Explicating and Measuring Social Relationships in Social Capital Research

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The authors examine how the construct social capital is explicated and measured by communication scholars in contemporary research and argue that linkages between concepts and measures are not always clear and operationalizations of social capital are far from uniform in empirical studies. The authors also note that the measures of social capital fall along 2 dimensions: a static–dynamic continuum and an informal–formal path, which are largely ignored. The authors challenge communication scholars to reexamine the theoretical underpinnings of social capital research articulated by Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman and to reconsider how the role and functions of communication might drive social capital.


We explore the construct social capital with particular attention to the way communication scholars have explicated and measured the concept. Researchers in our field have, on balance, concentrated on social ties as indicators of social capital, attending to the strength, amount, and frequency of ties that are best described as “social relationships.” Our examination, therefore, focuses on how such social relationships have been conceptualized and measured. We found that social relationships reveal underlying dimensions that allow us to offer a typology of ties, thus clarifying how variables are constructed. We then consider how such measures both illuminate and ignore social capital as conceptualized by scholars who introduced the term and how communication researchers have added to the body of knowledge on social capital.

Explicating social capital

The term social capital can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century when Lyda Judson Hanifan, an educator in West Virginia, used the term to stress that community cooperation is essential to operate a successful school (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Hanifan (1916) defined social capital as “those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and
social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (p. 130).

Hanifan’s oblique reference to “substances” was later clarified into two separate streams of research on social capital by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman. Both traditions borrow liberally from economic models, where capital refers to labor, forms of currency, stock, and power, while social capital refers to the currency that results from the social networks that humans enjoy and from the resources gleaned from relationships within such networks.

Coleman and Bourdieu approached their studies on social capital from different ideological paradigms, with Bourdieu’s perspective arising from the Marxist tradition and Coleman’s views influenced by rational choice models and theories grounded in community structures. For Bourdieu (1986), social capital is inextricable from economic capital, which, in turn, underlies social relationships: “Every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital” (p. 253). In this sense, capital’s distribution “represents the immanent structure of the social world” and thus its use, availability, currency, and impacts are constrained because capital is distributed unequally, thus favoring some individuals more than others because of their socioeconomic standing (p. 242). As a result, aspects of social capital become institutionalized.

Bourdieu (1980) described social capital as “an aggregate of actual or potential resources” (l’ensemble des ressources actuelles ou potentielles) that arise from “a durable network” (un réseau durable) of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248–249).

Therefore, the issue of “resource” is key to understand the impacts and influences of social capital. Bourdieu departs from Coleman in his judgment that such resources are linked to networks entrenched in social class systems. Such relationships are iterative in the sense that they are continually reproduced. Bourdieu noted that “The reproduction of social capital presupposes an increasing effort of social ability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (p. 250). Bourdieu also argued that individuals struggle against inequality, as noted by McCaughan (1993). Agency, McCaughan argued, arises from the struggle against inequalities fostered by differences in material and symbolic capital (p. 6). For Bourdieu, social capital represents a struggle over resources, and thus an economic and cultural struggle.

Bourdieu’s perspectives have had scant impact on current North American studies on social capital in the field of communication, which have been heavily influenced by Robert Putnam, who, in turn, drew from the foundations articulated by Coleman. Because his approach emerged from economic theory, Coleman credited economist Glenn C. Loury for defining social capital as “a set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization” (Loury, 1977, as cited in Coleman, 1990, p. 300). Coleman (1988) also infused human agency in his views of social capital, which he called a “resource for action” (p. 95). For Coleman, the relationships that foster social capital augur social change. Rather than describing such relationships as
locked within a closed and class-driven social structure, Coleman asserted that the creation of social capital enriches relationships at a microsocial level, which, in turn, engender community connections at a more macrosocial level. Coleman’s optimistic perspective—that social capital can serve a broader public interest—is embodied in Putnam’s influential treatise, *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam, like Coleman, viewed social capital as the linchpin to well-functioning, democratic, and healthy communities. Communities infused with an endowment of social capital boast an engaged citizenry where “strong social networks prevail” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). A community prospers not because of isolated individuals working and living independently but because groups of individuals create and nurture networks that inspire community coherence. Putnam drew from Coleman’s assessment that social obligations, expectations, and norms work in tandem to enrich relationships and thus communities, engendering democratic pluralism.

