

## Social capital in Bourdieu's, Coleman's and Putnam's theory: empirical evidence and emergent measurement issues

By Michael Tzanakis ([mtzanakis@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:mtzanakis@ioe.ac.uk))

### Contextualization

Social capital like cultural capital enjoys great currency in multi-disciplinary research. Today's concept of social capital however is a result of a mixture of functionalist, critical and rational theoretical traditions and these traditions have largely determined the methodologies with which the concept has been studied both between and within social sciences. As a result, social capital means different things to different social scientists, particularly if it is elevated from the individual to the aggregate level to characterize communities, regions or states. This review examines empirical evidence on social capital and argues that social capital works best as an individual-level concept, which loses much of its intended heuristic utility if it is automatically elevated to characterize communities, nations or parts of the globe.

**Abstract:** *The theoretical formulations on social capital of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam have greatly contributed to the currency of the concept. Yet, while the concept enjoys an expanding popularity in interdisciplinary research, conceptual ambiguity and misspecification persists. Lack of agreement in defining social capital is reflected in the operationalisation of the concept. While many refer to 'social capital' or 'measures' thereof, they are unlikely to refer to the same thing or that the measures employed are reliable, valid or comparable. This is all the more evident in Putnam's formulation and the body of research it has generated. This review argues that such research is plagued by unresolved measurement issues which do not help to clarify the nature of the concept. This critical review addresses the similarities and differences among the theoretical formulations of the three prominent theorists focusing on empirical research that assigns a causal role to social capital. It is argued that as a concept, social capital offers great heuristic potential but that it cannot be treated as an aggregate trait of large collectivities. Aggregate measures of social capital lack both reliability and validity and are inconsistent with theory.*

### Introduction

The concept of social capital draws attention to the effects and consequences of human sociability and connectedness and their relations to the individual and social structure. The concept is not really new. In various forms, it has been theorized by Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Tönnies (Quibria, 2003, p. 1; Portes 1998, p. 7-8). Other authors have convincingly traced these themes to more recent and diverse ideologies (Schuller et al., 2000, p. 13). The treatments of social capital by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam may have some common threads, but their different underlying ideologies make integration of the concept difficult. The contributions of these three scholars are critically reviewed focusing on the main lines of theoretical criticism followed by an examination of the relevant empirical evidence. Although all three formulations have limitations which are reflected in the criticisms reviewed here, Putnam's formulation presents the greatest problems. This critical review first examines the main tenets of Bourdieu's Coleman's and Putnam's theories of social capital followed by a review of their general criticisms. Then it reviews the empirical evidence for the three

theoretical formulations with special emphasis on the methodological and measurement issues surrounding evidence inspired by Putnam's formulation.

## Bourdieu's formulation

According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) social capital is defined as 'the aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition'. Social capital for Bourdieu is related to the size of network and the volume of past accumulated social capital commanded by the agent (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Bourdieu sees clear profit as being the main reason that actors engage in and maintain links in a network. That profit is not necessarily economic, but according to Bourdieu, it can be *reducible* to economic profit. The actors' *potential* for accruing social profit and *control* of capital are differentially distributed. This differential distribution of potential and control is a central notion in Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction and social space.

For Bourdieu (1984; 1989), social space is defined by the complex clustering of actor's positions. However these positions cannot be rendered 'objectively'. Any such effort will result in a very partial and misleading picture because it would conceal the complex interactions that occur between actors. These interactions make up another dimension defined by the *relative distributions of resources*, and the extent to which these resources can be activated. Actors are unequal in possessing and activating their resources. These inherent inequalities *predispose* or *condition* actors in differentially advantaged locations in social space in the competition for the appropriation of available scarce resources. The inequality fuelling the actors' predispositions is rooted in the differential distributions of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. These predispositions act to *legitimate* the structure of differential awards and provide the means to perceive the structure.

According to Bourdieu, all forms of capital, by being organically-related to positions in social space, act in two ways simultaneously: they reproduce all forms of capital and they use these resources to embed the actor's position further. So, positions of actors are both the cause and the effect of all forms of past accumulations of capital, particularly social capital. Social capital can be seen as a 'credential' that perpetuates social inequality by providing *differential* entitlements to credit (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248-9). Therefore, social capital along with other forms of associated capitals 'explain the structure and dynamics of differentiated societies' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Social capital via group memberships becomes a collective phenomenon.

Bourdieu's theory has been criticized as reductionist for privileging economic capital as the ultimate source and eventual exchange form of all other capitals (Alexander, 1996; Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu is also faulted for attributing, like human capital and rational action theorists (Goldthorpe, 1996), an interest-bound, utility-orientation in all human action (Swartz, 1997, p. 78). In Bourdieu's formulation, social capital becomes highly context-specific as a direct consequence of the relativity among the social, cultural, economic and symbolic fields (Adam and Rončević, 2003, p. 161; Savage, Warde and Devine, 2005). This makes any automatic aggregation of social capital problematic (Schuller, 2001, p. 12). Social capital is therefore problematic as a feature of social classes that include widely variable people in terms of these four fields. This is particularly the case for UK ethnic minorities that appear to be using social capital that is not class-based (Crozier and Davies, 2006, Modood, 2003; 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

## Coleman's formulation

Coleman's (1988) definition of social capital comes close to Bourdieu's (1986) and Loury's (1977) but from a completely different point of departure. For Coleman, 1988, p. S98) social capital 'consists of some aspect of social structure, and facilitates certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure'. Coleman adopts a middle line between two theoretical traditions. The first is a functionalist view of social action which is conditioned by social structure. The second is rational theory which suggests that actors' goals are determined by utility-maximizing pursuit of his/her self-interest (Coleman, 1988, p. S95).

