



Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking

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Abstract

The difference between bonding and bridging social capital relates to the nature of the relationships or associations in the social group or community. Bonding social capital is *within* a group or community whereas bridging social capital is *between* social groups, social class, race, religion or other important sociodemographic or socioeconomic characteristics. The bonding/bridging distinction can be made in relation to a range of relationship and network characteristics. Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* discussed bonding social capital is good for “getting by” and bridging is crucial for “getting ahead” (Putnam 2000). Putnam credit these terms to Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal (Gittel and Vidal 1998). Scholars at the World Bank are credited with adding the concept of linking social capital to describe relationships among people or institutions at different levels of societal power hierarchy (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Some authors include linking to make the three-way distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

Introduction

The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital builds on the seminal work of Mark Granovetter (Granovetter 1973, 1985, 2000) on embeddedness. This line to social capital theory is call the *network approach* and is most commonly used by researchers approaching social capital from economics. Key authors in this theoretical tradition can be traced from James Coleman (Coleman 1988, 1990) to Ronald Burt (Burt 1982, 1997, 2000; Lin, Cook, and Burt 2001), Nan Lin (Lin 2001; Lin et al. 2001; Marsden and Lin 1982), and Alejandro Portes (Portes 1998, 2000, Portes and Landolt 1996, 2000; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993).

The concepts of bonding and bridging social capital are associated with the network theories of structural holes and network closure (Adler and Kwon 2002). The social network theories provide a rich tradition of research that social capital theorists find highly applicable.

The taxonomic refinement of bonding and bridging has been described as *types* of social capital (Ramos-Pinto 2012), as *forms* of social capital (Gooderham, Minbaeva, and Pedersen 2011; Widén-Wulff et al. 2008; Woolcock and Narayan 2000), as *dimensions* of social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000), and as *functions* of social capital (Seferiadis et al. 2015). These terms are often used interchangeably, even by the same author in a single publication.

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Some authors have conceptualised the difference between bonding and bridging social capital as different types of trust. Bridging social capital could be conceptualised as generalized trust (earned trust) and bonding social capital as ascribed trust (van Staveren and Knorringa 2007).

Bonding social capital	Bridging social capital
Within	Between
Intra	Inter
Exclusive	Inclusive
Closed	Open
Inward looking	Outward looking
“Getting by”	“Getting ahead”
Horizontal	Vertical ¹
Integration	Linkage
Strong ties	Weak ties
People who are alike	People who are different
Thick trust	Thin trust
Network closure	Structural holes
Public-good model	Private-good model

Table 1. Distinctions between bonding and bridging social capital

In practice the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital is not easy given the multiple and overlapping relationships individuals have with

¹ In practice bridging social capital can be horizontal or vertical. See section on linking social capital for further discussion

others (Healy 2002). Although popular in academic literature the bonding/bridging distinction focuses on social structure so fails to reflect the multidimensional nature of social capital (Engbers, Thompson, and Slaper 2017). In the past some authors have taken one type, bonding or bridging, as the approach for their research. This is uncommon in recent years when researchers have preferred more comprehensive approaches.

Problems with bonding/bridging distinctions

These typologies amalgamate a variety of contradictory aspects of both networks and norms into single categories, creating methodological blind spots that decrease the use-value of the concept (Ramos-Pinto 2012). Bonding and bridging are not completely mutually exclusive. Groups from a similar background are not similar in every respect, and may provide bridging links across, for instance, generations or sexes or educational achievement. Conversely, in groups from different ethnic backgrounds people may find others of the same age and sex with a common educational background and interests (Edwards 2004).

Bonding social capital

Bonding social capital is a type of social capital that describes connections *within* a group or community characterised by high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes, and available information and resources. Bonding social capital exists between ‘people like us’ who are ‘in it together’ and who typically have strong close relationships. Examples include family members, close friends, and neighbours.

Bonding social capital is described as the strong relationships that develop between people of similar background and interests, usually include family and friends, provide material and emotional support, and are more inward-looking and protective. Bonding social capital refers to networks with a high density of relationships between members, where most, if not all, individuals belonging to the network are interconnected because they know each other and interact frequently with each other.

Friendships are often considered to be bonding social capital, in that they are frequently formed between people who share common characteristics or interests. Friends are people that we turn to when we are in a crisis, and with whom we feel close. However, friendships may also act as bridging relations, in that they may be between people of different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, or ages, who may in turn provide access to information and other groups or individuals not previously known to the other.

Bonding social capital based on location

If we consider this spatially then bonding would be ties within a village, and bridging would be ties to a member of a different village - between villages. Within a village we can expect people to feel a sense of belonging.

