

Individual Social Capital and Its Measurement in Social Surveys

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With its popularity has come an unresolved issue about social capital: is it an individual or a collective property, or both? Many researchers take it for granted that social capital is collective, but most social surveys implicitly measure social capital at the individual level. After reviewing the definitions by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, I become to agree with Portes that social capital can be an individual asset and should be firstly analyzed as such; if social capital is to be analyzed as a collective property, then the analysis should explicitly draw on a clear definition of individual social capital. I thus define individual social capital as the features of social groups or networks that each individual member can access and use for obtaining further benefits. Four types of features are identified (basic, specific, generalized, and structural), and example formulations of survey questions are proposed. Following this approach, I then assess some survey questions organized under five themes commonly found in social surveys for measuring social capital: participation in organizations, social networks, trust, civic participation, and perceptions of local area. I conclude that most of these themes and questions only weakly or indirectly measure individual social capital; therefore, they should be strengthened with the conceptual framework proposed in this paper and complemented with the items used in independent surveys on social networks.

Introduction

Since the establishment of social capital as one of the most popular social science concepts in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, there have been several warnings concerning the term's fading distinctive utility. Years ago, Portes (1998:2) warned that "the point is approaching at which social capital comes to be applied to so many events and in so many different contexts as to lose any distinct meaning". A more recent and blunt echo is from Lin, Cook and Burt (2001:vii):

In fact, there is a looming danger that the free flow of understanding, application, and interpretation of social capital may soon reach a point where the term might be used in whatever way it suits the purpose at hand, and thus be rendered meaningless as a scientific concept (...) and ultimately be abandoned for its lack of distinctive features and contributions to the scientific knowledge.

Indeed, the concept is "seductive but infuriating" (Li, Savage, and Pickles 2003), because it has been used indiscriminately. As the initial attractiveness of a piece of fashion dress will soon lose its appeal once it is everywhere on the street, an academic term's popularity can easily lead to undisciplined interpretations and applications. We should prevent the wild weeds from killing the beautiful bud by making every effort to restore the concept's genuine

utility in social research. In this paper I aim to address two tightly interrelated issues in the study of social capital: whether social capital is conceptually an individual property, and whether instruments employed in social surveys for measuring social capital have been properly purported by a clear answer to the foregoing question. These are important questions because they determine "the selection of quite different research strategies" (Van Deth 2003:84).

For many researchers, social capital, by definition, is a collective rather than an individual property (Newton 2001; Rahn et al. 1999). When Putnam (1993, 2000) tried to find out the value of social capital for developing and maintaining democracy in Italy and America, what he observed was local communities and associations, not individuals. Indeed, the term itself suggests that it cannot be something of an individual, and the reason seems obvious: social capital is embedded in social relations; hence, no social relations, no social capital. Because social relations require two or more individuals to exist, how could social capital possibly be an individual property? Thereby, as the only form of capital not under any individual's complete ownership, social capital sets itself apart from other types of capital, such as financial capital and human capital. You can sell your house or your skills, but you cannot sell your social relations, in which other people also have a stake.

Nevertheless, if social capital is a collective property by birth, then a confusion arises when it is measured and then analysed as a property of an individual, although very often implicitly. This is especially the case for studies drawing on data collected from social surveys, because the individual is the natural unit of observation and measurement. When

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survey instruments are designed to measure any attributes of an observation unit, it is assumed that the unit is the entity that carries those attributes. It then follows that survey items about social capital are meant to measure social capital at the individual level, or 'individual social capital' for convenience of use. By decomposing social capital into several components and then turning them into survey questions and statistical variables, such as civic participation, social network and trust, designers as well as users of these items have individualized the meaning of social capital, either purposefully or unwittingly. Those with a strong opinion of keeping it as something of a collective entity may point to the distinction between the unit of observation and the unit of analysis – measurements made on individuals shall be aggregated later to measure collective attributes, such as the percentage of residents voluntarily participating in community activities.

