3. On the costs of conceptualizing social ties as social capital

Robert M. Fishman

I offer in this chapter a friendly, yet emphatic, critique of a term—and concept—that serves to animate and draw attention to much work that I admire and from which a great deal can be learned. In the pages that follow I elaborate a series of rather substantial and interrelated costs of conceptualizing social ties as ‘social capital’ (hereinafter, SC), costs that—I contend—impinge upon our ability to understand empirical reality. This critique is intended to be friendly, for I thoroughly share the commitment of SC theorists to identify and account for positive outcomes that can be attributed to social ties and tie-supporting norms. Indeed, in the closing section of this chapter, I offer a theoretical claim intended to enhance our ability to locate just such positive effects of social connections, but I propose to do so in a way that underscores differences, rather than commonalities, in the causal impact of social relations and norms.

I argue that despite the admirable quality of much work done within the SC framework, this school’s conceptualization and labeling of useful social ties, and related norms, SC detracts from the collective explanatory efforts of social scientists and introduces unnecessary confusion into scholarly discourse. I acknowledge that the term draws attention to important findings but argue that such attention comes at a price and that it detracts from social scientists’ pursuit of their most fundamental goals: explanation and conceptual understanding.

The critique developed in this chapter represents an elaboration of an argument I first offered in Democracy’s Voices, a book that argues for the ability of boundary-crossing social ties and conversations to reshape public life in a way that enhances democratic quality. In that book I examine—and reject—the possibility that the SC approach provides a more useful framework than the analysis of particular types of ties for exploring the impact of social connections and conversations. In this essay I extend that earlier argument by reviewing evidence from recent scholarship, taking up the loose metaphor-only version of SC scholarship, and offering a positive case
for the benefits of conceptualizing useful social ties through at least two analytical prisms – rather than just one.

I ask readers to accept just one fundamental methodological and theoretical assumption: that the mere formulation and elaboration of a concept does not by itself establish whether it usefully reflects – or promotes the study of – underlying empirical reality. Indeed, the scholarly effort to determine whether concepts are useful or counterproductive stands as an important task for social scientific progress. This assumption, and the related claim (which readers may or may not fully accept) that concepts in and of themselves are not real things, but rather intellectual constructs that must be judged precisely on the basis of their usefulness for answering meaningful questions about reality, represent a constitutive element of the Weberian approach to social science to which I subscribe. Although I have avoided the use of quotation marks around the term SC in all but a few places, I do ask readers to leave open the question of whether the term is a fruitful or confusing way of understanding the empirical realities that we all seek to capture, and in that sense I invite readers mentally to place quotation marks around the term.

I argue that unlocking the enormous (but multifaceted) causal force of social connections – as modern sociology, much contemporary political science, scholars in other fields and theoretical precursors such as de Toqueville have sought to do – requires us to differentiate among types of connections and types of effects. There is a strong basis in scholarly works, both classic and contemporary, for distinguishing among types of ties – and their effects. Indeed, empirical studies are replete with instances of precisely such differences, the most widely recognized modern classic on this point being the pioneering scholarship of Mark Granovetter on the dissimilar labor market impact of strong and weak ties. The broader importance of searching for the dissimilar effects of social relations is nicely captured by Barry Wellman’s compelling formulation: ‘Which types of ties and networks give what kinds of social support?’ Yet despite abundant evidence that differing forms of social connection do generate quite dissimilar consequences, the concept I critique may encourage scholars and readers of their work – to conceive of social connections and tie-supporting norms as constituting one undifferentiated ‘stock’ or amount of SC that can be measured by a single metric and that exerts one overarching effect characterized by its underlying similarity in disparate arenas or settings.

One purely terminological issue merits brief attention: the use of the term SC typically rests on a series of distinctions that for some, such as Elinor Ostrom in her stimulating formulation in this volume, begin with ‘physical capital’, which is taken to represent the most common sense in which the term ‘capital’ is employed. However, it is not clear that the
conventional understanding of capital can be fully reduced to 'physical capital'. Capital in its standard sense embraces some items — such as financial instruments — that have a value not primarily reflective of their qualities as physical things. However, such items, along with physical resources, do have an economic exchange value, thus providing capital in its basic sense with an important property, fungibility, which allows us to measure meaningfully the total amount of capital possessed by an individual or collective entity. For these reasons, I prefer to understand capital in its most conventional sense as economic, rather than simply physical, capital. Scholars have formulated a series of other 'capitals' — cultural, social, political and more recently spiritual — as theoretical tools thought to promote scientific explanation, but whether these conceptual adaptations of capital really do facilitate our ability to identify and understand causal dynamics in spheres other than the economic market requires serious attention, which is precisely the point of this discussion.