For Coleman, social capital is *productive*, i.e. it is used so that actors can achieve particular ends that would have been impossible without it. So it has a clear instrumental purpose. Like Bourdieu, Coleman defines social capital as a collective resource utilizable by actors who are goal-oriented. Social capital requires an element of *embeddedness* in social structure. This is a notion that Coleman has adopted from Granovetter (1985) but it can also be seen in Bourdieu's social space as defined by actors' positions. Like Bourdieu, Coleman sees social capital as essentially residing in the social structure of *relationships* among people. This dimension sets it apart from both financial and human capital. Unlike Bourdieu though, Coleman sees social capital as a *bonding* mechanism which adds to the *integration* of social structure. For Coleman social structure predates the agent who can use embedded social capital as a resource.

Coleman is preoccupied with the question as to whether conceptual tools, efficient at the individual level, can be utilized to make the so-called micro-macro transition (i.e. extend beyond the family to greater aggregates and collectivities). Social capital, despite its less tangible character, shares with financial capital an ease of making the micro-macro transition. Social capital infuses with *value* those aspects of social structure that become *resources*, which become utilizable for goal-seeking actors. As such social capital can be used conceptually at both the micro and macro levels without requiring a separate theory of social structure working at the two levels of inquiry.

The analogy to financial capital is complete when Coleman explains what exactly constitutes capital resources for individuals. Thus, the obligation to reciprocate a favour done by an actor A to an actor B constitutes a 'credit slip' for actor A. This credit slip is redeemable in the network within a time frame such expectations and information define. That it will be redeemed in the future is based on the *trust* produced by that part of the social structure that has provided the resource, i.e. the existence of the nexus of relations. Credit slips can theoretically be amassed turning social capital into a fungible resource. Thus, social capital can be utilized to achieve ends for actors in contexts other than the ones the obligation was initially incurred.

Coleman's functionalist bent however sets his formulation completely apart from that of Bourdieu. Coleman's preoccupation with the connection of social capital as being largely a *product* of social structure has prompted him to look for such structural prerequisites to the neglect of other possibilities, such as conflict. For Coleman, there is no provision for inequality as a *result* or a *cause* of the differential power arising from differences in social capital.

Another major difference between Bourdieu and Coleman is that for Coleman, social capital acquires the nature of a public good. Direct contributions by actors will benefit the whole. Strong families or communities accrue from strong social bonding among members. For Bourdieu, social capital reproduces social inequality but it may increase integration within specific groups. Both Bourdieu and Coleman send out a pessimistic outlook for society but

for different reasons. Bourdieu sees social capital as a scarce resource. It is therefore a mechanism of class reproduction that perpetuates structured inequality. Coleman sees social capital as a potential public good. However, internal community social links are weakening and lack *closure* (networks are becoming more open-ended resulting in less dense, close-knit relationships). As a result, social capital becomes much less likely to become a shared public good. Hope lies only with state-led formal organizations which are expected to substitute voluntary organizations in the supply of social capital (Coleman, 1988, p. S118).

Coleman has come under considerable criticism. First, he is faulted for failing to distinguish between *resources* and the *ability* of network members to obtain them (Portes, 1998, p. 5; Quibria, 2003, p. 4). Recipients and donors of social capital have different motivations that cannot be fully accounted for by a rational action framework (Portes, 1998, p. 5; Quibria, 2003, p. 4). When social capital shifts from an individual-level relationship to a feature of a community, it becomes conceptually fuzzy. Such transition is not explicated by Coleman. Nor are the structural preconditions for such transition specified (Portes, 2000, p. 3).

Second, Coleman's argument is also claimed to be circular and tautological: social capital seems to exist only if and when it is positively evident at community-level outputs. Thus, causes and effects are never adequately delineated (Lin, 1999, p. 33; Portes, 2000, p. 4; Quibria, 2003, p. 4, 9). This circularity is also linked to Coleman's failure to offer any systematic treatment of the difference between the *wish* of actors to oblige and their *capacity* to do so (Portes, 1998, p. 5; Portes et al., 1999). Instead, inequalities observable at every level of social structure are attributed to structural *dysfunctions*, like relative lack of *closure* and its related consequence, lack of overarching social capital-producing norms.

Third, Coleman's insistence on closure as a precondition of the functionality of social capital-based networks is another major criticism. Based on Granovetter's (1973) notion of 'weak ties' and Burt's (1992) 'structural holes' concepts, Lin (1999, p. 34) and Adler and Kwon (2002, p. 29) for example dismissed closure as a precondition for social capital. Lin (1999) argued that closure is required only in goal-specific pursuits of actors. When members are searching for and maintaining resources, closure is needed. However when members are searching and obtaining resources, they require bridges with other network members and so closure is neither needed nor desired. Closure may create negative externalities. In-group solidarity, primordialism, essentialism and parochialism can create 'low radii of trust' (trust that does not extend beyond the group boundaries) (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 8-9).