Putnam’s writings have gained traction in scholarly and popular circles alike but not because of the ascendancy and appeal of social capital. Rather, the threat of crumbling communities in decline captured public attention with Putnam’s warning that “the very fabric of our connections with each other has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities” (the Saguaro Seminar, 2010). Moreover, Putnam (1995a, 1995b, 2000) posited that people spend less time building interpersonal relationships because we are spending less time on social activities and more time on solitary pursuits, such as watching television, thus diminishing civic engagement and depleting our reserves of social capital.

**Communication scholarship**

When Putnam threw down the gauntlet of mass media influences on civic engagement, communication researchers seized the opportunity to challenge his assumptions. Putnam invoked the “time displacement” thesis that the more time spent in one activity (e.g., television viewing) results in less time spent on another (membership on a bowling team). He also suggested that individuals are more frightened and less trusting (and hence, less engaged) as a function of the “mean and scary world” cultivated by television.

Communication scholars, including Dhavan V. Shah, Patricia Moy, Dietram Scheufele, and Christopher Beaudoin, argued that Putnam’s analysis of media effects was both blunt and narrow: “These simplistic critiques of the media are grounded on the assumption that there is one mass communication experience (rather than multiple motives and uses) and one audience (rather than different types of users)” (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001, p. 465). For example, Shah (1998) treated media use as a conditional variable influencing social capital, finding that newspaper use and watching social dramas were positively associated with civic participation.

As a result, recent scholarship of social capital in the communication discipline is conjoined with Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital and thus draws principally on the foundations built by Coleman.
Our current task is to examine how communication scholars have conceptualized and measured social capital, especially in terms of relationships and connections among individuals.1

**Social relationships in social capital**

Reviewing the literature on social capital in communication journals reveals that, although the explication of the term varies, a common feature that links studies on social capital is relationships with others: a tie or link among individuals within a community, such as neighbors, acquaintances, and friends. Such relationships are an essential component of social capital, binding individuals within families, groups, organizations, and institutions. The nomenclature varies somewhat, with researchers referring to “social networks” (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004, 2006; Putnam, 2000), “social connectedness” (Moy, Scheufele, & Holbert, 1999; Zhang & Chia, 2006), and “social relations” (Beaudoin, 2007; Coleman, 1990; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2001). For our discussion, we label this feature “social relationships.”

Conceptually speaking, scholars also argue that life satisfaction (Shah, 1998) and trust (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2006; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, 1998; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Uslaner, 2004; Zhang & Chia, 2006) comprise the social capital construct. And while these constructs may indeed be associated with social relationships, trust and life satisfaction are not, by themselves, social relationships.

In digging more deeply into social relationships, we found that researchers use a variety of operational measures and that these vary from study to study. We noted two underlying (and unexamined) dimensions of social relationships that we have labeled along continuums of informal-to-formal and static-to-dynamic. We discuss these in the following sections.

**The informal–formal dimension**

Measures of social relationships are operationalized along a continuum of informality to formality. Informal behaviors seem to require little commitment or preparation, whereas more formal relationships require planning and intentionality. An example is illustrated by Zhang and Chia (2006). In their study on residents of Clarksville, Tennessee, the researchers measured “social connectedness” by asking how often participants “spent an evening socializing with others (1) within and (2) outside their neighborhood” (p. 286). We consider these questions to reflect more informal relationships, in that “socializing” is rather vague, with no definition offered to the respondent.

Our criteria for describing level of formality hinges on the question wording, which should indicate whether the context of the social activity is casual (e.g., getting together with friends) or more rigid in requiring a degree of convention or ritual (e.g., attending a Rotary Club meeting).
The static–dynamic dimension

Turning to the other dimension, we noted that the questions used to measure social relationships range throughout a continuum of dynamism. We argue that “socializing” is hardly static, but that “serving as an officer” in an organization is more dynamic than mere membership. We consider dynamic relationships as those that involve actual behavior; in other words, they require effort. It is noteworthy that some kinds of dynamic behaviors, such as volunteering, may have a strong influence on individuals (Ikeda, 2002; Putnam, 2000). When participating as a volunteer, individuals exchange ideas with others and engage in cooperative decision making. These experiences, in turn, encourage volunteers to participate more frequently (Ikeda, 2002).