This chapter's critique is not equally applicable to all currents within the SC approach. I first examine both the allure and the significant pitfalls of the most extreme, or 'more-than-metaphor', version of SC theory which takes social connections and related norms to be strongly similar to economic capital. This perspective assumes that individuals and social aggregates — be they firms, local communities, countries or some other collective entity — possess a total 'stock' or amount of SC that can be meaningfully measured and which exerts a generalized positive effect on the pursuit of myriad objectives. Some, but not all, scholars operating within this framework assume that SC, like economic capital, should be understood as an investment that is made by actors instrumentally pursuing the positive benefits that can be predicted to follow from the growth of their total stock of SC. If valid, this approach would vastly facilitate the study and understanding of social ties and trust, for it offers the promise of providing one unified metric and conceptual lens for studying a wide array of effects that scholars have studied separately. Yet by the same token, if not valid, this approach presents scholars with major impediments to the pursuit of their explanatory objectives.

Secondly I examine the appeal and the much more limited costs of adopting a looser 'metaphor-only' understanding of SC. This perspective takes social ties and trust to be similar enough to economic capital to render the term SC suggestively useful, yet dissimilar enough to require a conceptual apparatus and methodology fundamentally unlike those appropriate for the study of economic capital. This approach does pursue some useful distinctions among types of ties and effects. If we could easily limit the use of the term and concept to this loose metaphor-only sense in which one argues that the causal force of social connections or norms is somewhat
Costs of conceptualizing social ties as social capital?

(but not precisely or measurably) akin to economic capital, many of the objections presented in this essay would vanish. But such a restriction is unlikely to prevail, even though some scholars clearly do limit their own use of the term to this diffuse sense. By its very nature, the metaphor of capital, when used to conceptualize the causal force of social connections, encourages those who employ it to pursue a strong — more than mere metaphor — theory. Moreover, I argue that even the loose metaphor-only sense of SC, despite its surface appeal, can generate unnecessary confusion and may actually distract our focus from some important explanatory challenges.

Thirdly, I present a theoretical rationale and empirical support for examining the causal impact of social connections through more than one conceptual prism, and I argue that the study of social ties and their causal impact proves most fruitful precisely when such analytical distinctions are pursued. Finally I place this critique within the theoretical perspective that animates it, namely the Weberian approach to social science.

THE MORE-THAN-METAPHOR SOCIAL CAPITAL APPROACH AND ITS PITFALLS

If the effects of social connections, and norms supportive of such connections, can be usefully understood as constituting one more or less cohesive and measurable underlying phenomenon that proves relevant for analyzing disparate human endeavors, the theory and terminology of social capital are thoroughly validated. If this condition held, it would be preferable to view specific types of ties and associated norms as mere manifestations — and components — of a deeper underlying reality, namely the total pool of SC held by an individual or collective entity. Much scholarship makes essentially this assumption, and treats specific types of social relations and/or trust as mere data points in the operationalization of what is taken to be a meaningful and more general phenomenon conceptualized as total SC and represented in one summary measure. Network ties, associational membership, attitudes of trust and much more are used to calculate a generalized measure of SC which, in the extreme, may then be viewed by some scholars as more real than any of its components taken on their own.

This approach — which essentially forfeits the opportunity to examine the specific causal impact of each type of tie, and instead calculates a summary measure of total SC — poses numerous problems. These problems include methodological and theoretical drawbacks as well as the overwhelming weight of a great deal of empirical evidence on the wide range of variation in the causal dynamics manifested by differing social ties and norms. Perhaps the most fundamental difficulty concerns the viability of
constructing one summary measure of total SC, as practitioners of the more-than-metaphor approach frequently attempt. If a summary measure is to be calculated we require some unified metric for assigning weights to all those social relations and norms held to contribute to SC. In the absence of such a unified metric it is difficult to see how we can meaningfully assign actors or collective entities with a total score, an overall stock, of SC.

In addressing this point we encounter a fundamental contrast between social relations and economic capital. The economic resources of a firm or individual can be assigned monetary values allowing one to construct an overall measure of value. Granted, even economic capital proves difficult to measure in a fully satisfactory way: some of the resources possessed by economic actors are more readily exchangeable than others, and measures of a firm’s worth – such as its capitalization and its book value – may diverge substantially from one another. Yet despite all the difficulties involved in assessing a firm’s or an individual’s total stock of capital, it remains the case that monetary values and market exchanges do provide us with a plausible basis for constructing summary measures of wealth and value. There is no plausibly equivalent metric for assessing the total ‘social wealth’ of an individual or a collective actor. One cannot exchange family ties for professional connections, or the reverse, and trust cannot be bought, sold or mechanically exchanged.