The problem is that in either individualizing or collectivizing social capital, few researchers have explicitly conceptualized individual social capital and its connection to the collective counterpart, i.e., 'collective social capital', if such seemingly redundant usage is allowed. The awkward usage, however, perfectly reveals the popular assumption of social capital being a collective property. How could we square the circle that social capital is conceptually assumed to be a collective property on the one hand but operationally measured as an individual attribute in social surveys on the other? The question clearly demonstrates the importance of establishing a conceptual foundation for measuring social capital in social surveys. This is not a trivial matter of clarifying the level of analysis or measurement. It is about enhancing the explaining power of social capital.

This paper picks up what Portes (1998:21) left at the end of his review of the literature of social capital, in which he claimed that "the greatest theoretical promise of social capital lies at the individual level – exemplified by the analyses of Bourdieu and Coleman". What is social capital at the individual level? Why does it have the greatest theoretical promise? Portes, however, did not provide further explanations. I believe that it is time to make it absolutely clear that social capital should be understood as an individual attribute before being taken as a collective property, and it should be measured as such in social surveys.

There are two additional important reasons for establishing social capital as an individual property. First, since social capital is very often used to explain other social phenomena at an aggregate level, such as rate of political participation, economic performance, social inequality, etc., researchers have the responsibility of explaining how social capital, carried by individuals at the micro-level, has produced a result at a higher level. In other words, researchers should clearly specify the use of social capital as a micro mechanism for explaining meso- or macro-level social processes (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). Second, it is mandatory for survey designers and data analysts to ensure

that they know what they are measuring and analyzing before pondering over technical issues. This may sound common place but it always helps to remind ourselves that measurement is not purely a statistical or research design issue.

Before I proceed, a disclaimer is necessary for avoiding confusions. By advocating the concept of individual social capital, I do not mean to exclude its use as a collective property. It can be both. The mandate is that we clearly claim what we mean and keep our measurements consistent with the claimed conceptual meaning.

Social capital: individual, collective, or both?

Is social capital an individual or a collective property? If it is both, then under what conditions can one be distinguished from the other? The confusions about what social capital really means and how it works stem, at least in part, from the lack of focused discussions on these questions. Since much of the credit for popularizing the concept should go to Robert Putnam, let's begin by analyzing his definition. His initial definition runs as follows (1993:167): "Social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions". Several years later, he offered another definition (2000:19): "social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them".

First of all, note that, although he was talking about the same set of things in the two definitions – trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks, the distinction between social connections and *features* of these connections is blurred. Later I shall show that this distinction is actually crucial for answering the question of whether social capital is individual or collective. For now, let's focus on the definitions themselves.

Intuitively, it seems undisputable that the above representations of social capital are collective characteristics – members of a social community trust each other, exchange favours, and do something together for a common interest. But, it does not demand much effort to look at these features from an individual perspective: how much a person trusts others or is trustworthy to others, what favours a person can offer or ask from others, and how networked a person is in terms of both the number of social ties and the position in social networks. Putnam didn't contrast these two perspectives. He did say, however, that social capital could be both an individual and a collective property (2000:19): "social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect – a private face and a public face. (...) Social capital can thus be simultaneously a 'private good' and a 'public good'". If there is nothing intrinsically wrong with talking about something with two faces, then it will be truly confusing if

we don't specify which face we are talking about. When will social capital become a 'private good'? Is it the same as other private goods, such as house and skills? Can one sell it or inherit it from another person? Is the 'public good' simply the sum of the 'private goods', or can it be possible for the 'public good' to be divided and distributed to individual persons? If sometimes it is possible while other times not, then what are the conditions under which it is possible or impossible? Besides other problems in Putnam's arguments (Jackman and Miller 1998; Paxton 1999; Portes 1998; Skocpol 1996), the clarification of 'individual' vs. 'collective', or 'private' vs. 'public', has fallen behind the concept's popularity.

In search of clearer notions, we need to go back to Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman. First, Bourdieu (1986:248-49) defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network, which is consisted of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Such group membership provides each member with the backing of the collectively-owned capital in the various senses of the word, a 'credential' that entitles them to credit.