Operationalizing social relationships

Neighborliness

Several communication researchers examined social relationships within the context of the neighborhood. While Zhang and Chia (2006) measured ties within and outside of the neighborhood, Beaudoin and Thorson (2006) focused on relationships with neighbors and measured neighborliness with three questions in an analysis of a 1998 telephone survey in St. Louis by the Center for Advanced Social Research at the University of Missouri, Columbia. They asked, How often a respondent borrowed or exchanged things with neighbors; how often a respondent visited neighbors; and how often a respondent and neighbor helped one another with small tasks, such as repair work or grocery shopping (pp. 161–163; see also Beaudoin, 2007; Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). In terms of the static–dynamic continuum, the questions appear to be rather dynamic (e.g., verbs such as borrow, visit, and help are active). Such relationships are arguably more informal, in that they may be spontaneous or require little prior commitment on the part of the respondent. Helping a neighbor with household chores is much more informal than attending a parent–teacher association (PTA) meeting.

Social support

Beaudoin (2007) also examined variables that measured “social support,” which he defined as “an outcome of social capital that involves emotional support, comfort and understanding, and help and advice” (p. 646). In this regard, social support is “a positive outcome,” which indicates social capital, rather than a predictor or a component of social capital. Beaudoin used three items to measure social support, attending to the amount of support offered. Beaudoin (2007) conducted research among residents of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, asking how often they gave advice to others, offered emotional support, and how often they tried to comfort those outside the participants’ immediate family (p. 646).

We consider the variable of social support above more dynamic than static, with giving advice, giving comfort, and offering emotional support as active behaviors.
In terms of the informal–formal continuum, Beaudoin’s questions appear more informal because these actions seem to be more spontaneous than planned.

**Context**
Some researchers have invoked geographic context into their studies on social capital, as noted above with Beaudoin’s study on gulf coast residents. Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, and Donavan (2002) operationalized “informal social interaction” by asking questions at a microlevel context, situating the questions in the context of home and neighborhood. For example, the authors asked participants how often they entertained people in their home, gave or attended a dinner party, and played cards in the past year (p. 969). Such questions reveal behaviors that are dynamic and informal.

In summary, all the measurements (neighborliness, social support, and context) indicated somewhat informal and dynamic behaviors. Table 1 illustrates the dimensions of formality and dynamism of the variables.

**Sociability**
Another term used to refer to interactions among individuals is sociability. Uslaner (2004) measured sociability with three items in an analysis of a 1998 survey of technology use by the Pew Center. The questions included, “How often do you visit family members?” “How frequently do you call your friends?” and “How wide is your social support network?” (p. 229). On balance, the questions align with the more static and informal dimensions shown in Table 1. With the exception of Uslaner, we could find no other communication scholars who incorporated family networks as part of social capital measures, although Hanifan (1916) and Bourdieu (1986) discussed family networks as integral to social capital.

Other researchers have measured sociability outside the family. Moy et al.’s 1999 telephone survey of residents of Madison, Wisconsin, used three items to measure

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Dimensions of Neighborliness, Social Support, and Context Variables</th>
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<td><strong>Informal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Static</strong>&lt;br&gt;  • Context (entertained people in their home, gave or attended a dinner party, and played cards in the last year)&lt;br&gt;  • Neighborliness (borrowed or exchanged things, visited neighbors, and helped one another with small tasks)&lt;br&gt;  • Social Support (gave advice, offered emotional support, and tried to comfort people)</td>
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individual-level social capital (p. 33). The researchers asked participants how often they “got together” with other people in Madison. We argue this is a measure of sociability (see, e.g., Uslaner, 2004; Zhang & Chia, 2006). While vague, “getting together” appears to be more dynamic than static, and arguably less formal. The question wording of “in Madison” situates the respondent within a context.