Fourth, Coleman's contention that resources, attitudes and norms such as trust and reciprocity or social networks and associations can be understood as social capital has also received criticism. Foley and Edwards (1999, p. 146) argued that social capital is context-dependent and therefore context-specific. Since context conditions the *use value* and *liquidity* of social capital, every attempt to fix social capital into an integrative function, as in Coleman's formulation, is severely limited in scope. They stress that precisely because social capital is context-dependent, social resources are neither equitable nor evenly distributed. This is a point on which Coleman remains conspicuously silent. Shucksmith (2000, p. 8) also rejects any treatment of social capital as a collective good. In his view, treating social capital as a collective good masks inherent inequalities in which assets are accessed and appropriated differentially by those who already have social and cultural capital.

Fifth, Coleman is faulted for paying little attention to structural inequalities and relations of power in general (Fraser and Lacey, 1993; Molyneux, 2002; Tonkiss, 2000). Edwards, Franklin and Holland, (2003, pp. 9-11) critique Coleman's communitarian approach as having conservatist overtones. In their view, Coleman's horizontal understanding of social capital conflates the different positions of persons in terms of their class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ability. That horizontal understanding ignores vertical inequalities. It does not offer any

convincing framework as to why horizontal relations of social capital are more significant than vertical ones.

Sixth, Coleman has been targeted in feminist critiques for his inattentiveness to power relations relevant to the allocation of women's roles in families. Feminists react against Coleman's line of thinking which assumes that women, by being mothers in the traditional understanding of mothering, 'are naturally predisposed to their families or communities' (Molyneux, 2002, p. 178). Thus, any modernization associated with that role, for example as a result of women's greater influx into the labour market is, in Coleman's view, associated with a decline of social capital. Coleman's communitarian approach becomes thus blind both to gender-related social inequalities and to social changes associated with gender roles in society.

## Putnam's formulation

All the theoretical principles suggested or implied by Coleman have provided the main engine for Putnam's formulation of social capital. For Putnam (1993a, p. 35; 1993b) social capital refers to 'features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit'. Coleman's insights however become evident in Putnam's belief that social capital is a quality that can be a facilitator of interpersonal cooperation. As he puts it '(w)orking together is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of human capital' (Putnam, 1993a, p. 35-6). In Putnam's view, such a feature can be considered an aggregate trait to such a degree that it can become automatically comparable across cities, regions and even countries.

In later articles, Putnam's (1996a) fully adopts Coleman's (1988) link between the lack of strong family and community ties and the intergenerational decline of social capital in the United States of America (USA). Putnam (1996a; b) provided statistics that indicated rapidly declining rates of voting and membership in a number of voluntary organizations in the USA. He suggested that 'the national slump in trust and engagement was likely to continue' (Putnam, 1996a, p. 45-6). According to him, the USA has been witnessing the rise of an 'uncivic' generation, which he identifies as the baby-boomers born after World War II.

Putnam's argument presents social capital, essentially the 'amount' of 'trust' available, as the main stock characterizing the political culture of modern societies. For Putnam, voluntary associations that enable a horizontal linking of people produce *trust*, the norm that causes interpersonal bonding. This is also the celebrated norm-producing feature of networks in Coleman's formulation. Putnam however, specifically connects trust and its concomitant reciprocity to *civic engagement*. Civic engagement, following a Tocquevillian perspective, presumes *civil virtue* which in itself is an index of the strength of civil society. In short, social capital is associated with political involvement, particularly via voluntary associations. Therefore for Putnam social capital amounts to a direct test of the democratic strength of American society.

In Putnam's formulation, social capital is elevated from a feature of *individuals* and small groups in local communities to a feature of large population *aggregates*. Social capital becomes a collective trait functioning at the aggregate level. As such, it can become a *diagnostic tool* for societal political and economic health. Fukuyama (2001, p.7), argues that social capital is the *sine qua non* of stable liberal democracy. Thus, citizens adhering to norms of strong associational participation and who are holders of high social capital are naturally more inclined to cooperate on economic and political projects.

Another reason is practical. Social capital 'reduces transaction costs associated with formal co-ordination mechanisms' (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 10). This is the notion of social capital as a



'universal lubricant' of social relations (Putnam, 2000). The informality engendered in social capital relations facilitates the functioning of modern economies. Social capital in this respect may operate either as *bridging* or as *bonding* (Putnam, 2000). The first type of capital expands networks while the second increases their cohesion. Thus one should expect a positive association between indicators or types of social capital and outputs such as civic engagement, economic prosperity and growth and level of (democratic) citizenship. However, Putnam moves beyond the statement of a mere association to a specific *causal* connection of social capital as a determinant of political involvement and economic aggregate indices. Thus, much effort has been spent by political scientists and economists to connect causally this 'civic culture' to practically every positive and progress-conducive feature of modern Western societies. However, treating this 'civic culture' (Almond and Verba, 1989) as a *cause* of positive societal-level outputs has generated even greater confusion around the concept of social capital.