There would be dense networks of strong relationships stemming from daily interaction over long periods of time. The network is exclusive, requiring residence in the village, and inward looking in nature. The relationships would help to provide social support by allowing people to access favours, information, and emotional support.

In this context bridging social capital would be a relationship to someone in a different village. These relationships tend to be weaker, owing to the realities of space-time and therefore less frequent interaction. The relationship is with someone who is different, in this case they live in a different village, likely with different skills, knowledge, information, and importantly different friends. This type of relationship provides potential access to resources beyond ones’ immediate network through a friend of a friend type relationship.

This distinction led Robert Putnam to suggest that bonding social capital is good for “getting by” and bridging is crucial for “getting ahead”. Putnam described bonding social capital as inward looking, reinforcing exclusive identities and promoting homogeneity; whereas bridging social capital as outward looking, promoting links between diverse individuals. (Putnam 2000)

The bonding/bridging distinction is not necessarily geographically based and is often not relevant, particularly in modern developed societies. In traditional societies bonding social capital tends to be tied to place or geographic space, but in more developed countries people from diverse backgrounds are more likely to live in close proximity and networks tends to be less dense – i.e. people in developed countries don’t tend to know their neighbours as much as traditional societies.

Bonding social capital as associations

A different example would be within and between organisations. Bonding social capital would exist within a company where employees have shared identity, shared understandings, and a sense of belonging. Within the company the relations are exclusive and inward looking, and the networks is dense with most people knowing each other. Depending on the size of the organisation this may not be true but bonding social capital can still be found strongly in teams or units within the organisation.

In this context bridging social capital would be a relationship to someone in a different organisation. Bridging networks provide access to different resources so Putnam’s description is particularly relevant: bonding allows people to ‘get by’ by encouraging reciprocity and collaboration, and bridging allows people to ‘get ahead’ by providing access to resources not otherwise available.

We can think about the bonding/bridging divide as people who typically associate together, compared to connections to those who typically do not associate together.

Benefits of bonding social capital

Bonding social capital can fulfil a useful social function

by providing a vital source of support to people who suffer from socio-economic hardship or poor health. Bonding social capital tends to help people 'get by' and provides the norms and trust that facilitates collaborative action.

Research by Edin and Lein (1997) (Edin and Lein 1997) found that poor mothers living in public housing developments relied on money obtained from a network of family and friends to make ends meet. While bonding social capital allowed these mothers to cobble together enough resources to survive, their lack of bridging social capital did not allow them to connect with individuals or organizations outside their network that might promote social change or identify other forms of assistance.

Negative effects of bonding social capital

There is a general claim that bonding social capital tends to have negative outcomes, a stereotype where bridging social networks are perceived as good and bonding ones as bad. However, this is not accurate.

Bonding social capital is more likely to have some negative outcomes due to its tightly structured and exclusive nature, but it is also a very important source of social support. What is more important is the balance of bonding and bridging social capital. Neither is negative per se but can be negative depending on the balance and context.

Networks with excessive levels of bonding tend to breed bias and racism, creating outgroups and exclusion. The Ku Klux Klan is often cited as an example of a group with high levels of bonding social capital that has negative outcomes.

Several studies have found that bonding social capital has either no effect or a negative effect on economic outcomes, while bridging social capital can improve economic development, growth, and employment.

Bridging social capital

Bridging social capital is a type of social capital that describes connections that link people across a cleavage that typically divides society (such as race, or class, or religion). It is associations that 'bridge' between communities, groups, or organisations.

Bridging social capital is different from bonding social capital which is within social groups and is characterised by dense networks with people feeling a sense of shared identity and belonging. The bonding/bridging distinction can be made in relation to a range of relationship and network characteristics. The table below summarises the main features of each.

Bridging describes social relationships of exchange, often of associations between people with shared interests or goals but contrasting social identity (Pelling and High 2005).

Although friends are normally considered bonding social capital, friendships may also act as bridging

relations, in that they may be between people of different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, or ages, who may in turn provide access to information and other groups or individuals not previously known to the other (Edwards 2004).

A third type – linking social capital?

Some authors have suggested a third type of social capital is needed to capture the power dynamics of vertical associations. Michael Woolcock called this linking social capital and conceptualised it as a subset of bridging social capital. If linking social capital is included, then bridging social capital is an intermediate step between bonding and linking social capital. Under a bonding/bridging/linking taxonomy bridging would be defined somewhat differently compared to a bonding/bridging binary taxonomy.