It is clear that, for Bourdieu, networks *per se* are not social capital, as is for Putnam; instead, they are the channels through which social actors have access to social capital. Social capital is consisted of all the resources that belong to a group of people. Group membership facilitates each member's use of social capital, but that is about how social capital works rather than what it is. When a member succeeds in acquiring a certain amount of resources, we can talk about the "volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent" (1986:249). Therefore, social capital can indeed be acquired and used by an individual member, if not necessarily owned in any specific sense. Although Bourdieu did not use the term, I see no difficulty in deriving from his work the meaning of 'individual social capital', that is, the amount of collective resources that are obtained and put to use by any individual member of a social group. It should be added that it is not always possible or necessary to quantify group resources or to reduce them into tangible forms, such as money and equipments; intangible resources, such as reputation and mutual trust, can also be used by individual members or even can be transferred between them. In essence, Bourdieu acknowledges that social capital resides in a collective entity, but by emphasizing its accessibility to individuals, he implicitly recognizes individual social capital as the collective resources used for personal purposes.

Coleman's definition of social capital is essentially a generalized version of Loury's (1977, 1987), which refers to "aspects of social structure to actors, as resources that can be used by the actors to realize their interests" (Coleman 1990:305). In the sense of how social capital facilitates individual actions and interests, his understanding is clearly consistent with Bourdieu's. An important distinction needs

to be made, however, in terms of what the two sociologists mean by 'resources'. It seems that Bourdieu is not very concerned about the nature of collective resources; he is more interested in how social capital is different from other forms of capital in explaining social phenomena. In this sense, Bourdieu's understanding of collective resources is broader than Coleman's, including both tangible resources as well as intangible ones. Emphasizing social capital's inalienable nature, Coleman basically rules out tangible forms of resources as social capital (Coleman 1990:315):

Social capital has certain properties that distinguish it from the private, divisible, alienable goods treated by neoclassical economic theory (...). Although it is a resource that has value in use, it cannot be easily exchanged. As an attribute of the social structure in which a person is embedded, social capital is not the private property of any of the persons who benefit from it.

Coleman's understanding of social capital is therefore more restrictive than Bourdieu's, but they are in agreement on the function of social capital – helping individual members achieve their personal goals. It is on this common ground that they both lead us to the concept of 'individual social capital' by referring to either abstract or tangible properties of a collective entity that an individual member can make use for advancing his or her own interests. By providing a starting point at the individual level, this conceptualization of individual social capital enables us to develop mechanisms and dynamics of collective behaviours. I believe that this is what Portes was talking about while making the claim that social capital at the individual level represented in Bourdieu and Coleman's work had the greatest theoretical potential. Now we need to develop this notion in some details.

Elements of individual social capital

Key to Bourdieu's and Coleman's definitions is to treat social capital as a mechanism for making a sensible connection between individual interests and collective behaviours. It is therefore necessary to identify the elements of individual social capital as part of this mechanism.

Here is the ideal-typical situation in which individuals discover and use social capital: a group of people become connected via a certain kind of relations, and regardless of the exact nature of their relations, the members find that something possessed or produced by the group either itself is a valuable asset or can help them acquire other desirable benefits. Current studies usually identify three things in this situation as social capital, which overlap on top of each other: group membership, features of the relationship, and resources under the control of the group or dependent on the existence of the group. Confusions arise when no specification is made with regard to which of the three or all

of them are the subject of discussion.

I argue that only features of social relations should be taken as social capital. Group membership hardly qualifies, because although it may have the potential of expanding each member's social ties, benefits from the membership are by-products, which are dependent on features of social relations and hardly predictable simply based on membership alone. Furthermore, not all group memberships facilitate the use of collective resources by group members. Some memberships can hinder or even terminate the procurement of desirable interests. There is also a technical problem of 'multiple type-memberships' due to the lack of information about the total number and the names of social organizations the respondent has participated (Morales Diez de Ulzurrun 2002).