## Criticisms of Putnam

Most of Coleman's criticisms have also been expressed against Putnam's formulation. This is unsurprising since Coleman's formulation has provided Putnam's theoretical basis. Putnam (1993a;b; 2000a;b; 2006a;b) is mainly critiqued for his treatment of trust as an aggregate indicator of social capital and for the ways this is linked to associational participation, economic growth and democratic ethos at regional or national levels. This treatment is argued to exhibit fundamental conceptual and methodological flaws.

First, Putnam's formulation is engaged in a causal reasoning which is entirely circular (Morrow, 1999; Quibria, 2003). Causes, in this case the *sources* of social capital, are argued to be conflated with their effects, e.g., their observed *benefits* (Portes, 1998; 2000). The existence of social capital is simply equated with its outcomes (Sobel, 2002). This reveals a major conceptual failure to disentangle analytically the conditions under which social networks represent *effects* of social capital or their *causes*. This lack of clarity is argued to undermine many later treatments following this tradition. As Adam and Rončević (2003, p. 167) point out, the quality of government structures is in one study considered a *consequence* of social capital (Narayan and Cassidy, 2001) while in another its *determinant* (Healy et al., 2002).

Second, the *direction* of causation is never convincingly made clear. Thus, Putnam (1993a; 2000a) seems to be convinced that 'economics does not predict civics, but civics does predict economics' (Putnam et al., 1993c, p. 157). However this statement is not backed up by systematic historical analysis. As Portes (1998, p. 20) convincingly shows, Putnam simply engages in an *ex post facto* analysis of the Italian case by reverberating the same tautological reasoning. All features of public life purported to reflect high social capital are accounted for by the high stock of social capital in that region. Swain (2003) argues that Putnam simply reiterates well-known features of Italian life that have been consequences of the different economic development of the North and South (Brucker, 1999). Yet this begs the question of whether trust in institutions leads to interpersonal trust or if the causation is reversed (Foley and Edwards, 1999).

Third, Putnam's wish to isolate a single factor in explaining the growth of the economy and democracy (Portes, 1998) leads him to neglect other causal possibilities which could be giving rise to both social capital *and* economic prosperity. By failing to identify common antecedents in both social capital and other outcomes, he fails to identify possible causal spuriousness in his fundamental link. Like Portes (1998), Foley and Edwards (1999, p. 145) highlight the possibility that 'generalized trust' or 'civicness' are likely to be highly mediated by local structures. It is such local structures that Putnam sees as historically-rooted effects of traditions of trust-generating social capital networks. Putnam's historical analysis of Italian

regions is said to be naïve (Swain, 2003, p. 193) and to fail in the face of serious historical scrutiny (Brucker, 1999; Muir, 1999 cited in Swain, 2003). Shared historical experience and tradition can shape internal norms that produce social capital (Fukuyama, 2001). Thus Putnam's misplaced causation leads him to a number of questionable conclusions and overstatements.

Fourth, Putnam is faulted for conceptual short-sightedness. Aggregating trust to the level of the region or of the country assumes that such quality can be commonly shared. Further, that such quality emerges in all people more or less as a reflex once social structure conducive to such sentiment is present. But as Foley and Edwards (1999) argue, aggregating trust at the regional or national level eclipses information about all the vital variability of trust at the individual level. Further, if context makes all the difference, as Smith and Kulynych (2002, p. 167) suggest, social capital cannot be assumed to be a standard quality inhering in every individual or in the relationship among individuals. As both identity theory (Stryker and Burke, 2000) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) have shown, context matters as it establishes a reflexive relation between actor and structure. In other words, Putnam ignores actors' subjective understandings, fundamental in shaping the emergent meanings assigned to such relationships (Edwards et al, 2003, p. 14).

Fifth, Putnam neglects that networks differ both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, they can be assumed to differ in the type and value of resource available, in their inclusiveness as well as in regards to the number of ties available for use to the actor at a given time. Vertically, networks can be expected to vary in two dimensions. First, depending on the location of the actor in Bourdieu's sense, and second, according to the level of aggregation (Foley and Edwards, 1999). Thus, as Kearns and Parkinson (2001) show, neighbourhood change, and the social networks thereof, result in unpredictable gaps in fortune and prosperity between places within single regions, let alone countries.

Sixth, the temporal dimension in network operation is another critical neglect in Putnam's formulation. Social capital that emerges as an effect of such variance is by definition also variable (Adam and Rončević, 2003, p. 170). Thus, assuming that such variation in network structure produces similar levels of aggregated 'trust' within or across different nations is a methodologically unfounded assumption (Sobel, 2002, p. 151). It makes such formulation static (Morrow, 1999, p. 16). As Foley and Edwards (1999, p. 151) argue, even assuming, as Putnam does, that such a norm of trust is widely (and normally) distributed, does not mean that such a norm will be activated in the particular instance for the particular person at any given time.

