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1. Author/s information

* Department TESIS, University of Verona (Italy)

2. Contact authors' email addresses

* andrea.sciandra@univr.it

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Social Capital in Relational Approaches: Methodology and Results of Empirical Studies

Andrea Sciandra

Andrea Sciandra
Ph.D. Candidate, Sociology and Social Research
Department of Time, Space, Image, Society
University of Verona (Italy)

E-mail address: andrea.sciandra@univr.it

1. The Relational View of Social Capital

The concept of social capital owes much of its success to the work of R. Putnam (1993; 2000), who holds that social capital consists of trust, reciprocity, networks of associations and civic engagement. This view of the concept has been widely criticized, for example by Portes (1998), who highlighted Putnam's circular reasoning through which social capital becomes at the same time cause and effect. Putnam's perspective has been defined as collective (Portes, 1998) inasmuch as social capital functions as an asset belonging to the community, and it differs from previous approaches in that the individual can possess social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The theoretical foundations, the different levels of analysis and the methods used have generated an output of articles and monographs that is rather difficult to analyze concurrently as far as the knowledge gained about the phenomenon in question is concerned, as pointed out by Lin and Erickson (2008); they focus on the importance of a clear and solid theoretical foundation, a standard method of measurement and studies that share these foundations.

In this review, I will try to highlight the progress made in the studies that use the concept of social capital from a relational perspective, especially from the point of view of the methods used and the results obtained in relation to other concepts such as interpersonal trust, participation and civic engagement.

Coleman's (1990) definition of social capital, according to which social capital is contained within the structure of an individual's relationships (although this definition does not present all the characteristics of a relational view), paved the way for approaches that focus on the idea that social capital is made up of the resources an individual can make use of through his or her relationships; in this sense Esser (2008) defines it as *relational* and in contrast to the *system social capital*, which conversely underlines its nature as a collective asset in terms of the characteristics of whole networks of actors.

The relational nature of social capital has been fully grasped by Lin and Erickson (2008:4); they explain how the concept is "rooted precisely at the juncture between individuals and their relations and is contained in the meso-level structure or in social networks". One of the key concepts in this view of social capital is the one of personal networks, which, according to Wellman (2007), are able to convey social support; moreover, they prove to be a key factor when adopting a network vision that can give a broad interpretation of community phenomena rather than simply state they are in decline.

On the methodological front, the studies based on this type of approach are particularly interested in the ego-centered networks that can be traced after performing an interview where the subject's bonds with the alters that make up their social network are reconstructed (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). On this matter, Wellman (1988) had already pointed out that analyses of personal networks have been well integrated with the traditional research methods we can see being used in sociological surveys.

2. From Nan Lin's Theoretical Base to Empirical Methods and Studies

One of the authors who adopts a relational perspective from a theoretical, methodological and empirical point of view in order to better grasp the macro-micro relationship between structure and individual is Nan Lin. For Lin, social capital represents a further form of capital that can be grouped along with the *neocapital* theories, as it represents investments made in social relationships with expected returns (Lin, 2001); furthermore, for Lin social capital consists of resources embedded in the social structure that can be accessed and mobilized in purposive actions.

On the methodological plane, Lin presents three data-collecting strategies used to construct measures of social capital: saturation, the name generator and – especially – the position generator (Lin & Dumin, 1986) created by Lin himself. The position generator is a data-collecting technique where the interviewees define how well they know individuals who occupy a sample of hierarchical positions in the social structure. The position generator sampling technique determines in advance a sample of significant structural positions (usually the professions) and the interviewees have to state which individuals they have established a relationship with. The empirical analysis based on this technique (Lin & Dumin, 1986) demonstrates that the occupational positions of the interviewees' social circles (relatives, friends, acquaintances, etc.) have a significant influence on their search for a prestigious job.

Following the same line of enquiry, Lin and Erickson (2008) collected the studies of various scholars of social capital who have accepted this technique as reliable and valid and use it in reference to other concepts such as civic engagement, participation and trust. Several different authors have underlined the fact that in the literature there is often confusion between the concept of social capital and those of trust and civic engagement. For example, Adler and Kwon (2002) note that in Fukuyama's work social capital is synonymous with trust, while trust for Coleman is a form of social capital and for Lin is a collective asset deriving from social capital conceived as a relational asset.