Yet is there another available metric for assigning weights to particular social connections or norms, in the effort to construct a summary measure of SC? Is there any alternative to relying on exchange value, an approach which appears to be thoroughly implausible given that in the modern world social relations are not exchangeable on the market? Two alternatives appear worthy of some consideration, but they lead us in rather different directions. We could assess the contribution of specific social connections to an actor’s presumed total stock of SC by attempting to ascertain the exchange value of information or resources obtained through the tie in question. Alternatively we could assess the opportunity cost of building and sustaining the same ties. The time and effort involved could conceivably be captured through focused research instruments. However, this dual strategy does not prove to be compelling, for the two approaches would often yield quite different scores, thus placing in question the validity of both. The value of resources which can be said to flow through ties is only imperfectly (and often indirectly) related to the energy and intentions involved in constructing those ties; many positive rewards that flow to those with (certain types of) social ties have been shown to be second-order consequences or by-products of social relations established for other reasons.

The seeming impossibility of generating a meaningful summary measure of ‘total SC’ raises serious doubts about the conceptual commitment to
Costs of conceptualizing social ties as social capital?

viewing social relations and norms as constituting one undifferentiated overall amount. Yet this is not the most weighty objection to the view that individuals and collective entities hold an overall stock of SC. Perhaps the greatest problem posed by this approach concerns its failure to capture the multiple causal logics manifested in the diverging consequences of different types of social ties.

Given that the components used to calculate an overall measure of SC generate quite different causal outcomes – and often fail to covary with one another – as much research shows, it follows that in this instance the explanatory power of the ‘whole’, which is to say any given summary measure of SC, is actually lesser than that of the sum of its parts. As Stephen Smith and Jessica Kulnych note in their critical essay on SC: ‘the terminology of social capital oversimplifies the character of such relationships and actually obscures the vast differences in their effects’. Trying to capture the causal impact of particular types of social relations through a conceptual lens that focuses in undifferentiated fashion on the sum total of all social relations is highly counterproductive.

This is why some SC theorists do introduce distinctions within the large set of phenomena they label with this term, and when they do so the explanatory benefits of such distinctions become clear. For example, in Chapter 4 of this book, John Helliwell and his collaborators Haifang Huang and Robert Putnam find that domain-specific measures of trust offer stronger predictions than a generalized trust measure in the search for determinants of workplace well-being. Moreover, the domain-specific variables differ in their explanatory power, with workplace trust holding the greatest predictive power.

The number of types of social connections and related norms (such as trust) that have been presented by scholars as instances of SC – and that have been included in general measures of total SC – is quite large; the list of component indicators varies quite substantially from one researcher to another. In light of this vast diversity it should come as no surprise that SC researchers have often encountered substantial dissimilarities across time and cases in the level obtained by the alleged components of total SC and in the directionality of their change. For example, trust may decline while associational membership holds steady, and other disparities in the evolution of phenomena thought to form part of SC have also been found. Furthermore, some seemingly straightforward indicators, such as associational membership, may mask causally relevant distinctions among changing forms of group membership in contemporary societies. The degree of interaction among members of associations is highly variable. If all SC indicators exerted exactly the same causal impact – or if the explanatory power of each such indicator could be assigned a given weight that
remained constant for all those causal processes we wish to understand – differences in the pattern and direction of change in SC components would not be of major scientific concern. Yet that is not the case. The differing causal consequences of diverse types of ties and norms render highly questionable any summary measure that rests on components that vary at least somewhat independently of one another.

The more-than-metaphor understanding of SC also encourages some scholars to conceptualize all useful ties and norms as the fruit of instrumentally oriented investment-like behavior thought to have established and sustained those ties and norms. This analytical prism seems to hold considerable logic if one adopts the SC framework as one's approach for studying beneficial effects of social relations. After all, if social connections and trust are simply one form of capital, why not assume that they rest on the same sort of calculations that underpin the growth of economic capital? Yet even one of the founding theorists of the SC school, James Coleman, argued explicitly against the assumption that the usefulness of social relations need necessarily reflect prior efforts and calculations specifically designed to produce such beneficial effects. The evidence against this assumption is too strong to sustain such a claim, at least in its most extreme form. Indeed, many useful consequences of social relations have been shown to be by-products of connections initially established for other reasons, thus rendering the instrumental-investment prism insufficient (but not always inaccurate) as a guide to understanding fully the force of social relations. The decision to label social relations as a form of capital and to discuss social dynamics in the language of economics tends to privilege an analytical prism that is helpful for understanding some – but not all – useful ties and norms.