Neglect of such historical possibilities and contingencies contributed to Putnam's fundamental failure to account adequately for human agency within network structures. At the network or actor level, low-level trust may create opposing and conflicting interests among network members and the rest of the public sphere, as demonstrated by the Italian mafia and some Latin American countries (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 12). Further, investments by actors in human capital are neither costless nor reversible. Thus, what started out as trust may end up as a constraint or liability (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p. 27).

For all the above reasons, trust cannot be assumed to be equally distributed in a network nor equally accessible by all actors. As discussed, this is because actors occupy different locations, are different persons and may react differently to their context in the *same* network. Therefore Putnam's *a priori* assumption that trust has pro-social consequences is unfounded and proves in practice simplistic. It fails to predict when trust or absence thereof can produce militias or democratic partisanship. In other words, Putnam fails to recognize that democracy can be enhanced also by non-collaborative, suspicious, non-trusting and conflicting relationships (Smith and Kulynych, 2002, p. 173).

## **Empirical findings relating to Bourdieu's, Coleman's and Putnam's formulations**

Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis finds some empirical support. Evidence in the United Kingdom (UK) supports the connection of social networks and parental choice in the English national school system. The general findings confirm that the extent and potential use of parental networks in choosing a school is associated with parental social class. Earlier studies in the UK showed that class privilege persisted as indicated by parental choices for private education, even in the face of a more open, meritocratic education system. The main engine of retaining class privilege has been communities' social capital sustaining inequalities (Westergaard and Resler, 1975 cited in Edwards et al 2003, p. 19). The 1988 Education Act in Britain which supposedly gave greater choice to parents in Britain in the selection of school for their children did not result in a freer choice of place. Instead, class differentials were identified in the use of networks in post-1988 Britain (Goulbourne and Solomos, 2000; Woods, 1998). There was also evidence that parental social capital operating through parental networks was in fact affected by significant feedback from children's networks. Allatt (1993, p. 143) showed that parents transmit social capital by choosing particular schools aiding their children to create and sustain their own social networks there. More recent research has shown that informal information networks drive the relocation of many parents outside central London in search of a better school (Butler and Hamnett, 2011).

Parental networks also seem to be related to dropout rates. Quantitative studies in the US showed that the odds of a child dropping out of school decreased with the number of other parents a child's parents were in touch with (Carbonaro, 2005). Assuming that parental involvement measures the extent of their social capital, evidence shows a generally positive effect of parental social capital on the offspring's educational outcomes. However that effect, while still positive, varies substantially across ethnic groups (López et al., 2001; McNeal, 1999; Qian and Blair, 1999). Bourdieu's prediction that inequalities in the distribution and access to resources condition a habitus that predefines 'acceptable' or 'legitimate' aspirations and expectations was also supported in some qualitative studies (Freeman, 1997). However it is generally *not* borne out in the educational expectations of minority groups (Modood, 2003).

Studying LEADER programs for local rural communities in the United Kingdom, Shucksmith (2000) found that local communities were characterized by entrenched inequalities in access to local resources via exclusive use of social capital networks. This resulted in LEADER programs benefiting the more privileged. Shucksmith concluded that those who had the necessary social connections were the ones who appropriated development initiatives such as LEADER (ibid, 2000, p. 8).

Coleman's hypotheses also find some support in empirical studies. Intact, tight-knit families with parents interested and actively involved in their children's educational development invest in social capital more than single parents or parents who are frequently absent from home. Children of involved parents show generally better educational and developmental cognitive outcomes (McLanahan and Sanderfur, 1994; Parcel and Menaghan, 1994). Social capital as indicated by the presence of a father in the household and high educational aspirations of the young person's close friends in urban settings reduced the odds of that adolescent dropping out of school (Furstenberg and Kaplan, 2007). Based on National Educational Longitudinal Study (1994) data, Teachman, Paasch and Carver, (1996) confirmed Coleman's (1988) original findings. If children attended Catholic schools (considered a proxy of close-knit family ties), maintained ties between family and school and did not change schools often, they had significantly lower dropout rates. Exposure to social



networks was also found to be positively related to academic achievement and aspirations among Mexican-origin high school children, especially those who were bilingual (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush, 1995). Similarly, Valenzuela and Dornbush (1994) highlighted how a familistic orientation among similar students provided social capital in the form of familial support.

Other studies however seriously question such generalized 'family social capital effect'. Also using NELS88 data, Astone and McLanahan (1991) and Teachman et al. (1996) have largely disconfirmed Coleman's posited adverse link between lone parenthood and children's educational outcomes. Further, the very significant variation in the link between parental involvement and offspring's educational outcomes across racial and ethnic groups is justifiably taken as a disconfirmation of Coleman's thesis. If parental involvement varies with class, culture or ethnicity then the social capital thesis is seriously undermined. Other factors might account for the link between parental involvement and children's outcomes, apart from social capital-generating closeness of family ties. Using similar data and controlling for all possible background factors Campbell and McLean (1999) found that the effect of parental involvement on the likelihood of young people's dropout and truancy rates varied widely across ethnic and racial groups. Effects were found to be lower for African American, Hispanic and Asian American than for white high school students. Similarly, Qian and Blair (1999) showed that parental involvement was not consistently a reliable predictor of educational aspirations of high school seniors. While parental involvement positively affected the educational aspirations of African American, Hispanic and white high school seniors, that was not true for Asian-American seniors. Further, tested on NELS data, social capital as a predictor of children's educational outcomes largely diminishes after controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), children's linguistic ability, length of residence and ethnicity. For Portes (2000) this clearly indicates that the effects of social capital on children's educational attainment are overstated.