Resources controlled by the group are not social capital either because of two reasons. First, an outstanding feature of social capital is its intermediary nature – it is a tool, a channel, or a condition of obtaining other resources, such as financial credits, political support, technical expertise, or psychological comfort. For the members, social relations *per se* have no intrinsic value if they cannot help the members acquire collective resources. The other side of the coin is that collective resources are the target of social capital, not social capital itself. Second, it is not always straightforward to identify the resources that a group actually possesses. A social group may be established only for accumulating a particular kind of resources, such as manpower for a trade union. It is never clear *ex ante* what the group will be able to offer after it comes into existence. Which resource is identified and how it will be used are often unexpected consequences while other purposes are being pursued (Merton 1936; Boudon 1982); for example, a reading group turns into a network of political movement, or a business corporation grows from a golf club. In these situations, members do not know what resources will be available beforehand and thus cannot recognize them as social capital for obtaining other benefits.

Features of social relations among group members then stand out as the least disputable representations of social capital. The distinction between social relations and their features is clearly earmarked by Coleman, but unfortunately blurred by Putnam. Coleman was consistent in referring to 'aspects' or 'attributes' of social relations rather than social relations themselves. To Putnam, in contrast, the two are interchangeable. The distinction is crucial because no social relations should be assumed of only performing the positive functions desired by group members. To the individual, group membership alone cannot guarantee that the desired benefits will follow. Although it is intuitively evident that only some social relations can function positively to the interest of the members, it is too often assumed or implied in studies of social capital that all memberships will work in favour of the members' interests. If not all civic organizations are civic, then our attention should turn

to 'civiness', i.e., a feature of civic organizations, rather than civic organizations themselves. Focusing on features of social relations enables us to take social capital as a variable instead of a fixed attribute, and our job is to measure its magnitude and to explain its variation, not to presume its desirability beforehand.

If individual social capital can be defined as the features of social relations that can be used by individual members as means for achieving ends, then what are the features? Based on the above discussion, I propose a scheme of four groups of items (the wording of the example questions can be modified, of course):

Basic features that describe social relations, including, not exclusively, strength and frequency of contacts, total number of individuals involved, number of chains (or intermediaries), etc. For example, we may want to measure the strength of social relations by asking how likely the respondent would talk about personal matters with a particular person. Then we can ask how many persons there are for each level of strength and whether the respondent becomes to know them directly or has been introduced to them by others.

Specific features that describe the relationship between individuals who personally know each other (colleagues, friends, association members, etc.): trust, respect, exchange, obligation, cooperation, etc. For each group of people that the respondent knows, we can ask how many of them the respondent finds trustworthy, respectable, cooperative, and so on. It helps to specify the exact relationship firstly – supervision at work, members of parents club, volunteers at the same charity, etc. – and then to ask the respondent what obligations, favours, helps, attitudes, and so on, the respondent is confident of expecting from each relationship.

Generalized features that specify the relationship of individuals with 'the general others' (those they do not know personally): acceptance of collective norms, behavioural compliance of shared rules, trust of people not personally known (generalized or impersonal trust, Shapiro 1987; Miller and Mitamura 2003), effectiveness of collective procedures for resolving conflicts, etc. Examples abound in daily life: Do you find that most drivers abide by traffic rules? How often do you see people jumping the queue? How serious do you think littering on the street a serious problem? Do you believe people on the street will help you if you are involved in an accident? Current social surveys have designed some excellent questions on this topic, such as "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" used in the European Social Survey (ESS).

Structural features of social relations (in contrast to the basic features): centrality, cohesiveness, structural

holes, etc. (Carrington, Scott, and Wasserman 2005). Obviously, the boundaries of the social relations under study have to be clearly specified before questions about these features can be raised. Therefore, general social surveys are not particularly equipped for measuring these features. One option is to include a set of instruments on a specific network in a general survey questionnaire. The network could be the circle of best friends, a group of colleagues for a common task, or a club pursuing a common interest. Measurements of these structural features then can be attached to each individual respondents either as their own personal characteristics or a characteristic of a higher level entity.

Now I examine the extent to which items formulated in social survey questionnaires reflect these conceptual elements.

