

Defining social capital; a systematic analysis of metaphorical conceptualisations

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ABSTRACT

There is much discussion in the literature on social capital about the abundance of definitions. This paper presents a systematic metaphor analysis of the metaphors used in social capital literature to conceptualise the key concept of "relationships". In the three texts analysed, seven metaphors for relationships are dominant. Relationships are conceptualised as contacts, links, ties and connections, paths, networks, channels, resources and capital. These together create a ladder of relationship conceptualisations, which helps further the discussion on definitions of social capital and facilitate progress towards consensus on a definition.

There is much discussion in the literature on social capital about the abundance of definitions and concepts (Adler & Kwon, 2000; 2002; Paldam, 2000). Some definitions focus on the characteristics of relations an actor maintains with other actors (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995; Granovetter, 1973; 1985; Putnam, 2000), the structure of relations among actors in a network (Burt, 1992; 1997), the resources possessed by the actors in a network (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981) or the resources, structure and characteristics of a network of actors (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).

This study shows that the abundance of definitions and concepts is the result of a variety of conceptual metaphors used by authors in the field of social relations and social capital, in an attempt to understand the underlying concept of "relationships". Relationship is an abstract concept that is given meaning by using a variety of metaphors like relationships as "ties", "paths", and "capital".

Following the idea that metaphors are often used in an unconscious and implicit way, we will try to reveal the conceptual metaphors for the concept of relationships, utilised in the literature on social capital, by looking at the entailments of these metaphors. Entailments are the connotations of the metaphor that transport meaning from the source to the target domain. These entailments show themselves in texts through verbs, nouns and adjectives. By analysing verbs, nouns and adjectives, we will identify the author's metaphors-in-use (Morgan, 1996) in an attempt to discuss and provide answers for the diversity and number of definitions of social capital, as well as the number of methodological approaches to its measurement. We will also consider how definitions of social capital have progressed over the duration of the publications analysed.

HOW METAPHOR WORKS

Metaphors play an important role in theorizing about organizations (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Some authors argue that metaphors should be avoided in organizational theory (Bourgeois & Pinder, 1983; Tinker, 1986). Others see metaphors as valuable creative tools for developing new theories and insights (Weick, 1989). Morgan (1997) has shown that many theories about organizations can be "reordered" (Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2003) into a particular metaphorical view of organizations, showing the metaphorical bases of organizational theorizing. Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) go even further, presenting evidence from cognitive science indicating that metaphors are inescapable because they are the basis for abstract reasoning. Metaphors are conceptual by nature and feed and structure abstract thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

There is a debate about the way metaphor works (Black, 1993; Cornelissen, 2005; 2006; Heracleous, 2003; Keenoy et al. 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; 2003; Marshak, 2003; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002; Oswick & Jones, 2006; Tsoukas, 1991), especially about whether metaphor is simply a matter of comparison, highlighting the analogies in the source and target domain of the metaphor, or whether a metaphor does more than that. Some authors (Oswick et al. 2002; 2006) argue that when using metaphor, individuals pick a source domain ("capital") that fits the characteristics of the target domain they want to highlight ("relationships are valuable"), resulting in a metaphor ("relationships as social capital"). As Oswick and Jones (2006: 484) describe it:

Put another way, we often know the characteristics of the phenomenon that we wish describe, and the metaphor is simply a vehicle for articulating what is

already known (albeit, on occasions, it is only known either implicitly or partially).

Cornelissen (2005; 2006) presents the domains-interaction model as an alternative for the correspondence theory of metaphor to highlight the fact that metaphors can produce new meaning that goes beyond similarity. According to this model the process of metaphor application is not just the transfer of selected meaning from a source to a target, but a two-way process in which the target and the source concepts are aligned, and correspondence is constructed and created, rather than deciphered. As a result the metaphor can produce new meaning in both the target and the source domain.

Both the correspondence and the domains-interaction model assume that the characteristics and the structure of the target domain exist independently of the metaphors used to describe them. Even in the domains-interaction model the first step is the identification of correspondence between the structure of the target domain and the source domain. However, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have shown that in many cases individuals unconsciously use metaphor to conceptualise and structure the target domain. The target domain gets its structure from the metaphor used to describe it. For example, as such the concept of "relationship" is empty. It is by unconsciously applying the metaphor of *relationships as paths* that it makes sense to talk about relationships as being "close" or "distant", to question how many people can be "reached" through a network of relationships, or to identify somebody as a local "bridge" in the relationship network. These attributes (close/distant), verbs (to reach), and nouns (bridge) aren't used literally, yet they make sense because the underlying conceptual metaphor of *relationships as paths* is familiar. At the same time we use

other metaphors to conceptualise relationships, such as a *relationship as a tie or link*. This metaphor enables us to think and talk about "strong relationships", to "connect people", or "a chain of people".