However, Coleman's description of community-generated trust receives strong support in empirical studies of ethnic enclaves and niches. Earlier studies have amply demonstrated the importance of the community resources for ethnic firms (Light, 1984; Light and Bonacich, 1988; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Thus, rotating credit associations (RCAs) that operated exclusively on the kind of social capital Coleman highlights were vital for generating capital for immigrant Asian firms. The same can be said for New York Chinatown (Zhou, 1997), Miami's Little Havana (Portes, 1987; Portes and Stepick, 2003; Perez, 2001), Los Angeles' Koreatown (Light and Bonacich, 1988; Nee et al., 1985) and ethnic niches, which refer to the takeover of a particular economic sector or industry by an ethnic group (Portes, 2000). Waldinger et al., (1990) described the tight network-based control of white ethnic groups on construction (Italians), fire and police unions (Irish and Polish) of New York. In general, there is evidence supporting the contention that informal network sources are mobilized in an actor's job searches and that this has positive effects on that actor's attained (SES) (Lin et al., 1981; Tubergen et al., 2004). Later research on social resources by Lin (1999) confirmed this link between social capital-generating resources in networks and the individual's status attainment, authority and placement in a number of industries. Similarly network researchers have established that actors use social capital networks to gain access to broader and better quality, timely and reliable information, (Bauman et al., 1991; Fernandez and Weinberg 1997; Meyerson, 1994).

Social capital networks are found to be particularly important for social mobility in inner-city environments. Thus, Wilson (2001; 2002) documented the further decline and impoverishment of inner-city black areas particularly after the departure of localized industrial employment and middle class. Because the quality of network resources of the remaining population declined as well, there was high unemployment and welfare dependency. Sullivan (1989) showed that black young people could not rely on family adults in job-seeking

because those adults did not occupy influential positions in networks. Thus black inner-city young people become vulnerable to illicit activities. Fernandez-Kelly and Curran (2001) described a vicious circle related to this process. Inner-city networks promoted entrenchment and thus cut off members from information. At the same time they also promoted local subcultural styles that made it impossible for members to get mainstream jobs, even if information eventually reaches them. It would appear that this negative social capital (Portes, 1987) perpetuates a 'circle of poverty' (Frazier, 1968; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Lewis, 1998) and its related concept 'culture of poverty' (Gans, 1968; Ogbu, 1987, Wilson, 2001).

Coleman's hypothesised link between community-based social capital indicated by the extent of one's social network and one's occupational achievement is generally confirmed, particularly for ethnic enclaves and minority economies. However, evidence also showed that social capital networks entrench and embed individuals making it very difficult to opt out. This dimension of social capital is completely ignored by Coleman.

## **Putnam and aggregate-level social capital**

Putnam's formulation has generated an impressive wave of empirical research which has elevated social capital to a unique and prominent position. But this body of research has added to the concept's theoretical opaqueness rather than led to its clarity – in essence because it has treated social capital as an aggregate resource.

Social capital has been treated as being four things simultaneously: a universal diagnostic tool for cross-national assessment of the level of a number of economic and political outcomes; a predictor of a region's potential for such outputs; a facilitator of such outputs; and an outcome of economic, political and institutional structures. Empirical evidence however casts serious doubt on the validity of Putnam's hypothesized link between aggregate-level social capital and positive state-level outcomes.

Apparently for many scholars, Putnam's definition of social capital has provided the missing link in explaining cross-national differences in growth patterns that cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by the four classical economic indicators: technological level, natural resources, physical capital and human capital (North, 1990; Olson, 1996; Svendsen and Svendsen, 2003). The general effort has been to isolate the role of social capital for two main reasons. The first reason is to explain more convincingly why the wealth of nations is so unequally distributed. The second reason centres on how local development in rural and developing countries can be ameliorated by stressing local potentialities in social capital. This is the hypothesized role of social capital as a facilitator. Social capital enters the economists' growth estimations because it is hoped that cross-national differences in that measure can account for those differences better than the classical aggregate factors (Olson, 1996).

Some of these studies suggest that social capital provides the basis for greater levels of synergy, i.e. re-integration of unaffiliated individuals into collective projects. Social capital can also have a role of 'facilitator' or 'lubricant' of project-committed network organizations (Adam and Rončević, 2003), as well as of intermediary institutions (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). These were found to be especially critical in the creation of democratic interest groups in societies otherwise permeated by clan-like, rent-seeking networks, such as organized crime in certain Latin American countries, the Balkans, Russia and Italy (Gambetta, 2000).