**Size of network**

We now return to the issue of breadth of support. Recall that Uslaner (2004) operationalized “sociability” using items that measured frequency of visiting family members, calling friends, and the size of the social support network (“How wide is your social support network?”). In this case, the size of one’s network appears to be a feature of social capital and presumes that breadth of one’s network should offer the potential for support. However, the relationship is neither necessarily dynamic nor formal.

**Improving community**

In a departure from their colleagues, Moy et al. (1999) included a question that asked how often participants had “ideas for improving their community” in an additive index of civic engagement (p. 33). This question—something of an outlier because it does not directly address social relationships—harkens back to Coleman’s inclusion of human agency within the rubric of social capital.

**Public attendance**

Some researchers included attendance at public events as a component of community engagement. Shah et al. (2002), in the secondary analysis of the DDB Life Style3 data, measured public attendance with five items, asking how often in the past year respondents frequented an art gallery or museum, went to a classical concert, saw a pop or rock concert, attended a country music concert, and visited the zoo (pp. 965–969). The activity of attending events raises intriguing questions about the conceptualization of social capital. Clearly, the researchers are equating engagement in community events as a feature of social capital. However, our reading of Bourdieu and Coleman is that engagement in community links social capital through network memberships and that attending a public event does not necessarily enrich one’s group membership or network. On the other hand, Putnam included attending movies, sports events, nightclubs, live concerts, and theatrical performances as features of social capital. We raise the question that while attending public events is indeed dynamic, it is not clear to us that attending events is conceptually bound within social capital; indeed, Putnam (2000) defined social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19).

Inclusion of “attending events” presents a problem with the typology we constructed because, unlike the qualities of social relationships, it is difficult to tease out how such activities describe social exchange. Moreover, the level of activity
required—on the static-to-dynamic continuum—is fuzzy. Visiting an art exhibit can be passive or active, depending on the context and the individual, while attending a music concert can be highly engaging, with rockers dancing in the aisles. In addition, we argue that attending events can require a certain degree of formality (purchasing tickets in advance) but the level of formality varies considerably (going to the cinema is much less formal than attending the opera).

Civic participation and engagement
For Robert D. Putnam, civic engagement is a crucial component of social capital, and communication researchers have liberally incorporated the concept into empirical studies.

Civic participation and engagement (the terms are used interchangeably) are often operationalized as participation in community activities, such as doing volunteer work, attending club meetings, and taking part in neighborhood projects.

Although civic participation is one of the most common variables used in social capital research, its conceptualizations are slightly different among scholars; while some regard civic participation as a component of social capital, others argue that it is an outcome of social capital. For example, Shah, McLeod, et al. (2001) claimed that civic participation is one of the “important individual-level indicators of social capital” (p. 467; see also Shah, Kwak, et al., 2001, p. 143; Shah et al., 2005). On the other hand, Zhang and Chia (2006) considered civic and political participation as “the consequences of social capital but not a part of the definition of social capital” and measured these two kinds of participation separately (p. 281, emphasis in original).

Whether civic participation is as an attribute of social capital or treated as an outcome of social capital, it is commonly used as a variable in survey research (Moy et al., 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, Kwak, et al., 2001; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2002; Zhang & Chia, 2006).

Returning to measurement of civic participation, Dhavan V. Shah and his colleagues frequently used the same battery of questions in several studies to measure civic participation, asking participants how often they volunteered, worked on a community project, and went to a club meeting in the past year (Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, Kwak, et al., 2001; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2002). Zhang and Chia (2006) measured civic participation with more specific questions, asking participants how frequently they attended club or neighborhood meetings, served as an officer of a club or organization, served on a committee for a local organization, or worked on a committee project in the past year (p. 287). Shah et al. (2005) used five items, asking how often participants did volunteer work, went to a club meeting, worked on a community project, went to a community or neighborhood meeting, and worked on behalf of a social group or cause in the past year (p. 540). In contrast, Lowrey (2004) used one engagement variable as a component of social capital, asking how many hours per week individuals spent participating in community groups.

