

# Toward Clearer Conceptualization and Theorization of Social Capital: Focusing on Four Aspects of the Concept

Tohoku University

Yoshimichi Sato

## 1. To Save Social Capital from Conceptual and Theoretical Confusion

Social scientists as well as practitioners have paid attention to social capital for a few decades expecting that it has positive effects on actors and society. At a glance at the field of social capital, however, we see conceptual and theoretical confusion about it. Coleman (1999), for example, argues that dense social networks between parents of high school students become social capital for them, while Burt (1992) maintains that such dense networks do not become social capital for entrepreneurs. Putnam (1993) points out a low level of social capital in southern Italy, but families there must have a high level of social capital because people in southern Italy are family-oriented and their family ties are strong.

I argue (1) that these seemingly contradictory findings and theoretical arguments occur because students in the field have not necessarily made clear which aspect of social capital they deal with and (2) that, to save the concept from the confusion, we should examine four aspects of social capital mentioned below.

## 2. Four Aspects of Social Capital

2-1. Goals and Utilities of Actors A social network becomes social capital for an actor, while it does not become social capital for another actor. This is because they have different goals and utilities (Lin 1999)

2-2. Levels of Definition Social capital has been defined at the individual, the meso, and the societal level. Identifying the level of a particular definition is a way to avoid confusion related to its usage.

2-3. Coverage of Social Capital A third aspect that distinguishes between definitions of social capital is coverage. A useful categorization is global versus local social capital. Global social capital covers a whole society, while local social capital covers a smaller society within the whole society.

2-4. Types of Social Capital A fourth aspect of social capital is types of social capital. An important approach to the categorization of different types of social capital categorizes it into cognitive and structural forms (Uphoff, 1999).

## 3. Conclusion

We can save social capital from confusion by identifying the four aspects. Furthermore, interesting research questions can be derived from them, which I will show in my presentation.

## References

Burt, R.S. 1992. *Structural Holes* Harvard University Press.

Coleman, J.S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Lin, N. 1999. "Building a Network Theory of Social Capital." *Connections* 22(1): 28-51.

Putnam, R.D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work* Princeton University Press.

Uphoff, N. 1999. "Understanding Social Capital." P. Dugaputa and I. Serageldin (eds.) *Social Capital*. The World Bank.