Enthusiasts of the more-than-metaphor usage of SC might well respond that the pitfalls outlined here are all avoidable. Surely it is true that many SC theorists are aware of at least some distinctions to be made in the effects that flow from ties. Moreover, numerous SC scholars explicitly avoid the restrictive instrumentalism-only view of social relations. In his monumentally important study of the decline in civic engagement and sociability in the United States, the distinguished SC scholar Robert Putnam does differentiate between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ SC, thus offering a case in point of the openness of some within this school to the study of differences among types of ties. Nonetheless, the more-than-metaphor approach, by its very nature, encourages scholars to calculate and discuss summary measures of total SC, as Putnam himself does after introducing that distinction. Some SC scholars may exclude certain types of social linkages from their summary measures – and conceptualizations – as in the case of Putnam’s convincing exclusion of vertical clientelistic ties in his study of
the civic foundations of effective democracy. Yet in a sense, specific exclusions serve only to underscore the broader case against a summary measure composed of dissimilar components.

To a somewhat lesser degree, the strong version of SC theory may also encourage scholars to embrace fully the exclusively instrumentalist view of social relations that lies closest to the analytical prism appropriate for understanding economic investments. Thus in various ways, scholarly efforts and attention are diverted from the necessary search for explanations resting on distinctions among social connections, such as the difference between ties that are constructed and valued for instrumental reasons centered on the external consequences of the social relations in question and other ties that participants establish and take to be meaningful because of their intrinsic qualities.

THE METAPHOR-ONLY UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Many if not all the objections I have presented thus far would appear to diminish in magnitude or even disappear entirely if references to SC could be understood to constitute nothing more than a suggestive but quite inexact metaphor. This is the approach taken in practice by those SC scholars who differentiate among types of social relations in their analysis while also eschewing any effort to calculate a total pool of SC. Ronald Burt in his sociological tour de force, *Brokerage and Closure*, is quite explicit in his adherence to such a metaphor-only understanding. Indeed he notes that ‘the concept begins as a metaphor about advantage’. Instead of attempting to theorize an underlying – and measurable – causal unity encompassing all instances of social relational advantage, he focuses on two structurally distinct forms of such advantage that he labels ‘brokerage’ and ‘closure’. On the basis of a thorough review of empirical evidence and a wide-ranging theoretical synthesis, Burt shows how two very different forms of network-based advantage – leading to different types of benefits – rest on: (1) facilitating a connection between otherwise unrelated social worlds (that is, brokerage); and (2) strengthening social relations within relatively closed worlds (that is, closure). This theoretical framework proves highly successful in identifying and making sense out of important forms of advantage rooted in structured social relations. Moreover it avoids the (counterproductive) attempt to calculate an overall stock of socially rooted advantage possessed by individuals or collective actors.

Does this metaphor-only approach succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of the more-than-metaphor usage? Certainly, to some degree the answer to that
question must be affirmative, but that does not mean that this looser understanding of SC is without its own costs. Burt articulates his SC framework around precisely the sort of distinction among types of ties and effects that this chapter advocates – and which would be masked by limiting analysis to one undifferentiated conception of all useful social connections. But by placing the discussion of brokerage and closure on the terminological terrain of SC his analysis may inadvertently create conditions that inhibit the collective pursuit of scientific clarity and accumulation; the metaphor of capital, based as it is on a scientific concept, encourages many scholars to attempt a more-than-metaphor formulation. As Burt himself acknowledges: ‘Clear-thinking observers can be frustrated with the vagaries of social capital left as a metaphor. Social capital is the Wild West of academic work. There are no skill or intellectual barriers to entry.’ Many scholars will find it inherently frustrating to limit the understanding of SC to that of a loose metaphor based on a hard concept (that is, economic capital) rather than pursuing a theoretical elaboration far more precise than any loose metaphor can be. If the usefulness of social connections is to be discussed through a metaphor provided by the allusion to economic capital, why not attempt to formulate a theorization of SC as conceptually parsimonious and as amenable to measurement as economic capital?

