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## Nan Lin's Theory of Social Capital

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The notion of social capital was popularized during the early 1990s by scholars working in several different fields, and different lenses for viewing social capital thus abound. For instance, sociologist James Coleman and political scientist Robert Putnam consider social capital to be a collective resource and it is the strong interconnections between individuals which foster “sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust” (Putnam, 1995, p. 66). Other researchers, such as Nan Lin of Duke University, view social capital as an individual resource. Lin's theory of social capital is rooted in the concepts of social network analysis, which provides methodological tools for investigating the relationships or ties between individuals. The network of relationships comprises the social network. Social resources are the goods possessed by individuals in the network and can consist of intangible goods such as social status, research collaboration, and information as well as material goods, such as money or a car. These goods are considered social resources because they are available to an individual through his or her social relationships. Access to these resources depends on the relationship with the individual possessing the resource and where one is located in the social structure.

Social capital, therefore, is defined by Lin (2001b, p. 12), as “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions.” The theory explains how the quality of social resources available to an individual within his or her social network influences the success of achieving desired outcomes or goals. People with better social capital are more likely to get ahead than people with poorer social capital. The theory of social capital grew out of Lin's social resources theory (Lin & Dumin, 1986). The impetus for the theory was to better define what social capital is and provide a method for measuring it.

Lin's work has mainly focused on status attainment and how social capital affects access to better jobs and hence higher status.

In sociology, social capital theory has mainly been used to explain how social structure affects access to better jobs. Studies have also investigated how social capital affects the job search of poor, urban African Americans (Smith, 2003), Internet use (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2003), and the search for information (Johnson, 2003).

Social capital theory and methods of social network analysis can be used effectively to understand the structural and relational dimensions of information behavior. For instance, although it is well-known that people prefer personal sources of information over more formal sources, it is not generally known who gets chosen and how ties (relationships) and social structure affect the choice of an information source. Using the methods of social network analysis it is possible to determine the relationship between the information seeker and information source, and the social position of the information source in relation to the information seeker as well as in relation to other people in the information seeker's network. Knowing how social structure affects information seeking may help to explain why people in certain social groups are less able than others to acquire the information they need. Using Lin's position generator, outcomes of information-seeking episodes can be evaluated in terms of social capital.

Names of members of an individual's social network can be elicited in a number of different ways (Flap, Snijders, Volker, & van der Gaag, 2003). In many social network studies, the common method used to elicit names of members of an individual's social network is the *name generator*. The name generator elicits names by asking respondents who of their acquaintances, friends, or relatives they would call upon in certain situations, usually involving an exchange of some sort—a conversational exchange (e.g., with whom do you discuss personal matters?) or exchanges involving help to carry out tasks or providing access to resources. The name generator also elicits names by asking respondents about the emotional content of relationships—for example, “who are your closest friends?” A problem with the name generator, however, lies with the difficulty of eliciting comparable network samples when the questions used to elicit the networks are either subjective or refer to exchange relationships that cannot be systematically sampled.

The *position generator* was developed by Lin and Dumin (1986) to provide a more systematic way of eliciting network members in order to measure the social capital of an individual. It consists of a list of ordered structural positions that are salient to the society or organization being studied. These structural positions can be occupations, authorities, work units, classes, or any other positions that can represent the hierarchical structure of the social group or society of interest. The positions are assigned a prestige score and then ranked. Study respondents are asked to name people they know in each of these occupations or positions. Social capital is measured based on how high up the position generator the respondent can reach (*reach*), the difference between the highest and lowest position accessed (*range*), and how many different occupations in which they know people (*diversity*). Reach, range, and diversity are the measures of social capital obtained from the position generator.

Social capital theory dovetails nicely with several established frameworks for studying information behavior. Regarding Chatman's information poverty (1996, 2000), findings from past studies indicate that social capital is related to education and income. Since the poor tend to prefer informal sources (i.e., people) over more formal sources of information, their difficulties in finding the information they need may be related to their lack of social capital. On a different note, social capital theory complements Erdelez's (1997) information encountering, since social capital and social structure may explain passive acquisition of information: Those with better social capital have better quality social resources and therefore are more likely to be in a position to encounter useful information either directly or by proxy. Similarly and regarding Savolainen's (1995) everyday life information-seeking framework, as part of daily life people search for information that cuts across a variety of sectors, for instance health, education, finances, and employment. Having a greater variety of people in one's social network, with high-quality resources such as education and jobs, may make it more likely that they will find the information they need. Finally, considering Pettigrew's (1999; Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004) information grounds theory, people who get together in diverse groups are more likely to meet people from different social or work backgrounds. This gives people the opportunity to interact with others who have access to different and presumably better resources and thus add to their social capital. The findings that certain

information grounds may be more conducive to information acquisition than others may be explained by the level of social capital present.

Social capital theory provides a useful framework for examining information behavior. It provides a way of understanding how the social structure affects both access to information and the flow of information between members of social groups or organizations. The main strength of the theory is that it provides a method for measuring social capital which can be assessed against information-seeking outcomes.

The measurement of social capital also is one of the more problematic elements of the theory. Since the position generator and the theory of social capital is based on a hierarchical depiction of society, when the groups being studied are not obviously hierarchical it may be difficult to identify ranked positions. For instance, members of an academic department or of a poor neighborhood may not vary appreciably in their access to social resources. While occupations usually have prestige rankings assigned to them, other positions chosen to represent structural locations may not have prestige scores and therefore the researcher will have to do additional research to develop reliable rankings. Overall, social capital theory can be fruitfully applied to information behavior when attempting to understand how social context or social factors affect people's ability to find the information they need.

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