Dissertation Thesis Review Report

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Title: Towards the Methodological Foundation of Social Capital Theory. How (not) to Measure it in the Czech Republic.

Nowadays, social capital is applied in many different contexts and fields of research. Overuse and imprecision have rendered it prone to vague interpretation and indiscriminate application. Its application continues to face many difficulties, many of which are of fundamental importance and have not been solved satisfactorily. The author focuses on just such difficult aspects. The concept of “social capital” lies in the core of this dissertation thesis.

The 315-page thesis is divided into two main parts. Part 1 introduces and critically discusses theories proposed by important personalities in the field, including Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, Burt and Lin. Part 2 builds on the conceptualization proposed in previous theoretical chapters and discusses some measurement techniques. It is noted that measurement in the Czech Republic should take that context into account. The thesis is concluded with recommendations of the social capital measurement instruments the author finds suitable.

Both parts of the dissertation contain original contributions to the field. In order to attain them, the author had to have a good command of the subject matter, both theoretically and in terms of empirical techniques for data collection and analysis.

The dissertation works with a large number of citations (around 400). 37 pages of appendices outline the questionnaires used and some additional numeric results of the statistical analysis. Overall the structure and the presentation of the thesis are satisfactory. Subject index and Name index are added.

In part 1 author describes and discusses theories of Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, Burt and Lin. Building on Coleman, Putnam proposed an advanced operationalization of the social capital concept. The author criticizes Putnam for conceptualizing social capital at the macro level, bringing it too far away from the original concept. Her imperative of studying social capital at individual level brings her to Burt and Lin. After discussing Burt’s theory and the empirical consequences of his approach, Häuberer comes to believe that while Burt’s theory is not falsified, it requires revisions and additions. Burt puts too much emphasis on weak ties and ignores strong ties in the theory of social capital. Lin’s concept receives the highest recognition from Häuberer,
as she finds it to fulfill the requirements for a general theory of social capital. Lin includes inequalities in his concept of social capital. The results of empirical studies do not contradict the theory. In spite of that, Häuberer criticizes Lin for paying insufficient attention to the mezzo- and macro-levels and ignoring the negative effects.

The author concludes her theoretical considerations by adapting Lin’s model as a foundation for the empirical part of her dissertation. Her adaptation distinguishes between action enabling structures and social resources as such. Social capital is further distinguished based on whether it enables expressive or instrumental action. By building her model, Häuberer prepares the ground for assessing, classifying, and analyzing the different social capital measurement instruments.

I appreciate the theoretical chapters high. She accomplishes her own adaptation of the theoretical model in order to apply it in further chapters to classify instruments for measuring different aspects of social capital. She explains the contributions and weaknesses of the main theories concisely and precisely. She demonstrates knowledge of empirical studies that contributed to assessing the consequences of the different theories and verifying or disproving parts thereof.

Häuberer in part 1 stresses the fact that there are numerous relevant measurement instruments for social capital and new ones are constantly being introduced. Moreover, social capital influences different levels of the social system and certainly has a dynamic aspect as well. Therefore, the author verifies some measurement instruments based on a large dataset in order to assess the quality of those instruments in the second part of her thesis.

In Part 2, the author validates the measurement instruments with regard to the Czech environment they should be applied to. She relies on data collected in sociological surveys in the Czech Republic. She delivers a short essay characterizing the Czech social circumstances. In a special chapter, she outlines the concepts of measurement quality—objectiveness, reliability, validity—and the ways they can be determined statistically. In this respect, she also explains elements of confirmatory factor analysis and the risks of undermining measurement quality in statistical surveys. In further chapters, she analyzes the results in order to assess measurement quality of the different approaches to social capital and acquired social capital. In each case, she assesses reliability (by using the test-retest and internal consistency methods) as well as criterion validity. In Chapter 8 on acquired social capital, she uses confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine construct validity. She compares her data with Van der Gaag and Snijders’s results and assesses the level of similarity between factor structures.

The author concludes that only network size, density of strong ties and the resource generator can be recommended for use in further research. Instruments for measuring the size and density of
friendship network, structural gaps, and openness should be revised. Levels of formal weak ties need to be revised entirely. In her summary, the author suggests some avenues for future research of measurement instruments in order to verify social capital theories or, if applicable, apply empirical results in program and policy design.

Häuberer’s analysis brings novel results. It is demonstrated that some of the measures proposed do not have the required reliability and validity. Further steps and research directions are proposed. This demonstrates the fact that Häuberer realizes the necessity of well designed data collection and corresponding data analysis procedures. Author clearly demonstrates that Czechs have a long way to go in applying the concept of “social capital”—whether as dependent or independent variable—in surveys as well as practical measures for enlightened politicians.

With regard to statistical analysis methods used in this part I have some problem with the logistic regression. To my opinion it is dangerous to make transformation to binary variables in the way author describes. In fact negative and positive changes could nullify each other in whole population. It would be better to calculate polytomous logistic regression with values (negative change, no change, positive change), which better describes the original dependent variable. Of course it is matter of a further elaboration.

My second objection refers to possibly slightly wrong use of CFA method. I suppose for categorical data it is not enough to calculate estimates by help of bootstrap methods. We need unbiased estimates through polychoric correlations etc. It would be interesting to analyze how various methods of CFA parameters estimation would influence results of this study.

Questions for discussion:

What role can play the qualitative and interpretative research in studying the social capital?

Can modern types of realism (transcendental realism, critical realism) in some way be useful as basis in social capital theory theorizing?

In spite of the above remarks, I find the dissertation presents a large amount of qualitative high level research which brings new evidence. The author demonstrates a good command of the principles of scholarly work as well as the necessary scientific scepticism. Therefore I recommend the dissertation for defence.

Doc. RNDr. Jan Hendl, CSc. Prague, 14 April 2010