On the other hand, among the studies that take up Nan Lin's ideas one cannot fail to mention the work of van der Gaag *et al.* (2008) where the position generator is compared to the name generator and the resource generator. The name generator (Marsden, 2005) enables us to reconstruct cognitive networks through an interview with a key actor who gives the names of people he is in contact with, giving their individual characteristics and the ties that in his opinion exist between the various subjects mentioned (name-interpreter). This technique makes it possible to analyze the structure of an individual's network of relationships using Social Network Analysis techniques in order to obtain synthetic indicators of the social capital possessed by the interviewee (Borgatti *et al.*, 1998), even though these indicators may refer to only a part of the interviewee's network, as the name generator tends to obtain information only about the strongest ties, while the position generator provides measurements based on accessed prestige positions that can potentially involve the whole network. The resource generator, on the other hand, aims to identify the instrumental and expressive resources spread around by social networks, of interest to scholars in different types of studies. The measures obtained through this analytical technique – such as the number of items relating to accessible resources – prove to be positively correlated with those obtained through the position generator; the resource generator in general proves to be the most suitable instrument for analyzing expressive resources (van der Gaag *et al.*, 2008).

As far as empirical studies are concerned, Magee (2008) uses the position generator on the concepts of trust and civic participation in a survey carried out in two American counties: one in Florida and the other in Pennsylvania. The results show that the individuals with the widest social networks are more likely to become involved in civic life, while trust turns out not to be associated with measures of social capital.

For their part, Bekkers *et al.* (2008) analyze the social networks of individuals involved in voluntary associations, and their results show that members of associations have greater access to social resources; in particular the size of personal networks and the prestige levels of alters have a positive correlation with membership of these associations. However, in this analysis performed on a sample of the Dutch population, the hypotheses derived from the collective theory of social capital fail to be confirmed, as trust does not seem to be linked to membership of a voluntary association.

In general, various studies have failed to find convincing evidence of a link between participation in associations and trust: for example, in the work of Uslaner (2002), who analyzes and tests the hypothesis of reciprocal causation, the existence of a virtuous cycle between trust and civic engagement could not be established – on the contrary a mono-directional causal link was found. Uslaner underlines that Putnam's idea – according to which trust and participation form a virtuous cycle – is incorrect and that a causal link exists only in a one-way relationship between trust and participation. The absence of this circularity is again highlighted in the work of Stolle (1998), who points out that only under certain conditions can we establish that trust generates civic engagement and that this in turn leads to increased trust. Hooghe (2008) on the other hand has demonstrated that there is a self-selection mechanism among association members, who generally display higher levels of education and income and therefore different civic behaviours. Wollebaek and Selle, however, suggest that the link between membership of non-profit-making organizations and levels of trust becomes more evident depending on the number of associations interviewees are members of and also the type of association: hierarchical organizations – when talking about subjects with multiple association membership – seem to inspire more trust than horizontal ones (Wollebaek & Selle, 2008).

One of the more promising paths for the study of the link between trust and participation would appear to be the institutional approach (Rothstein & Stolle, 2002), which, Putnam's hypothesis having been refuted, focuses on the quality of legal and administrative institutions as a source of social capital and generalized trust. Although it is not a relational approach, according to Rothstein and Stolle the institutional theory on social capital works both at micro and macro level, as the authors find that the institutions that act correctly and impartially generate greater interpersonal trust, both on a collective and an individual level (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

Another study that uses the position generator to analyze the link between social capital and civic engagement was carried out by Miyata *et al.* (2008). This study holds that participation in online communities tends to improve heterogeneity within personal networks and hence also social capital, which in turn is linked to civic engagement in the form of participation in voluntary associations. The authors use the study to draw a link between these concepts and Internet use, and also with gender, as they find evidence relating to the fact that men have wider social networks than women (according to a survey carried out in Japan).

The results found by Miyata *et al.* pave the way for a whole series of contemporary studies on the link between Internet use and social capital. I refer in particular to analyzes of the use of online social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, which can help to maintain relationships and therefore preserve social capital when an individual moves to a different city; therefore these studies identify a relationship consolidation factor in SNS that helps to create bridging social capital (Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Steinfield *et al.*, 2008). Among the various types of online community, some focus their attention on issues relating to a specific geographical area (Di Maggio *et al.*, 2001), therefore creating a link between online activities and specific actions on a local level. On this note, it has been established that, when used to address the specific needs of a community, the Internet can strengthen neighbourhood relationships (Boase & Wellman, 2006). This process reminds us of the concept of *glocalization* (Wellman & Hampton, 1999) that, according to Wellman, represents one of the principal foundations of what he has called '*networked individualism*' (Wellman, 2001), together with the presence of sparsely knit personal networks that include densely knit groups and the fact that relationships can be both easily formed and abandoned.