Moy et al. (1999) used three items to measure civic engagement, and we noted earlier that the linkage between the conceptualizations and operationalizations is not
clear. The first, “how often do you get together with people in the Madison area?” measures frequency of “getting together,” while the second, “how often have you worked to bring about changes in the Madison area?” is oblique. The third question, “how often do you have ideas for improving the Madison area?” may or may not indicate civic engagement. Shah (1998) used five items as an additive index of “civic engagement,” asking participants how often they “considered themselves influential in their neighborhood,” how often they “went to a club meeting,” “attended church,” “did volunteer work,” and “worked on a community project” (p. 477). The first question concerning influence seems out of place with the other four questions that measure specific engagement, raising a question of construct validity.

Moreover, the political dimension of some of the civic engagement questions is unclear. Working on behalf of a social group or cause can vary dramatically and could mean heavy engagement in a political party or participating in a community bake sale. Other studies measured political behaviors separately (e.g., political engagement or interpersonal political discussion; see Shah et al., 2005; Zhang & Chia, 2006). Most of the engagement items are dynamic in that they measure some kind of dedicated action (e.g., doing volunteer work or attending meetings). Turning to the informal–formal continuum, some questions appear informal (“did volunteer work”), while others are more formal (“served as an officer for a club”). It appears that from the way the questions are framed, participants would typically need to make an effort to take part in such social activities and that some are informal while others more formal. This continuum is illustrated in Table 2.

**Association membership**

A common practice in communication studies is to count the number of associations in which participants belong, with the implication that greater levels of membership translate to increased social capital. For example, Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) used an index that included membership in the following: (1) business civic

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**Table 2** Dimensions of Items in Civic Participation and Engagement

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<thead>
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<th>Informal</th>
<th>Dynamic</th>
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<tr>
<td>did volunteer work</td>
<td>served as an officer of some clubs or organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worked on behalf of a social group</td>
<td>served on a committee for a local organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worked on a community project</td>
<td>went to a club meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>went to a community or neighborhood meeting</td>
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groups such as Kiwanis or Rotary; (2) religious organizations; (3) ethnic or racial organizations; (4) neighborhood associations; (5) PTA or other school-related organizations; (6) political clubs or organizations; (7) social clubs such as card playing, music, hobbies, and book clubs; and (8) youth groups such as Girl Scouts or children’s sports (p. 398). Researchers have since added “charity or volunteer organizations” to the scale (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2006, p. 163; Fleming, Thorson, & Peng, 2005, p. 227).

Looking at static–dynamic features of membership, we argue that simply having membership in a club may be less dynamic than going to a club meeting, although we also acknowledge that some memberships may require a great deal of participation, such as a political group attempting to pass a legislative measure. Moreover, the membership categories above reflect varying degrees of formality. We argue that Rotary membership has a higher degree of formality than membership in a book club (Table 3).

We also note that association membership may not match one’s actual level of engagement. Membership alone does not necessarily indicate action. Putnam (1995a, 2000) noted that nontraditional types of organizations (e.g., Oxfam, Sierra Club, and the American Association of Retired Persons) and support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous are on the rise. Again, the level of commitment to such groups could vary significantly. For example, Sierra Club members may not know each other: “They root for the same team and they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other’s existence” (Putnam, 1995a, p. 71).

Residential stability
We call the final category of measures “residential stability,” referring to commitment to home and neighborhood. In one study, Shah, McLeod et al. (2001) created an index of residential stability, combining two measures: the likelihood of moving and the likelihood of remaining in the community. The constructed variable was used as a control with social capital as the dependent variable. In contrast, Lowrey (2004)
treated respondents’ years in the community and hours spent with community
groups as surrogates of social capital. Clearly, researchers have different ways of
treating the relationship of residential stability to social capital.

**A typology of dimensions of social relationships**

We argue that the operational questions of social relationships reveal underlying
dimensions of passiveness and dynamism that intersect with qualities of formality
and informality. Moreover, we argue that such attributes may affect the level of
engagement and the strength of ties among individuals and between individuals
and their communities, and thus differentially affect social capital. The dimen-
sions illustrate that the operational measures of social capital are far from precise,
and thus, communication scholars have various methods of quantifying social
capital, some of which are more refined than others and some of which have
stronger linkages to their conceptual definitions (these dimensions are illustrated in
Table 4).

