?

Social capital is very popular concept these days. Above, some dilemmas, concepts and approaches to social capital were outlined. To develop the concept, there are many weak points to be aware of when analysing it. The popularity of the concept is very high and it is one of the more fashionable and influential concepts (together with, for example, the concept of good governance). On the one hand, it is a source of possible interpretations, explanations and findings, but on the other hand, it is a construct. Social capital is a source, a potential, not a capital in economic terms, because, although it is accumulated, it cannot be used.

Due to its many definitions the concept still seems to be vague. Although it is mostly popular in research on civil society organizations and civil participation, it has penetrated other disciplines and fields of research. It focuses on intra- and extra-group cohesion and integrating processes. It emphasises the reflexivity of all processes, and that is also a reason why the causality and implications of social capital could be possible both directions and sometimes more unclear than straightforward. Moreover, its fluidity and the possibility to convert social capital into other capitals, complicate its analysis. Its frequent usage often seems to be generalized too much and the concept is losing its explanatory potential.

All this could be a weakness, as well as the strength, of the concept. The non-existence of a single definition enables us to approach the different aspects of social capital. Also, combining the static and dynamic components, as well as the broader conditions, where the social capital is formed and operates, could offer several interesting findings, such as the question of the different forms of different societies and their different phases of development.

Social capital is popular also in economics, where it is seen to be the missing link for explaining differences among societies, especially in their economic performance and development. Although there are some attempts to describe social capital in economic terms, as for example to measure it in financial terms, it is only a proxy, and a very inaccurate variable. Moreover, the conversion into other forms of capital complicates all evaluations – especially connecting social capital with human capital. Thus, some theories have appeared to describe the role of social capital in this field (social economy, trust, transparency, participation and new forms of governance), but a lot of work still remains to be done.

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University of Economics, Prague
Faculty of International Relations
Náměstí Winstona Churchilla 4
130 67 Prague 3
<http://vz.fmv.vse.cz/>



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