Thus the metaphor-only approach, compelling as it may seem, leaves the scholarly field with a massive unresolved tension between rather broadly shared aspirations for a parsimonious and undifferentiated conceptualization (and measurable operationalization) of all network-based advantage, and the reality that such aspirations cannot be persuasively met. The result is both unnecessary terminological confusion and a fair bit of work (often by superb scholars) that searches for a fountain of wisdom – in the form of a cohesive understanding of all beneficial social connections – which cannot be found, and which undervalues the search for the many sources of more delimited social knowledge remaining to be discovered. Needless to say, this state of affairs is counterproductive for the scientific enterprise. The Wild West, if we adopt Burt’s imagery, hardly seems the most promising model for scientific discourse and advancement. Burt himself appears ambivalent about the conceptual and terminological anarchy that ensues, remarking that ‘The variety is as interesting and exciting as it is corrosive to cumulative work.’ The metaphor-only understanding cannot easily command and channel most of the scholarly discourse that takes place on a terminological terrain which encourages a parsimonious overarching understanding of all beneficial social relations, that is to say, a more-than-metaphor usage of SC.

Yet even if, against all odds, the metaphor-only approach came to be the only understanding of SC in scientific usage, it would still entail some costs
for scholarly investigation, albeit far smaller ones than those posed by the more expansive understanding of the term. I argue below that a fully adequate understanding of the enormous array of consequences that flow from diverse patterns of social relations requires us to adopt multiple analytical prisms. I contend that at least one analytical lens quite helpful for examining some social connections – and their consequences – highlights processes that are so far removed from the workings of economic capital as to render them almost inconceivable from the standpoint of analysis shaped by the metaphor of capital. The metaphor of capital does succeed in underscoring, and drawing attention to, the magnitude of the ‘pay-off’ to be obtained by taking seriously the causal consequences of social ties and norms. But that metaphor encourages scholars to look for parallels of social life to economic capital far greater than what the evidence can sustain, and in the process it distracts much attention from important questions – and crucial distinctions – concerning exactly how and where social relations generate important consequences. Moreover, despite the exemplary scholarly quality of much work carried on under the SC banner, and the undeniable significance of many findings conveyed in that work, unsolvable disagreements over how to conceptualize and operationalize SC lead to unnecessary confusion. Even at its best the SC approach to the study of social relations and norms carries meaningful costs for the scientific enterprise.

**PRISMS FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS – AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

This chapter’s argument heavily emphasizes differences among types of ties and effects, a perspective on social relations that I now amplify. I argue that social connections are understood by their participants – and should be studied by social scientists – through more than one analytical prism. A lengthy and distinguished tradition in the study of social connections seeks to understand them by focusing on their structural, or relational, configuration. From this network-based standpoint, the most central feature of ties is to be found in their placement within the overall pattern of social relations that prevails in a population. Burt’s distinction between brokerage and closure is a prime example of such an approach. With a foundation in this structural study of network connections, many analysts move on to examine the implications of one or another pattern of connection for the flow of resources and information. Without undervaluing this approach, I argue for the parallel importance of another gestalt for understanding social connections, one that helps to
illuminate some – but not all – social connections that carry significant causal consequences.

Most crucially, I insist that the location of social connections in the overall network structure of a population does not presuppose the content of the social interactions in question or the meaning ascribed to them by the actors involved. Whereas some ties are most usefully understood through a prism that emphasizes their placement in extensive network structures (and the role of the ties in promoting social processes such as resource or information flows extending well beyond direct dyadic – that is, two-way – connections), other ties are more usefully understood through a prism that emphasizes the intrinsic importance and meaning that participants place on their direct dyadic interactions.

The theoretical distinction I emphasize here counterposes those ties that are understood by their participants fundamentally as means to obtain an end or ends external to the direct dyadic social interaction with others that are valued intrinsically by their participants. The contrast between instrumentally focused action and action rooted in a sense of its intrinsic merit is a fundamental element of the Weberian approach to sociology but its relevance for the study of social ties and their impact has been underdeveloped. With a foundation in my own empirical findings in Democracy's Voices and recent work by other scholars, I argue that culturally or subculturally rooted practices and meanings surrounding social ties help to determine whether given ties are best understood through a lens focused on their external network-based instrumentality or one emphasizing their intrinsic interactive worth. Moreover, as we shall see, those ties that are embedded in actor understandings emphasizing the external network-based instrumentality offered by dyadic linkages – which is to say, the indirect access to distant resources and power opened up by such linkages – may hold a weaker ability to generate certain positive outcomes than ties rooted in very different actor understandings.