In summary, we believe that the admixture of measures used to illuminate social
capital refract rather than reflect the construct. We use the analogy of refraction from
physics because the measures of the construct at times follow oblique angles and are
thus deflected from their course, as in refracted light (Oxford English Dictionary,
2010). In the following section, we describe the challenges wrought by the conceptual
and operational issues we see that arise in communication research.

**Challenges measuring social relationships**

**Challenge 1: The variable and the measurement are mismatched**

We found that, in some cases, the question wording of variables is not clearly linked
to the concept of social relationships. For example, Zhang and Chia (2006) explained
that social connectedness links individuals to society via networks (p. 281). However,
their measure of social connectedness hinges on frequency rather than the quality
of relationships, which we argue capture only part of the construct. They asked how
often the respondent “spent an evening socializing with others” either within or
outside of their neighborhood.

Another example is neighborliness, which “involves various forms of informal
contact with neighbors, including visiting, borrowing and sharing, and helping with
tasks around the house” (Beaudoin, 2007, p. 641). Using community and neighbor-
hood almost interchangeably, Putnam emphasized the importance of neighborhood
as the place where people nurture their relationships. In viewing neighborliness
as “connoting social networks,” Beaudoin and Thorson asked three questions to
measure neighborliness: how often the respondents “borrowed or exchanged things
with neighbors,” “visited neighbors,” and “helped one another with small tasks.”
Looking at the measures, it appears that neighborliness is a function of connecting
with neighbors to loan or exchange goods, to chat, or to assist them. In other words,
neighborliness involves a social and/or material exchange. Yet when we examined the wording of the questions, we found that “social connectedness” and “neighborliness” are actually measuring something very similar. Both measured the frequency of interaction with neighbors, making the mismatch between variables and measurements confounding.
Similarly, researchers have measured civic participation by the amount of time spent in activities. Shah and colleagues asked how often respondents “volunteer,” “work on a community project,” and “go to a club meeting” (Shah, Kwak, et al., 2001; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2002). In contrast, Zhang and Chia (2006) measured civic participation with four items: attending a club/neighborhood meeting, serving as an officer of a club or organization, serving on a committee for a local organization, and working on a community project. While the research teams used a similar method to capture voluntarism (both use “working on a community project” and “attending a club meeting”), Zhang and Chia are more specific, more formal, and more active in operationalizing civic participation as leadership (serving on a committee or as an officer). In this example, researchers use a variety of measurements to link to the same construct, civic participation.

Challenge 2: Variables include many dimensions
We found scholars often ignore the static–dynamic and informal–formal dimensions of variables, and moreover, they conflate dimensions within one variable.

In their concept of civic engagement, Moy et al. (1999) equated civic engagement with social capital at the individual level: “the relationships that citizens build and maintain within a community. This includes citizens becoming involved in community activities with the goal of improving community life and if necessary, bringing about changes in their community” (p. 30). As we noted earlier, the authors operationalized civic engagement by asking questions that measured the frequency of engagement with two somewhat vague questions: how often participants “got together” with other people in their community and how often participants “worked to bring about changes in their community.” The second dimension is unclear, asking respondents about their frequency of “having ideas” that may or may not lead to action.

Moreover, researchers used measures that appear to describe dimensions of network breadth and frequency of association, two distinct features of concepts such as sociability. It is unclear whether such questions as “how wide is your social support network?” “how often do you visit family members?” and “how frequently do you call your friends?” are measuring the same or different dimensions of sociability (Uslaner, 2004).

Challenge 3: Vague wording and categories
We found that researchers use concepts such as neighborhood and community interchangeably and that the definitions of such terms are often overlooked in peer-reviewed papers and in survey instruments. Similarly, survey questions with the wording “volunteer” do not define voluntarism for the respondent.