Other empirical evidence indicated that high levels of social capital were generally associated with higher aggregate levels of political involvement (Van Deth, 1997). Later research however disconfirmed this finding (Van Deth, 2000). Social capital was associated with aggregate levels of political participation and political trust of European ethnic minorities

and networks of ethnic associations (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; 2001; Jacobs and Tillie, 2004). Reciprocal links were also found to exist between aggregate levels of civic development and interpersonal trust (Brehm and Rahn, 1997). Trust in formal institutions has also been found to be a predictor of general societal trust (Booth and Bayer, 1998).

Other studies have treated social capital as the effect rather than the cause of institutionalized structure. Formal institutions, such as government and legislative settings, have been found to stimulate or stunt the development of social capital. This strand of research has been critical of Putnam's 'bottom-up' approach and therefore has sought to isolate the political and associational structural antecedents, particularly government structures that facilitate or impede the rise of social capital and trust in society. The general finding of these studies is that government structures and historically-embedded political traditions are sources of social capital and trust (Berman, 1997; Levi, 1996; Ostrom, 1994; Pildes, 1996; Woolcock, 1998). Government in particular was found to have an important role in fostering social capital at the community level either via synergy projects or institutional democratization and accessibility (Evans et al., 1996; Kenworthy, 1997; Tendler and Freedheim, 1994).

However, most of the above research shares a number of serious methodological and related measurement issues (Quibria, 2003). Some of these problems are rooted in conceptual underspecification. Problems are due to an apparent lack of a guiding theoretically-grounded methodological mechanism leading aggregation from the individual community (egocentric level) to the national level (sociocentric level) (Adam and Rončević, 2003; Foley and Edwards, 1999). As Swain (2003, p.196) argues such research 'fails to show how membership of and trust within small groups and networks percolates through into generalized trust, good government and a more effective political system'. The above research strands seem also to be relatively unresponsive to the need to specify exactly how a resource like social capital works and how exactly it can be related to development factors at the aggregate level. The lack of such theoretical and conceptual grounding linking social capital as an individual-level asset to a community-level asset (Portes, 2000) has led to the *ad hoc* inclusion of social capital indices. In turn, this inattention is directly related to measurement issues.

One of the most serious limitations in this strand of quantitative research is their use of *decontextualized* attitudinal responses about political participation or 'generalized' trust. Such measures are routinely taken to be valid and reliable indices of social capital. Bjørnskov (2007) used an aggregate measure of social capital which in his view could be captured by attitudinal indicators such as general trust and trust in formal organizations and one behavioural measure - membership in voluntary organizations. Based on these composite measures he found that level of social capital differed substantially among Western and Eastern European countries. Levels of social capital (trust) in Denmark were three times higher than in Russia. In an earlier study, Fukuyama (1995) had also distinguished between 'high' and 'low' social capital countries.

Treating social capital as an aggregate measure has led some recent studies to go so far as to demarcate geographic distributions of social capital across European countries (Van Oorschot et al., 2006). Aggregate attitudinal measures of trust have been routinely (and unquestioningly) used by studies based on the World Value Survey. Knack and Keefer (1997) used measures of general trust and degree of participation in civic organization as indicators of formal social capital (as opposed to informal social capital). Eurobarometer also provides similar aggregate attitudinal measures. World Bank researchers have developed measures which are considered indices for 'bridging', 'bonding' and 'linking' social capital, as parts of the *social capital assessment tool methodology* (SOCAT) (Woolcock, 2000; Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2001).

But such measures are of suspect reliability as indices for responses that are primarily context-driven or context-sensitive (Foley and Edwards, 1999). Thus, it is generally correctly argued that such averaging at national level homogenizes widely discrepant individual-level distributions, at neighbourhood, community or regional levels (Edwards et al., 2003).

Further, the SOCAT methodology has been severely criticized (Fine, 2001; Harriss, 2001). Even researchers who routinely use such data have highlighted the fact that 'substantial biases could result from comparing countries at one point in time' (Raiser et al., 2001, p. 5). Further, this methodology apparently works on the assumption that social capital, like taste is more or less a universal human trait, relatively stable over time and therefore measurable. But this assumption is both conceptually inconsistent with the theory this methodology is informed by and substantively unfounded. As Sobel (2002, p. 140) argues, if social capital is construed by this methodology to be a largely invariant and ingrained human feature, then Putnam's claim that there are declines in such ingrained feature in the course of a single generation does not make much sense. Also, this assumption proves substantively wrong since the SOCAT methodology commits largely the same circularity errors characteristic of Putnam's (2000) original index (Swain, 2003, p. 199). Thus, a considerable stretch of both imagination and complacency with methodological problems are apparent in attempts to reach measures of aggregate levels of trust or social capital at national levels. Even more problematic are cross-national comparisons based on a similar logic of measurement.

## Conclusions

The above review has highlighted a number of unresolved methodological and conceptual issues related to the concept and measurement of social capital. But instead of seeing these issues as leading to a dead-ended discussion about social capital, they should be seen as a sign of an ongoing, productive debate. Schuller (2001) for example urges thinking in that direction. While certainly rejecting simplistic aggregate measures of social capital, Schuller is optimistic. Social capital modelling should be expanded to include nonlinear or circular forms (Smith and Kulynych, 2002). Social capital is by nature a resource both context- and time-relative. Some of the problems of aggregation have come forth precisely because social capital has been treated as economic or human capital operating in a linear way. Quite clearly, social capital does *not* accumulate quantitatively or qualitatively in the same manner as does physical and human capitals. Most importantly, 'more' does not always mean 'better', at least not for everyone involved. Neither is 'more' the result of a simple additive function.