Michael Woolcock suggested that bridging social capital can be horizontal or vertical so a single category misses the important aspect of the exercise of power that is important in vertical associations (Evans and Syrett 2007). Thus linking social capital refers to relations between individuals and groups in different social strata in a hierarchy where power, social status and wealth are accessed by different groups (Woolcock 2001).

With the inclusion of the linking type bridging social capital relates to bonds of connectedness that are formed across diverse *horizontal* groups (Granovetter 1985; Putnam 2000).

This article adopts a bonding/bridging taxonomy so combines linking social capital with bridging social capital. See the section on linking social capital for further discussion.

Benefits of bridging social capital

The benefits of bridging social capital are far-reaching and can include increased ability to gather information, ability to gain access to power or better placement within the network, or ability to better recognize new opportunities (Adler and Kwon 2002). Because bridging social capital traverses social boundaries it tends to increase tolerance and acceptances of different people, values, and beliefs through contact with diverse others (Paxton 2002).

Bridging social capital allows different groups to share and exchange information, ideas and innovation and builds consensus among the groups representing diverse interests. Overlapping networks may make accessible the resources and opportunities which exist in one network to a member of another (Stone and Hughes 2002).

The bridging form of social capital functions as a social lubricant and has potential to work as social leverage, to help one 'get ahead' (Putnam 2000); it is mostly inclusive and consists of thin trust in light and ever-changing networks (Widén-Wulff et al. 2008). The word 'weak' should not be interpreted negatively, since the weakness

in the ties is the strength of bridging social capital. Social relationships are voluntary, continuously leaving open the option of breaking up or changing one relation for another, without strong social sanctions (van Staveren and Knorringa 2007).

It has been suggested that urban communities tend to have strong bridging but weaker bonding capital, whereas rural communities more typically have strong bonding but weaker bridging capital (Woolcock 2002).

Negative effects of bridging social capital

Unlike bonding social capital that can result in exclusion and a range of negative outcomes, bridging social capital has few, if any, negative effects.

Depending on your perspective social capital can have negative outcomes, but this is typically not a characteristic of social capital and how it manifests. It can facilitate industrial strikes that may allow workers to receive improved conditions, but this generally represents a cost for their employers and therefore potentially reduced profits. It may improve innovation but may also enable collusion, price fixing, or corruption.

Creating bridging social capital

Bridging social capital is essentially the result of networking outside normal social groupings. There is opportunity to build bridging social capital any time someone interacts with strangers. This can happen when attending events, or joining associations such as interest or sporting groups, industry associations, action groups, or any other type of social grouping. Bridging social capital is fostered most by memberships in associations that are representative of the larger society.

Linking Social Capital

Linking social capital is a type of social capital that describes norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting *across* explicit, formal or institutionalized *power or authority* gradients in society (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). These relationships are described as 'vertical' and the key feature is differences in social position or power. An example could be relationships between a community-based organisation and government or other funders.

Linking social capital is the third type of social capital that extends the common bonding/bridging distinction that is popular in the network theory approach to social capital. Linking social capital may be viewed as an extension of bridging social capital involving networks and ties with individuals, groups or corporate actors represented in public agencies, schools, business interests, legal institutions and religious/political groups (Healy 2002).

Scholars at the World Bank are credited with adding the concept of linking social capital to describe relationships among people or institutions at different levels of societal power hierarchy. Linking social capital

differs from bridging social capital because the power differences between partners are a conscious part of the relationship. While bridging social capital develops horizontal trust among unlike groups, linking social capital involves classic patron/client or mentor/mentee relationships (Schneider 2006).

Linking social capital refers to relations between individuals and groups in different social strata in a hierarchy where power, social status and wealth are accessed by different groups (Healy and Cote 2001). As such it is the extent to which individuals build relationships with institutions and individuals who have relative power over them (e.g. to provide access to services, jobs or resources) (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Linking relationships also involve reciprocity. For example, funders expect effective, quality services for their grants and mentors hope that the people they work with will reflect well on them by doing well in their lives or providing the same assistance to others (Schneider 2006).

Benefits of linking social capital

Linking social capital involves social relations with those in authority that can be used to access resources or power (Stone and Hughes 2002). Linking social capital has many indirect community benefits that are often omitted from in the literature such as connecting government officials with the people who provide knowledge and skills to perform their jobs (Jordan 2015).

Linking social capital is demonstrably central to well-being, especially in poor countries and communities, where too often bankers charge usurious interest rates, the police are corrupt, and teachers fail to show up for work. IT opens up economic opportunities to those belonging to less powerful or excluded groups (Jordan 2015).