Measuring social capital in general social surveys

For many social surveys, the unit of observation, the unit of measurement, and the unit of analysis all rest on the individual. Indeed, this is not a problem for studying most social science subjects. Nevertheless, the consistency between the units should not be taken for granted, particularly for studying a concept like social capital, as it can be understood conceptually at different levels. In such cases, it is crucial to specify the conceptual foundation of survey instruments. Unfortunately, often such conceptual foundation is not established in the technical reports of social surveys and research papers that use the data collected in these surveys. For example, some researchers have studied the causes and consequences of social capital at the individual level, but social capital remains at the collective level while only its effects are analyzed on individuals (Brehm and Rahn 1997). With social capital being defined as an individual property, we are now able to examine the items used in general social surveys for measuring social capital and to discuss how much they represent the concept of individual social capital specified above.

Many well known social surveys in Europe and America include items specifically designed for measuring social capital, such as the US General Social Survey (GSS), the European Social Survey (ESS), and the British Household Panel Study (BHPS). It is neither feasible nor necessary to review all survey questions in this section. Fortunately, as researchers have been trying to design survey items that are comparable across nations, the basic components as well as the contents of these items have converged, to a large extent, into a set of widely shared questions. For example, OECD has employed the following as a common definition of social capital: "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Cote and Healy 2001:41). Later, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in the UK has organized a team with the mission of deriving a coherent approach in order to put a stable structure to measurements of social capital

(Harper 2002), who have adopted the OECD definition as the guidance for producing survey items.

Current social surveys have concentrated on five dimensions of social capital. For each dimension, I shall select and discuss some survey questions to illustrate how useful they are for measuring individual social capital as defined before.¹

1. Organizational memberships

BHPS: "Are you currently a member of any of the kinds of organizations on this card? Yes/No. Which ones?" Then sixteen types of organizations are listed.

ESS, Round 1: "For each of the voluntary organisations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last 12 months, and, if so, which", followed by a matrix with twelve types of organizations.

If social capital helps individuals to obtain further benefits, then it should be made clear what benefits organizational memberships provide. Doubtlessly, being a member of a particular organization may be desirable in terms of making new friends, developing a sense of belonging, accumulating work experience, or obtaining supporting references. Note, however, that membership *per se* cannot automatically bring these benefits. As Wollebæ and Selle (2003) have found out, intensive involvement in civic organizations does not help the formation of social capital. This is so very likely because it is the *nature* of the relations between the members that determines whether there are benefits in the first place and, if there are benefits, what they are. Put differently, membership is only a preliminary condition. One may not be able to make new friends if there is a lot of politics going on within the organization, or if the organization discourages members from making things personal. Whether one can obtain the relevant work experience depends on the work assigned and the respondent's relation with his or her supervisor. So is true for getting references. In other words, to eventually obtain the desired benefits, members need to develop a specific relationship with a particular person in the organization. The above questions about organizational participation do not directly measure social capital, although they may serve as the filter for further questions on features of memberships, such as frequency and intensity of involvement.

2. Social networks and support

BHPS (2000): "We would like to ask how often you meet people, whether here at your home or elsewhere. How often do you meet friends or relatives who are not living with you?"

¹ To save space, I shall not reproduce all the categories or options given to respondents.

ESS (2002): "Using this card, how often do you meet *socially* with friends, relatives or work colleagues?" "Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?"