With regard to the important outcomes social capital has been associated with, it is clear that cross-sectional as well as longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to identify causal relationships. Yet *mutatis mutandis* these are not going to be completely productive unless it is understood that the conventional assumption of linearity must be expanded if not abandoned altogether. Second, it is important to answer the question of whether a factor such as social capital can be a cause and effect simultaneously. If yes, this causal reciprocity must be *modelled* specifically in a theoretically-informed and methodologically flexible manner.

But clearly this point of universal consensus is easier said than done. This is because theory is still not unified with respect to social capital, and it still has not incorporated systematically related areas of concern, such as conflict theory and conflict resolution that are clearly relevant. Questions include how social capital operates within each opposed faction directly exacerbating intergroup conflict (Goette, Huffman and Meier, 2006) or, alternatively, how social capital leads to conflict resolution (Polleta and Jasper, 2001). These require systematic interdisciplinary attention. Social capital in European ethnically segmented



societies, for example, cannot be viewed via Putnam's 'pacific functionalism' (Siisiäinen, 2000).

The second area which has remained virtually unexplored is social identity theory as this is connected to social capital. Group identity as theorized by Tajfel (1978; 1982) or structural interactionism as formulated in Stryker's (1980; 2007) identity theory have a lot to offer to social capital research. For one thing, relations of social capital can be argued to be conditioned by group identity. Alternatively, group identity could be seen as a facilitator of resource access. If ethnic identity and social capital are associated in complex ways, as present research has shown, we need to expand our vision to address the following question. Can identity, or more specifically ethnic identity, claim to *share* causal antecedents with social capital? This seems quite possible: Context matters in a complex way to the generation of social capital, as the above review has shown. We also know that context matters in group identity formation. Since both research traditions agree that *human relations* involve studying interactional patterns between agency and structure, there is automatically common ground. In sum, if group identity affects or is affected by social capital then we need to enrich social capital theory with conceptual tools that will allow for this.

A third and final point can be made: The connection of social capital to dimensions of social stratification and mobility needs systematic attention at both the micro as well as the macro levels. Social capital is a cause and a consequence of social inequality. As a scarce resource social capital has an unconventional nature that defies aggregation in the usual manner (Dasgupta, 2000; Quibria, 2003). At the same time, though, typical measures of SES have always implicitly included social capital: Human capital is related to social capital in many and interesting ways (Schuller, 2001). Similarly, measures of occupational prestige have also implicitly included it inasmuch as they have used achieved educational status as a component of occupational prestige. Further, an impressive body of organizational research has shown how access to better jobs is based on networks. As Light (2001, p. 5) correctly puts it, 'good' jobs refer to jobs that, due to the job seeker's exclusive and unequal access to networks, pay better than that person's qualification would normally allow'. Of course, the statement can be contested especially in view of the documented exploitation of recent immigrants by their co-ethnics in sweatshops or menial jobs that Light himself (Light and Bonacich, 1988) and others (Anthias, 1992; 1993) have shown. Yet his point that networks not only find jobs but also exclude others from those jobs cannot be denied, as research on ethnic niches has shown (Portes 1998; 2000). Social capital may also generate more social capital; studies in inter- and intra-organizational settings have shown it repeatedly (Burt, 1992; Uzzi, 1997; Podolny and Page, 1998). But curiously enough, the extent to which employees will act *selflessly*, i.e. producing intraorganizational capital as a *public good* (Coleman, 1988), depends on those employees' *self-categorization processes* (Haslam, Eggins and Reynolds, 2003). That brings us back to the need to make connections between social capital and social identity theory.

In addition to the unresolved methodological issues in current social capital modelling, the above literature review has revealed specific gaps in current research. First, research in social capital has not satisfactorily charted ethnic family dynamics in social capital. Most such quantitative research is US-based, and on recent immigrants. Quantitative research in both social and cultural capital (see, Tzanakis, 2011) still needs to address specific concerns regarding the idiosyncratic nature of ethnic families and the particular ways ethnic parents transmit family advantage or disadvantage via social and cultural capital.

Second, as the present review has indicated, research on social capital suffers from serious methodological and measurement issues particularly when social capital is treated as an aggregate measure. Good-quality longitudinal data have generally not been used under rigorous testing procedures to measure social capital at the aggregate level. But these



measures should first be tested for their validity and reliability. Since social capital accumulates or dissipates with time only longitudinal designs can answer questions about causal relationships of such capital and particular outcomes. Further, social capital and cultural capital have been frequently operationalized by identical measures (father's education) but clearly this offers no way of disentangling their effects. Similarly, while obviously related to family or individual socioeconomic status (SES), the relation of social and cultural capital to SES requires careful research on its own. In other words, effects between SES, social capital and cultural capital need to be modelled separately first and over time. Once these effects are charted, then the effect of parental social and cultural capital on children's educational outcomes, net of other parental SES measures can be obtained.

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