

Blind Spots in Social Resource Theory: Essays on the Creation, Maintenance and Returns of Social Capital
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English summary

This dissertation examines blind spots in our understanding of one big idea, namely that ‘the people we know matter’.

The people we know matter in many ways. They provide information, personal advice or simply a sympathetic ear. In formal terms, this idea has been called ‘social capital’. In this dissertation, I rely on a network perspective which views social capital as the resources that an individual’s social contacts possess and that they are able to lend to the individual.

The benefits of our social connections, in short, our social capital are widely acknowledged. However, there are still several gaps in our understanding of how social capital is created, maintained and how it produces its returns. The aim of this dissertation is to shed light on several of these blind spots.

With regard to the *creation of social capital*, a basic prerequisite is contact between individuals. A useful framework for understanding how contact turns into social capital is the choice-constraint model: This framework views social relationships as being both structurally determined and as carved by individual agents who make choices within an opportunity structure. Social contexts provide meeting opportunities with certain others and within this constrained pool, individuals choose whom to engage with. A large body of research shows that most individuals have networks that are homogeneous in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. This has led researchers to conclude that preferences for similarity are a driver of tie formation. Apart from meeting opportunities and preferences for similar others, our understanding of the creation of social capital is very limited.

The first contribution of this dissertation is that individuals do not only select others within an opportunity structure, but they are also able to select the opportunity structure itself. To show this, I studied the link between personality and social capital. Personality traits are

one driver of the individual decision to enter social situations versus solitary ones (i.e., extraversion) or the decision to enter novel settings versus familiar ones (i.e., openness to experience). The types of settings that individuals choose to enter provide opportunities for connecting with others who can potentially offer useful resources.

Entering more social settings as opposed to solitary ones provides more opportunities to meet many people who can be potentially useful. Entering diverse settings provides opportunities to meet a diverse set of people who are able to provide unique resources. Our understanding of the creation of social capital could benefit from uncovering additional factors that, like personality, drive the individual choice to enter selective meeting opportunities.

The second contribution is that individual choice within an opportunity structure is not only guided by preferences for similarity. It is also guided by rejection of dissimilarity, which seems to be motivated by the desire to maximize one's social capital. My findings show that individuals who control many resources are those who have the most homogenous networks. Those who occupy advantaged positions benefit relatively less from dissimilar ties than those who occupy less advantaged positions. Assuming that everyone is – consciously or subconsciously – motivated to get the most out of their social relationships, we would observe that everyone has a tendency to aim for the most privileged, rich, skilled, and powerful others that are available to them. For advantaged individuals, this means that they look for social ties in their own social stratum, and for less advantaged individuals this means that they are relatively more open to befriending someone higher up the social hierarchy. This finding cannot be explained by only considering preferences for similarity. Individuals who are presented with opportunities to befriend dissimilar others choose not to, especially when dissimilar others offer fewer benefits than similar ones. This highlights the importance of acknowledging rejection of dissimilarity as a distinct driver of individual choice that affects the creation of social capital.

Based on previous work, we also hardly know anything about the *maintenance of social capital*. While we have a good understanding of resources available in a network at a certain time point, we often do not know how this network emerged over time. In particular, we do not yet fully understand which ties get lost and why. I argue that dissimilar ties are more likely to be lost than similar ties, because they are more difficult to maintain. In line with this, my findings show that dissimilar ties are more likely to be lost. However, three prominent explanations (i.e., lack of meeting opportunities, preferences, and network embeddedness) are unable to account for this. Future research will need to clarify what aspects of dissimilarity make it less likely for ties to remain in the network. With our current state of knowledge, I can only speculate that dissimilar ties might not reach a sufficient level of closeness and trust, which would bind them to the network. This potentially ties back to the general consensus among social capital researchers that dissimilar ties are more likely to be acquaintances and weaker ties that provide instrumental resources like information or professional advice, but less so empathy and belonging. Put differently, to benefit from the resources offered by dissimilar ties, they might need not be strong.

Finally, with regard to the *returns of social capital*, we have a good understanding of the benefits of diversity in social capital, but less so of similarity. We do not yet know to what extent, under what conditions and for whom similarity in networks is beneficial. In this dissertation, I explore the benefits of similarity for wellbeing among individuals who occupy different social positions. I found that migrants who lived below the poverty line did not benefit from their social ties. Migrants benefited from social capital only if they were located in higher socioeconomic strata. This highlights the importance of considering divergent returns of social capital depending on individual ethnicity and wealth.

To conclude, this dissertation fills several concrete gaps in our understanding of the creation, maintenance and returns of social capital. The original choice-constraint model

provides an elegant abstraction of two important drivers for the creation of social capital, namely opportunity structure and individual choice. My findings suggest that this model might be too parsimonious to explain the many micro-level processes at play. A model that is too simple, lends itself to being applied in reductionist ways that do not sufficiently reflect the complexity of a phenomenon. In applications of the choice-constraint model, meeting opportunities are often treated as opportunity structures within which individuals make decisions. This might have prevented researchers from asking how individuals entered meeting opportunities in the first place or whether individual choice is driven by other forces than preferences for similarity.

This dissertation shows that different levels of abstraction provide us with different insights into social capital. More abstraction does help us understand general regularities in social capital. However, if we want to understand its details and workings, it is beneficial to add more complexity. This dissertation aimed to do this, and it concludes that we cannot do away with details. At the expense of simplicity, this dissertation seeks to tell a more complete story about the creation, maintenance and returns of social capital.