Social networks, often loosely referring to the connections among a group of people, do not necessarily or directly lead to social support. As a matter of fact, social connections can become a liability; at least, resources (time, effort, money, etc.) need to be invested for establishing and maintaining social connections, and there is no guarantee that individuals will earn what they hope to get if they take the networks as a kind of capital. Again, it all depends on the nature of the connections. Sociologists have identified the instrumentality of social networks to obtain other types of benefits, but the facilitating function of social networks relies on what flows through the social ties (Smith-Doerr and Powell 2005; Stinchcombe 1990) not simply the frequency of contacts. Given a relatively fixed amount of capacity of constructing and maintaining social networks, social actors have to balance the dual demands of brokerage and closure of social connections (Burt 2005). Low quality but large number of connections (weak ties) are good at passing information around, while high quality but limited number of connections (strong ties) are expected to provide valuable support (Granovetter 1973; Bian 1997). It is difficult to find instruments in general social surveys, however, that have clearly incorporated these issues. Whilst questions about frequency of being social with friends and participating in social activities, or about having someone as a listener, do measure an aspect of social relations, they barely touch the features of the social networks that individuals can make use of, such as strength, structural positions, and mutual obligations. At best, frequencies of interactions can only be taken as a weak indicator of the strength of the relationship. To truly measure the features of social networks, we firstly need to specify the boundaries of the respondents' networks. With most social surveys' target populations being all adults or households of a nation, it is obvious that the objective is not to map out the respondents' social networks and measure their structural characteristics. Consequently, the social network component of individual social capital remains elusive in general social surveys. If networks with clearly defined boundaries and their related resources are the true targets of measurements, such as the three generators (the *name* generator, McCallister and Fischer 1978; the *position* generator, Lin and Dumin 1986; and the *resource* generator, Snijders 1999; Van der Gaag and Snijders 2003), then individual social capital can only be measured on a limited number of respondents in a small scale survey rather than one at the national level. What general social surveys actually measure is some selected attributes of a particular individual respondent's social relations, not ego networks centred at the respondent.

3. Reciprocity and trust The following question has been used in more than one surveys, including British Social Attitudes Survey (2000) and ESS (2000):

"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"

As mentioned before, this question is very useful for measuring the general feature of social relations between the respondent and the unknown others. In particular, the above question is designed to measure the respondent's perception of the trustworthiness, fairness, and helpfulness of those strangers. The underlying reasoning runs like this: if you think that most of the people that you do not know personally are trustworthy, fair, and helpful, then you shall enjoy a variety of benefits, such as peace of mind and occasional favour without worrying about potential harmful consequences. Coleman's example of a mother with children moving from Detroit to Jerusalem is a well-known example.

What I would like to point out here is the fact that a trusting relationship runs in two opposite directions – how the respondent trusts strangers and how the others trust the respondent as a stranger. Therefore, we can (and should) ask the respondent whether most people trust him or her: "*How much do you think people on the street trust you?*" Such self-assessment of trustworthiness reflects the perceived social capital at the respondent's disposal. The main benefit of being trusted by strangers (the general others) is a higher rate of success in asking for their help.

4. Participation in civic institutions and activities

Citizen Audit Questionnaire (2001): "During the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence rules, laws or policies? And would you do any of the following to influence rules, laws or policies?" Seventeen actions are offered, including contacting a politician, signing petition, etc.

ESS (2002): "There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?" Ten actions are listed.

These questions are hardly in line with the logic of how individual social capital works. First of all, if social capital has to reside in a collective entity, then nowhere can we find the entity in the above questions. One cannot help wondering what social groups or networks these questions are referring to when they ask the respondents how confident they are about parliament, police, or the government, how often they contact their political representatives, or whether they think they have the ability to influence politics. These are essentially individual perceptions and behaviours that are not related to any clearly specified collective entity. It is even more difficult to find the shared norms or values, if there is any, carried by the group or network. According to the definition of individual social capital derived in this paper – features of social relations accessible and useful for individuals

Table 1: Features of social relations and themes in the measurement of social capital

Features	Organizational participation	Social networks	Trust and reciprocity	Civic participation	Perception of local area
Basic	Use as filter	Use as filter	NR ^a	NR	NR
Specific	Specify relations and benefits	Complement ^c	Specify relations and benefits	NR	NR
Generalized	NR	NR	Specify generalized trust	Specify relations and benefits	Specify relations and benefits
Structural	NC ^b	NC	NC	NC	NC

^a not relevant

^b not containing

^c with items in separate surveys

to achieve their interests, these questions should be modified with an aim of reflecting the logic of social capital as a mechanism for bringing interests to the individual. One plausible reason for taking civic participation as social capital may run as follows: the collective entity is the whole nation, and the expected benefits shall be desired new policies as an outcome of the attitudes and behaviours. If this is what dictates the design of these items in social surveys, then social capital is the operation of the political system because it is the political system that links the individual behaviours together.