It is important to have an appropriate balance of all types of social capital, not just linking with an absence of the other types. Research has found that without linking types of social capital, bonding social capital alone may not be sufficient for community development to occur (Flora 1998). Onyx et al 2007 identified that communities with higher levels of all forms of social capital are more able to mobilize in the face of adversity and less likely to have negative outcomes.

Negative effects of linking social capital

If there is an absence of other forms of control and accountability, linking social capital can quickly become nepotistic or a mechanism for insider-trading and political favouritism (Grootaert et al. 2003). Other authors have also found connections between high levels of linking social capital and nepotism, corruption, and suppression (Szreter and Woolcock 2004).

This highlights the importance of the balance of different types of social capital and the highly context specific nature of social capital.

Creating linking social capital

Linking social capital develops over time, involving both shared cultural values regarding service provision and long-term, trusting relationships. Creating new trusting ties across power relationships requires time and, often, brokers (Schneider 2009).

Non-government organisations (NGOs) working with communities to implement donor or government projects become brokers of linking social capital. Often funders recognise the importance of the established linking social capital and continue to fund NGOs that have good relationships with the wider community.

Approaches to conceptualising bonding/bridging social capital

Although the distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital may immediately seem straightforward, there is an underlying conceptual ambiguity plaguing the current theoretical literature. I have discussed bonding social capital as networks of people who are similar in some important way, and networks of people who typically associate together. This represents two different ways of conceptualising bonding/bridging:

- *Internal* - bridging and bonding via socio-economic heterogeneity of *within* organizations
- *External* - bridging and bonding through interconnections between associations - bridging socio-economic divides might predominantly result from overlapping networks *between* organizations

Evaluation of the *internal* bridging nature of associations involves comparing membership composition of each association to the composition of the overall population on a large number of socio-economic dimensions, for example age, gender, education, income, religion, race, housing status, professional status, occupational classification, marital status, whether one has children.

Assessment of the *external* bridging potential relies on counting interconnections between associations and correcting this number for the relative size of each association. This gives information about the extent of overlap in networks with a higher degree of overlap representing more bonding social capital.

Let's explore an example to illustrate the differences. A local Sheffield (UK) cricket team may have players who are socioeconomically similar – they may all work for local steel works, be predominantly white males between 18 and 40 years of age, have similar levels of education and income, and the dominant religion may be Christian. Many of the players may know each other outside of the cricket team, and many may also know other members of their families. They would likely live near each other and have gone to the same schools, attended the same churches, and been members of the same groups or clubs.

This represents a high level of bonding social capital by both approaches.

Contrast this to a local cricket team in Brisbane (Australia) where players would likely come from diverse backgrounds. Some may be university students, others may work in a variety of white and blue-collar professions, and some may be unemployed. They may include a variety of ethnic backgrounds and have vastly different socioeconomic characteristics. They would be less likely to know each other outside of the team, and although they may live in the same area higher levels of mobility may mean few of them went to the same school, attended the same church, or were members of the same groups or clubs.

This represents a low level of bonding social capital by both approaches.

In both examples above the result was the same regardless of the methodological approach used to define bonding and bridging social capital. This is because often heterogeneity of membership and interconnection between associations is related. Likeness of members is often related to the likeness of their associational memberships.

Binary or continuum?

Generally social capital that is either bonding or bridging describes the nature of a social relationship. If the relationship is with someone like myself, who moves in similar social circles, then it is described as bonding. If the relationship is with someone different to myself, who moves in different circles, then it is described as bridging social capital.

Of course, the nature of a relationship is not binary, it is not this or that. Social relationships are far more complicated and typically a relationship will have some characteristics of bonding and some characteristics of bridging. The same is true if we consider social capital at a higher level, as in the cricket team examples. Any network will have some characteristics of bonding and some characteristics of bridging.

The binary nature of the distinction between bonding and bridging risks simplification and reduction in analysis. This is a significant problem if researchers and policy makers assume the two are strictly mutually exclusive.

The distinction is useful in describing social networks and in understanding the function of social capital. We must be careful to clearly define bonding social capital to ensure any empirical analysis is rigorously linked to our theory.

An integrated approach to measurement of bonding social capital

Researchers have developed a method to integrate internal and external approaches to bridging and bonding social capital by combining them into a matrix (Geys and Murdoch 2010). This is one way to combine both conceptualisations of bonding/bridging without

further simplifying the research context. It may also be possible to create three categorisations rather than a simple binary. This would allow for a 'middle' type that is neither distinctly bonding or bridging. This approach would sharpen the distinction between the two extremes of the scale by not unnecessarily, and possibly erroneously, forcing associations in the middle of the ranking into either the bridging or bonding category.

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