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) introduce the idea of *primary metaphors* that help to conceptualise subjective experiences using mental imagery from the sensor and motor functions of our body. For example, we use the sensorimotor experience of affection as warmth (the warm body of our affectionate mother in our childhood) as the source domain when we conceptualise the subjective experience of a relationship (the target domain) as a "warm" relationship. Lakoff and Johnson claim that we do not first decide what characteristic of a phenomenon to highlight and then pick our metaphor, but that the metaphor allows us to bracket (Weick, 1995), or highlight, certain characteristics that would not be possible without metaphor.

Often we use multiple metaphors for a single concept. For a rich domains of experience, like love, a single conceptual mapping does not do the job. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show that love is conceptualised in terms of a journey, physical force, illness, magic, madness, union, closeness, etcetera. As we will see later, in social capital literature the experience of relationship is conceptualised by at least seven metaphors. Sometimes contradictory metaphors are used for the same concept. In the *love is madness* metaphor ("I am crazy about her"), there is lack of control, while in the *love as a collaborative work of art* metaphor, love requires careful work. Furthermore, in the mapping of characteristics from the source to the target domain, some features are included and others are left out. When we say, "the man is like a lion", we do not refer to the hairs or the tail of a lion but to its strengths and wildness. Some metaphorical mappings are apt and others are not.

Primary metaphors go before language and help to conceptualise our experiences. The use of primary metaphors is part of the unconscious mental operations concerned with conceptual systems, meaning, inference, and, in the end, language. The metaphorical mapping from the source to the target domain can be rich and complex because of the many entailments that metaphors have. We can recognize the unconscious and conceptual use of metaphor in organizational theory using systematic metaphor analysis because it shows itself in the non-literal use of certain nouns, verbs and adjectives related to the core concept of a theory. For the systematic metaphor analysis in this paper, social "relationship" is chosen as the core concept of definitions of and theories on social capital. The aim of the analysis is to discuss and provide answers for the diversity and number of definitions of social capital.

THEORIZING ABOUT SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Definitions of social capital are numerous and can be categorised in a number of ways. Some definitions focus on the characteristics of relations an actor maintains with other actors (Coleman, 1990; Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1985; Putnam, 2000), the structure of relations among actors in a network (Burt, 1992; 1997), the resources possessed by the actors in a network (Lin et al. 1981), or the resources, structure and characteristics of a network of actors (Gubbins & Garavan, 2005; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Seibert et al. 2001). These definitions distinguish between social network and social resource elements of social capital. Gabbay and Leenders (2001) make the distinction more explicit, specifying that social capital comprises the beneficial resources actors draw from their social networks, rather than the relationships that constitute those social networks. Lin (1999: 35) also emphasises the social resource elements of social capital in his definition; "the resources

embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilised in purposive actions". Conversely, Sandefur, Laumann and Heinz (2002) consider that the aspects of social structure and social relationships that are potentially valuable through their provision of beneficial resources are forms of social capital. Burt (1992) focuses primarily on the structural elements of social capital but also states that social capital is at once the resources that contacts hold and the structure of contacts in a network. He posits that the resources describe "who" you reach and the structure describes "how" you reach. Coleman's (1990: 305) definition of social capital adopts the same view "social capital means aspects of social structure, which actors can use as resources for realising their interests". However, Johanson (2001) criticises those definitions of social capital that incorporate both the structure and the resources, arguing that this soon results in circular inference as it combines both network structure and its outcomes (see also Fukuyama, 1995). Making a comparison between social and financial capital, Johanson highlights that financial capital can be defined as an amount of wealth without reference to the possible profits it may produce and thus definitions of social capital should also not refer to potential outcomes.

These definitions can be further categorised according to those that view social capital in terms of internal network relations or relations external to the network. Definitions that focus on the external relations have been referred to as "bridging" (Adler & Kwon, 2002) or "communal" (Oh, Kilduff, & Brass, 1999) forms of social capital and those that focus on the internal relations are referred to as "bonding" (Adler et al. 2002) or "linking" (Oh et al. 1999) forms of social capital. The bridging view focuses primarily on social capital as a resource embedded in the social network tying the focal actor to other actors external to the collectivity. The bonding view of

social capital focuses on the internal ties of a given collectivity (organisation, community, nation etc.) and especially those features that give the collectivity cohesiveness. Those definitions that are neutral or adopt both the internal and external definitions of social capital consider that the distinctions between the views are a matter of perspective and unit of analysis and they are not mutually exclusive. They argue that the behaviour of the focal actor is external to the actor and internal to the social group (the collective).