To specify further, there may be elements of instrumentality present in ties that are valued intrinsically, but in such cases the goals pursued by participants are internal to the interaction in question and not (as in the opposing case) external resources to which the participants hope to gain access by cultivating the tie. Two simple illustrations help to make the point: a student may value interaction with a teacher because she or he enjoys learning (and assumes it likely to be of use at some point), thus placing intrinsic importance on the student–teacher relation, or because the student believes that the teacher stands as an influential gatekeeper controlling access to external opportunities and resources such as future employment, even if he or she does not enjoy or care about learning. Similarly, an employee in a medium-sized company may value interaction with his or her immediate
supervisor as enjoyable conversation and also as an opportunity to learn useful lessons from the supervisor or, alternatively, may value that interaction only as a conduit to resources that the employee hopes to obtain through the intermediary (network-activating) role of the supervisor.

Of course, in reality these possibilities are not mutually exclusive. My objective here is to introduce opposing ideal types even though much empirical reality may be located somewhere between these two theoretical poles. To reiterate the main point: the distinction I draw focuses not on the presence or absence of instrumental motives but instead on the way in which participants value and understand their direct social interactions, as a means to obtain access to resources made available through the network linkages of their dyadic partners or as intrinsically valuable (and/or useful) interactive experiences. Crucially, I also argue that the causal impact of ties may vary as a function of this distinction, and that for certain ends, ties that are intrinsically valued as interaction may prove more powerful in their ability to reshape outcomes than ties constructed and understood through an external-instrumentalist prism that focuses on access to goods outside the direct interaction.

Moreover, this distinction can be drawn, and may prove causally decisive, for social ties that seem more or less indistinguishable from one another from a purely structuralist perspective that emphasizes only the pattern of network linkages. From this chapter's perspective, the meaning that those involved place on ties proves decisive. Thus I emphasize the conceptual and explanatory significance of a distinction among types of ties that the SC approach, even in its metaphor-only version, would be unlikely to take note of. After all, capital is to be understood through the development of future wealth that it facilitates, and not through the intrinsic value that some may place on their riches. Ties that involve interactions which are valued intrinsically, and not as a means to obtain external resources (embedded in networks to which the ties provide access), are best understood through an analytic prism far removed from the capital metaphor, but for certain ends they prove more powerful than those ties best understood through a network-based prism focusing on structurally determined access to resources external to the direct dyadic ties. The extent to which ties shape at least some meaningful outcomes is not a function of the degree to which the ties fit the metaphor of capital— even in the loosest sense.

There is much evidence in favor of the proposition that social ties can and should be understood not only from the perspective of their placement in network structures but also from the standpoint of their actual content, the nature of what goes on in the interactions in question, and the meaning placed on those relations by participants. The important findings of Bearman and Parigi show that the conversational themes articulated in
social relations and thought to be important by contemporary Americans are enormously varied, encompassing many topics—often far removed from instrumental matters or strategies—and that the simple existence of network ties does not fully determine whether those ties will take the form of conversations which their participants think of as important.\(^\text{19}\) Evidence culled from several centuries of Japanese history by Eiko Ikegami in her important recent book, *Bonds of Civility*,\(^\text{20}\) analyzes the emergence of wide-ranging cultural associations and ties that were valued by their participants on the basis of the intrinsic content of the aesthetically oriented activity taking place. She shows that these ties, and the network revolution they represented, ushered in new forms of expression and social connectedness with carry-over consequences for the political system. Aesthetically oriented ties facilitated social contacts among individuals from disparate positions in social hierarchies, and they did so without centering these interactions on status-oriented strategies and goals external to the cultural content of the ties. In both of these cases, the significance that participants place on interactions and the content of the interactions cannot be mechanically read from a purely relational characterization of the ties. Ties may (or may not) be valued, instead, on the basis of the direct dyadic interactions that characterize them.

My own work in *Democracy’s Voices* makes a case for the explanatory significance of a distinction based precisely on the extent to which ties are valued either for their intrinsic dynamics or as a means to obtain access to external power-based resources. The data and analysis presented in that book show that boundary-crossing ties between intellectuals and workers hold the ability to reshape democratic discourse in important ways, but that this capacity is contingent on just the sort of distinction outlined above. The empirical findings of my survey analysis and qualitative fieldwork establish that, in at least one politically defined subculture, boundary-crossing ties hold an extraordinary ability to reshape the discursive horizons of local communities—and as a result, the broader quality of public life in democracy—but that structurally similar ties in another politically defined subculture thoroughly lack such an ability to reshape public discourse.