We also found that questions do not necessarily capture the potential range of answers. For example, Shah and his colleagues repeatedly used the same question to measure informal social interaction: how often participants (1) entertained people in their houses, (2) gave or attended a dinner party, and (3) played cards (Shah
et al., 2002; see also Shah, McLeod et al., 2001). These questions may exclude other opportunities for informal social interactions outside the house such as getting together at local cafés, pubs, or restaurants. Shah and colleagues also asked participants about attending classical, pop, rock, and country music concerts, but ignored jazz, punk, or other genres that might tap into a wider range of interests (Shah et al., 2002). Similarly, Zhang and Chia (2006) asked participants about how often they spent an evening socializing with others, but excluded breakfast, lunch, and weekends. Such exclusion may fail to capture the full range of socializing opportunities.

Challenge 4: Lack of reciprocity and mutuality
Survey questions often fail to capture the direction of behaviors and mutual interactions. Although the concept of social capital emphasizes reciprocity and mutuality, many surveys do not examine both directions. Beaudoin and Thorson (2004, 2006) partially measured mutual actions with neighbors (e.g., “exchange things with neighbors” and “help one another with small tasks”), but most studies focus on “what participants do for others” not “what others do for the participants.” This lack of reciprocity captures the instigator of social capital but misses the recipient. For example, elders or mothers with small children may not be able to “attend a meeting” or “do volunteer work,” but they still may benefit from the effects of social capital (e.g., receiving volunteer services).

Discussion
Our initial descent into examining social capital research led us to the realization that social scientists in the communication field have operationalized the term using a variety of measures and that some of the measures are admittedly obscure. Some scholars look at neighborliness, sociability, and stability, while others explore civic engagement and club memberships. Still others assert that attendance at concerts and public events are surrogates for social capital. We noted that cadres of researchers have developed their own sets of survey questions and that the questions posed and their wordings vary across cadres and studies. In other words, we found quite a variety of social capital indicators in the communication literature. Digging more deeply, we discovered that most of the measures reflect social relationships—their strength, amount, and frequency of ties that fall along two continuums: They tend to range from static to more dynamic behaviors, and describe relationships that range from the informal to the more formal. Yet, the variables appear to be indiscriminately mashed together.

We wonder, then, if measures that vary across a dimension of formality should be lumped together—conceptually and operationally speaking. For example, serving as an officer in an organization such as the PTA undoubtedly leads to greater civic participation than merely attending meetings. Yet, researchers do not appear to operationally attend to this distinction. Similarly, social relationships range from somewhat passive to more active engagements. An individual may hold membership in a political party without volunteering for any activities, while other party members
may work countless hours to campaign for a candidate. As Putnam (2000) pointed out, citizens can become members of an organization by simply “writing a check” (p. 157). In contrast, dynamic behaviors usually demand concrete actions with commitment, preparedness, responsibilities, and effort.

We posit that the lack of uniformity among measures points to a vexing question: How is social capital explicated? We turn to Steven Chaffee (1991), who admonished researchers to burrow into the belly of a concept and articulate its many dimensions and meanings before attempting to measure it. By examining the operationalizations in the communication literature over a 9-year period, we conclude that the disjointedness of the measures indicates a lack of construct validity. Researchers are somewhat cavalier in their definitions of social capital, forcing us—as critics—to return to Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam to refresh our assumptions.

We assert that Coleman and Bourdieu were interested in how resources that arise from social networks create social capital. Notably, Bourdieu argued that such networks reflect power differences among social and economic classes of people: an issue largely ignored in the empirical communication literature on social capital. Instead, studies have focused on social relationships (e.g., engagement in civic activities) without illuminating how resources that drive social capital are derived from such relationships. In other words, readers are left to assume that more is better: that the greater number of memberships held by individuals within communities results in greater degrees of social capital. However, as we noted above, “counting” social relationships fails to consider the depth or breadth of relationships in terms of their dynamism or formality, which, we argue, color the quality of the relationship.

We recommend, therefore, that researchers invoke Chaffee and return to the roots of the social capital construct and carefully explicate the term before embarking on measurements and attend to the relationships of power articulated by Bourdieu.