5. Perceptions of the local area

BHPS (2000): "Overall, do you like living in this neighbourhood?" Followed by a series of questions soliciting the respondent's ratings of different aspects of the local area, including crime, hygiene, health, education, safety, facilities, etc.

Questions about views of physical environment and facilities in the area hardly fit any definition of social capital – they are not about social groups or networks, nor are they related to norms and values. On the other hand, items about enjoyment of living in the area, fear of crimes, etc., do pertain to the respondent's relationship with others in the same area, but in an indirect way, thus adding an element of uncertainty to the measurement. For example, even if a respondent enjoys living in the neighbourhood, that does not necessarily come from a higher level of generalized trust of the neighbours because other factors, such as familiarity with the area, may come into play. I think that these questions have a large overlap with the third category as they are all about mutual perceptions and trust.

Summary

In light of the scheme proposed in the previous section for analyzing features of social relations, the main points of the above review can be summarized in a table (see Table 1).

The rows of the table refer to the four categories of features of social relations, and the columns are the five

themes most commonly used in social surveys. The cells with 'NR', shorthand for 'not relevant', indicate the lack of connection between the feature and the theme. For example, survey items about trust and reciprocity, civic participation, and perception of local area do not address the basic features of social relations. Similarly, civic participation and perception of local area are not relevant for studying specific features of social relations; organizational participation and social networks are not relevant for generalized features. Finally, as indicated before, most social surveys do not contain ('NC' for 'not containing') items on structural features of social capital.

When a theme does measure a group of features of social relations, I have inserted a brief suggestion in the cell. First, survey items about organizational participation and social networks are designed to measure the basic features of social relations, but researchers should keep in mind that they are only preliminary and should be used as filtering questions for further analysis. Second, items on participation in organizations, networks and trust have measured specific features of social relations, but these items need to be improved by specifying the relationship between the respondent and the participating organization, network or any social group, so that we can obtain a clear sense of how social capital works in a particular situation. Third, the same should be done for the three themes that measure the generalized features of social relations, namely trust, civic participation and perception of local area. Newly developed insights in the growing literature on generalized exchange in sociology and psychology (Bearman 1997; Molm 2003; Takahashi 2000; Yamagishi and Cook 1993) should be exploited for designing these items.

Researchers should pay special attention to survey items on social networks and become aware of the distinction between two types of measurements, one on the number and strength of ties and the other on the positional features in social structures. As the last row in the table shows, items in general social surveys are not effectively designed to measure structural features of social networks (centrality, cohesiveness, structural balance and equivalence, etc.). I have

therefore suggested that these items be designed for measuring a specific network, and we should explore how best to incorporate the results from this kind of surveys in those from general social surveys.

Concluding remarks

Social capital can be an individual asset and should be explicitly studied as such. The soundness of individualizing social capital comes from the premise that it is individuals who employ social capital as a means for achieving an end. As a social science concept, individual social capital emphasizes the active role of individual social actors rather than the constraining effects of social structures. Whether such notion follows the rational choice theory is not a matter of concern, because, just as rationality itself, individual social capital has now become a variable rather than a predetermined attribute. Furthermore, the value of this variable is inherently dependent upon characteristics of the social community or network. What survey researchers should measure and explain is the variation of individual social capital.

It seems that items in current social surveys, albeit sharing some common themes, have not been constructed with a clear objective of purporting a specific notion of social capital. It is understandable that survey researchers have tried to offer something suitable for as many research purposes as possible, but by doing so the distinctive features of the concept to be measured run the risk of getting lost. The conceptual difficulty has largely stemmed from the tension between social capital naturally understood as a collective property on the one hand, and survey items administered, also naturally, on individual respondents on the other hand. This conceptual versus practical contention may also explain the lack of survey items on the structural features of social relations in general social surveys; these items are most likely to appear in surveys specifically designed for mapping out social networks.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the First Conference of European Survey Research Association, 16-23 July 2005, Barcelona, Spain. I would like to thank Mariano Torcal, Yaojun Li, the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of Survey Research Methodology for their thoughtful comments. All errors, of course, are mine.

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