3. Integration of Sample Surveys with Social Network Analysis

An interesting area of research on social capital carried out from a relational perspective has developed in Italy, although at the moment it does not constitute one of the main points of reference on an international level. Among the authors who have given rise to the development of this view of social capital we find Pierpaolo Donati, who has formulated a theory of his own on the society that he calls *relational* (Donati, 1991; 2011). Relational sociology places the social relationship as its founding premise on an epistemological plane; this concept then becomes the subject of

sociological analysis, therefore from this perspective social phenomena are studied as relationships (Di Nicola, 1998). The relational approach also presents itself as a different perspective for the definition of social capital, as it belongs neither to individuals nor to society as a whole, but consists of ties that mediate the relationships between individual and society (Donati, 2003).

This vision is diametrically opposed to the view described by Putnam, as social capital is observed as a property of relationship networks whose sense of civiness represents an both output and an outcome (Donati, 2008). In fact, Donati explains that there is a direct relationship between individual factors and civic engagement, but also a relationship between these phenomena mediated by social capital. Civiness is therefore observed as the product of morphogenetic processes in social networks that can modify civic culture and civic engagement behaviours.

Taking this line of research as a starting point, it has been demonstrated on a methodological plane (Tronca, 2007) that it is possible to integrate the relational theory with structural interactionism (Degenne & Forsé, 1994), which holds that structure – in the sense of a network of relations – constitutes a constraint and an emergent effect, and therefore analysis of social networks can demonstrate that the morphology of the networks affects social phenomena (Forsé & Tronca, 2005). According to Porpora (2002), this concept of structure can be combined with social network analysis making it possible to avoid conflationary outcomes, as individuals can modify the very structure of their networks as well as being influenced by them in terms of constraints and opportunities.

On the empirical side, the use of social network analysis presents some undoubted advantages in Wellman's opinion (1988), because structural analysis is based on the relationships between units, which provide a more powerful explanatory tool than classifications based on the attributes of the units themselves.

Starting from this comparison, the empirical side of social capital analysis (Tronca, 2007) lately focused on personal networks as far as a property of the relationships is concerned, in terms of both form and content. A research project to experiment integrating the two methods was implemented in a survey on the population of the city of Verona (Di Nicola *et al.*, 2010; 2011a), giving results from the joint analysis of relational and individual data. The same research team then broadened its study of social networks to a representative sample of the Italian population in a survey (Di Nicola *et al.*, 2011b) using the analysis of personal networks also as the basis for explaining the different civic orientations expressed in the sample. The sampling plan for ego-centered networks was based on the name generator/name interpreter technique, from which various indicators relating to the resources conveyed by the networks and their very form were derived. In particular, these studies made specific use of the concepts of network closure and structural holes (Burt, 2001; 2005; 2009), where the former represents the ease of access to information, the possibility of sanctions against free riding and consequently it favours trust enhancement, while the latter represents an individual's capacity to set himself up as a broker within his own network, with the consequent possibility of gaining access to greater amounts and more heterogeneous forms of resources and information. Burt (2005) clarifies the effects and the mechanisms underpinning the two forms of social capital, which prove to be complementary to each other; he therefore stresses how it is misleading to attempt to place the two issues in opposition to each other.

These aspects relating to network locations are generally rendered from an empirical point of view through specific indicators such as those propounded by Burt (1992), for example effective size – which allows us to highlight the non-redundant ties and therefore the possible advantages in gaining information and/or control as well as the aggregate constraint, which expresses the level of network closure, *i.e.* the condition where an ego finds itself in a dense network with direct access to information and/or help but at the same time indicates a state of dependence on the alters in its network. These indicators have also been used from an empirical point of view to verify hypotheses taken from sociology literature, such as the presence of *amoral familism* (Banfield, 1958) in the south of Italy, in particular as far as the network closure in networks made up of family members is concerned (Tronca, 2010).

4. Some Further Perspectives on Methodology

To conclude, it is interesting to observe the main methodological standpoints concerning the analysis of social networks in relation to the concept of social capital. A fitting example of this is van Deth's (2008) essay showing a bottom-up approach to the problem of measuring social capital, based on the search for common roots that can be found in the use of the same indicators. Van Deth's proposals for furthering investigation into methodology are highly interesting, in particular the invitation to use mixed methods, therefore integrating qualitative and quantitative research and multi-level models in the hope of reaching a better understanding of the impact of context factors in relations at micro level.

Lastly, in the area of longitudinal studies aimed at representing the evolution of social networks we can find actor-based models (Snijders *et al.*, 2010), which make it possible to analyze the dynamics of changes in the relationships within a network, thus allowing us to test hypotheses on network dynamics by using simulations. The actor-based model for longitudinal studies reveals itself to be more general and gives more reliable results than the exponential random graph (p*) model (Robins *et al.*, 2007), which is not actor-based but tie-based.

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