On the basis of those empirical findings about the causal strength of social ties in one subculture—contrasted with their relative impotence in another subculture—I develop the broader theoretical claim that ‘ties-as-conversation’ hold the ability to reshape the discursive practice of their participants, with fundamental carry-over significance for public life, whereas ‘ties-as-brokerage’ lack that ability. The ties took the form of ‘conversation’ where subculturally based understandings encouraged participants to view interactions between workers and intellectuals as intrinsically valuable. In that setting, listening, as well as speaking, came to be a highly valued
component of interactions. Such conversational ties vastly increased the likelihood that local leaders and their communities would articulate their interests through ‘globalizing discursive horizons’ of interest to a national audience instead of through narrow defensive localism. Where boundary-crossing ties took the form of ‘brokerage’ facilitating access to otherwise unavailable external resources, or sources of power, they lacked such an ability. In both instances the ties in question connected dissimilar social worlds, but whether that connection can best be understood as brokerage or conversation proved to vary by subculture. Thus I argue that for certain important concerns, such as shaping the quality of democratic public life, ties-as-conversation, which can only be fully understood through an analytic prism emphasizing the intrinsic value of direct interaction, hold far greater causal weight than ties-as-brokerage, which are to be understood through an analytic prism emphasizing the access they offer to otherwise unattainable network-based sources of power or resources.

This distinction builds on a great deal of excellent conceptual work by social scientists and on careful empirical investigation, but the effort to differentiate between ties best understood through one analytic prism and those most readily understood through a quite dissimilar prism does not reflect currently predominant approaches and it runs directly counter to the spirit of work, shaped by the metaphor of capital, which searches for underlying unity in the causal logics underpinning the impact of ties and norms. This chapter argues that just such distinctions are required if we are to uncover fully the explanatory significance of social connections. All ties can be placed analytically in network structures (shaping access to more or less distant resources) and all ties do involve at least minimal conversational interaction, but the extent to which any given dyadic social tie is primarily understood by its participants and can be usefully read by scholars through one of these prisms or the other is highly variable from case to case, and this variation proves to have important causal consequences.

This is not the place to examine the dynamics shaping actor understandings of their ties, which is to say determining whether they best fit one prism or the other. However, it is possible to suggest the following. Culturally or subculturally based understandings of ties appear to be crucial in shaping the meanings and practices that actors adopt, but the magnitude of the incentives available to those who do make use of network ties primarily to increase their access to external resources is also surely relevant.

The framework I propose searches for scientifically relevant distinctions among types of social connections, and underscores the considerable causal force – for at least some purposes – of those ties that are valued as intrinsically worthwhile interactions and that are not primarily seen by their
participants as brokerage-like avenues to influence and power-based resources. A good deal of important recent work at the intersection of political and cultural sociology is consonant with this claim. The aesthetic networks richly analyzed by Ikegami are a powerful example of social relations built on the basis of the intrinsic meaning placed on interactions, and yet these interactions were capable of generating wide-ranging second-order consequences for the larger social and political order. Paul Lichterman’s compelling analysis of the varying ability of church groups to bridge social divisions in the contemporary United States identifies as a source of special power to do so the extent to which such groups treat their interactions reflexively, examining their own conduct and experiences self-critically. Again, the intrinsic importance placed on interactions themselves proves to be a source of strength in stitching together boundary-crossing social connections of societal significance. Gianpaolo Baiocchi’s skillful examination of the broad socio-political significance of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil notes the limitations of community activists who perceived participatory institutions only as avenues to secure particular resources, and the strength of (frequently poor) activists who developed within those institutions a discourse of the common good emphasizing general civic purposes. In this instance, different groups of activists articulated their socio-political engagement around relatively dissimilar prisms emphasizing either localistic access to external resources or overarching civic commitments that valued the intrinsic worth of participation. In all of these recent studies, distinctions similar to those emphasized by this chapter prove highly useful for scholarly analysis. Social engagements focused on the intrinsic value of interactions, connections and discussion hold considerable power, but they are not best understood through the metaphor of capital.

CONCLUSION

Nothing argued above is intended to place exclusive explanatory and theoretical weight on interactions conceived primarily as intrinsically meaningful, or to undervalue the importance of those network-based understandings of social relations that focus instead on access to more or less distant resources and on the advantages provided (or denied) by one’s relational location. A fully adequate understanding of social relations and their causal impact requires us to employ both prisms and to examine their relative explanatory relevance in differing settings and for predicting different desired outcomes. But this claim is not intended to represent an all-encompassing approach to the study of social ties; it is offered here as one example of the sort of
distinction that scholars can usefully develop and deploy in the search for an understanding of empirical reality. The push for excessive theoretical parsimony – or, worse still, the tendency to reify concepts – can only get in the way of an adequate understanding of empirical reality, as the Weberian perspective insists. The Weberian approach to social science, as I understand it, abhors essentialisms of all sorts – be they economic, cultural, social relational or otherwise – and instead builds its explanations on the embrace of a series of seeming tensions or intellectual oppositions. This approach treats distinctions between seemingly contradictory causal logics and social processes as potentially fruitful in the search for understanding of an empirical world more complex than any one theoretical claim can fully capture on its own.