We urge communication scholars to extend Putnam’s examination of civic engagement by focusing on the role of mass and interpersonal communication in social capital’s development. The bulk of survey questions used to measure social capital eschew communication, centering instead on memberships and sociability. That is, researchers equate “playing cards” and “attending a concert” with social engagement, but how such activities address or invoke communication are unknown. To some extent, communication harnesses social capital; that is, social relationships require that individuals address and exchange meanings with one another. How does this occur? Talking, listening, exchanging ideas, gossiping, compromising, and promising: such communicative actions are critical to our understanding of social relationships and therefore critical to understand social capital. In other words, social capital cannot be produced or processed without communication.

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Notes

1 Although outside the scope of the current study, note that studies on online social capital have burgeoned in the communication field. The trend has included studies on online games and social networking: sometimes as a channel of communication and sometimes as a site where social capital is created and maintained. Interestingly, online studies on social capital thus far conceptualize (and operationalize) the term much differently than the studies we examined.

2 Hurricane Katrina, which hit the southern coast of the United States on August 28, 2005, took more than 1,800 human lives and caused more than $81 billion in damages (the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009).

3 The survey is conducted annually by DDB Needham (now DDB worldwide).

References


作者探讨社会资本的概念是如何被当代的传播学者阐释和测量的。作者认为社会资本的概念和测量方法之间的联系并不总是很清楚，并且对社会资本的操作化在实证研究中也不统一。作者还指出对社会资本的测量沿着两个维度：一个静态-动态的连续和一个非正式-正式的路径，这两个维度都在很大程度被忽视。作者挑战其它传播学者，重新审视 Pierre Bourdieu 和 James S. Coleman 所阐述的社会资本理论基础，并重新考虑传播的作用和功能如何推动社会资本。
Analyser et mesurer les relations sociales dans la recherche sur le capital social

Les auteurs examinent comment le concept de capital social est analysé et mesuré par les chercheurs en communication dans la littérature contemporaine, et soutiennent que les liens entre les concepts et les mesures ne sont pas toujours clairs et que les opérationnalisations du capital social sont loin d’être uniformes dans les études empiriques. Les auteurs notent également que les mesures du capital social suivent deux dimensions, un continuum statique—dynamique et une trajectoire informelle—formelle, qui sont largement ignorées.

Les auteurs invitent les chercheurs en communication à réexaminer les fondements théoriques de la recherche sur le capital social de Pierre Bourdieu et James S. Coleman et à reconsidérer comment le rôle et les fonctions de la communication pourraient alimenter le capital social.
Explicando y midiendo las relaciones sociales de la investigación del capital social

**Resumen**: Estos autores examinan cómo la construcción social del capital social es explicado y medido por los estudiosos de la comunicación en la investigación contemporánea, y argüimos que las conexiones entre los conceptos y las medidas no son siempre claras y las operacionalizaciones del capital social no son uniformes en los estudios empíricos. Los autores notan también que las medidas de capital social recaen a lo largo de dos dimensiones: un continuo estático-dinámico y un camino informal-formal, que son ignorados en su mayoría. Los autores desafían a los estudiosos de la comunicación a re-examinar las asunciones teóricas de la investigación del capital social articulado por Pierre Bourdieu y James S. Coleman y reconsiderar cómo el rol y las funciones de la comunicación podrían dirigir al capital social.
사회적 자본 연구에서의 사회적 관계들에 대한 설명과 측정들

요약

본 논문은 구성사회적자본이 커뮤니케이션 학자들에 의해 어떻게 설명되고 측정되는가를 연구하였으며, 개념들과 측정들사이에서의 연계들은 항상 명백한 것은 아니며 사회적 자본의 기능화는 실제 연구에서 획일적이 아니라라는 것을 주장하였다. 본 논문은 사회적 자본의 측정들은 두가지 차원에서 고려될 수 있는바, 이들은 정체-역동 계속성과 비공식-공식통로로서 그동안 대체적으로 무시되어온 것 들이다. 본 논문은 커뮤니케이션 학자들이 하여금 Pierre Bourdieu 과 James S. Coleman 에 의해 토론되어온 사회적 자본 연구의 이론적 강조점들을 다시 연구하도록 제의하고 있으며, 커뮤니케이션의 역할과 기능들이 어떻게 사회적 자본화하는가를 재고려하도록 하고있다.
Explikation und Messung von sozialen Beziehungen in Untersuchungen zum sozialen Kapital