The perspective that animates this chapter values those concepts proven to be useful, but in the tradition of Weber understands even those concepts to be inherently limited. This perspective pursues the explanatory usefulness of embracing conceptual tension and of recognizing the inherent complexity of the empirical world. The promise of conceptual and terminological order seemingly provided by the SC school exerts a powerful attraction on many of the very best minds in the social sciences, but any embrace of the metaphor of capital for understanding social relations comes at a certain cost for it discourages scholars from delineating and exploring distinctions crucial for an adequate understanding of processes and outcomes in the world around us.

NOTES

1. For very useful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter I wish to thank Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Viva Bartkus, Erika Summers Effler, Jaume Lopez, Julia Lopez, Paul Lichterman and Jaime Ros.
5. Money may be taken as the metric by which economic capital can be measured and exchanged but there is scholarly controversy over the extent to which money is fully fungible. See the important analysis by Viviana Zelizer (1994), The Social Meaning of Money.
6. I am indebted to Thomas Miley for insisting on this point in discussions after a seminar in which I presented an earlier version of this argument at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona).
7. For an interpretation and defense of the Weberian methodological perspective, see Fishman (2007).
9. Also see Helliwell and Huang (2005).
Overview

15. Ibid, p. 4.
17. Ibid.
18. For pioneering work in this tradition see White et al. (1976).

A great deal of work has sought to develop and put to use the concept of brokerage. For important theoretical statements, see the previously cited work of Burt, as well as Gould and Fernandez (1989). On conversations and interactions themselves as the basis of network relations, and for a careful review of relevant literature, see the theoretically rich analysis of Ann Mische (2003). For important theorizations of the interface between culture and social relations see Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) and Lizardo (2006).

REFERENCES


Emirbayer, Mustafa and Jeff Goodwin (1994), ‘Network analysis, culture and the problem of agency’, American Journal of Sociology, 99(6), 1411-54.


Helliwell, John, Haifang Huang and Robert D. Putnam (2008), ‘How’s the job? Are trust and social capital neglected workplace investments?’, Chapter 4, in this volume.


Ostrom, Elinor (2008), ‘What is social capital?’, Chapter 1, this volume.


Smith, Stephen Samuel and Jessica Kulnych (2002), ‘It may be social, but why is it capital? The social construction of social capital and the politics of language’, *Politics and Society*, 30(1), 149–86.


Social Capital
Reaching Out, Reaching In

Edited by
Viva Ona Bartkus
University of Notre Dame, USA

and

James H. Davis
University of Notre Dame, USA

Edward Elgar
Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA
Contents

List of figures vii
List of tables viii
List of contributors ix
Acknowledgements xv

Introduction: the yet undiscovered value of social capital 1
Viva Ona Bartkus and James H. Davis

PART I OVERVIEW

1 What is social capital? 17
   Elinor Ostrom
2 Network duality of social capital 39
   Ronald S. Burt
3 On the costs of conceptualizing social ties as social capital 66
   Robert M. Fishman

PART II SOCIAL CAPITAL: REACHING OUT

4 How’s the job? Are trust and social capital neglected workplace investments? 87
   John F. Helliwell, Haifang Huang and Robert D. Putnam
5 Social capital effects on student outcomes 145
   Maureen T. Hallinan
6 Communities, schools and voter turnout: a case study in social norms 160
   David E. Campbell
7 Experimental approaches to the diffusion of norms 186
   David W. Nickerson
8 Capitalizing on connections: social capital and strategic management 205
   Janine Nahapiet
PART III  SOCIAL CAPITAL: REACHING IN

9  Social capital creation: collective identities and collective action  239  
   Roderick M. Kramer

10 Connecting to brokers: strategies for acquiring social capital  260  
   Daniel J. Brass

11 Trust, distrust and building social capital  275  
   Roy J. Lewicki and Chad T. Brinsfield

12 Understanding social capital: in whom do we trust?  304  
   Darryl Stickel, Roger C. Mayer and Sim B. Sitkin

13 Organizational trust and social capital  319  
   James H. Davis and Viva Ona Bartkus

Conclusion: frontiers of social capital research  339  
   Viva Ona Bartkus and James H. Davis

Index  357