Still other definitions of social capital focus on the substance, the source or the effects of social capital. Putnam (2000) posits that definitions of social capital have a common "central area", namely trust and cooperation. He argues that trust is fundamental to all definitions of social capital as it would appear that without trust, cooperation is limited to activities that are easy to monitor simultaneously and this trust is primary for further cooperation. Adler and Kwon (2002) suggest that goodwill, defined as the sympathy (Robison, Schmid, & Siles, 2002), trust (Adler, 2001; Leana & Van Buren, 1999) and forgiveness (Williamson, 1985) offered to an individual by friends, family and acquaintances, are the substance of social capital. A number of researchers have made references to the sources of social capital in their definitions, however beyond the acceptance that social capital is derived from social relations (taking cognisance of the definitions that regard social relations to constitute an element of social capital), much disagreement and confusion exists concerning what specifically creates social capital. The broad literature and definitions in the area debates such sources as motivation (Portes, 1998), norms (Putnam, 1993), trust (Leana et al. 1999; Putnam, 1993), associability and ability (Leana et al. 1999). The effects of social capital are also still contested and thus definitions vary in this regard.

Alder & Kwon (2002) propose that the effects of social capital flow from the information, influence and solidarity made available through social capital. Trust is also argued to be an asset resulting from social capital; construed as a relational asset (Lin, 1999), as is motivation (Burt, 1992; Uzzi, 1999).

The diversity and number of definitions of social capital evokes some criticism (Robison et al. 2002). Indeed Castle (1998) comments that unless the social capital concept is used with some degree of precision and in a comparable manner, it will come to have little value as an analytical construct. Such a plethora of definitions poses difficulties for those who wish to define it. Also without agreement on what constitutes social capital, empirical measurement is difficult and varied (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Furthermore, Baron and Hannon (1994) complain about the indiscriminate and metaphoric importation of economic concepts into sociological literature. They refer to the social capital literature as an example of "a plethora of capitals".

METHODOLOGY

We analysed the unconscious metaphorical conceptualisations in the social capital literature to gain insight into this "plethora of capitals". The unconscious and conceptual use of metaphor in organizational theory can be recognized because it shows itself in the non-literal use of certain nouns, verbs and adjectives. Systematic metaphor analysis is a form of an inductive approach that seeks to discover those underlying metaphors that are already in use, as opposed to a deductive approach, which involves taking a metaphor and imposing it on a particular organizational phenomenon (Grant et al. 1996; Palmer & Dunford, 1996).

In systematic metaphor analysis, we identify the core concept of a theory as the target area and analyse all phrases surrounding that target. Then we look at whether these phrases are literal or non-literal. We then search for the metaphor that gives non-literal phrases their meaning. The non-literal use of words can be difficult to recognize because we need to temporarily turn off our own embodied primary metaphors. The procedure for systematic metaphor analysis consists of six steps (Andriessen, 2006; Schmitt, 2005).

Identifying the target area for metaphor analysis

Metaphor analysis requires that a topic be selected in advance. In the case of social network and social capital theory the common denominator is the phenomenon of relationships.

Sampling

Systematic metaphor analysis assumes that text is available as material for further analysis (although the metaphorical content of gestures, symbols and images can also be analysed). We analysed three key articles in the literature on social capital. We selected the articles because they each represent the beginning of a new way of looking at social capital. Granovetter (1973) analyses social networks by looking at relationships between people in terms of structure. He is particularly concerned with the strength of ties. Lin et al. (1981) conceptualise relationships as social resources and argues that is the content of relationships and not the structure that is valuable. Burt (1997) conceptualises relationships as social capital. However, he also focuses predominately on the structural elements of social networks, particularly the existence of ties rather than the strength of ties.

Highlighting all phrases related to the target area

In the three texts we highlighted a total of 880 words and phrases related to relationships. We emphasize the various phrases in the following quote from Burt (1997) as an example of how this procedure works.

The structural *hole* argument defines *social capital* in terms of the information and control advantages of being the *broker* in *relations* between people otherwise *disconnected* in *social structure* (p. 340).

Each of the italicised words refers somehow to the idea of "relationships". In the quotation, relationships are conceptualised as a "hole", as "social capital", and as "social structure". "Disconnected" refers to an attribute of a relationship, and a "broker" refers to a role regarding relationships.

Identifying metaphors

A word or phrase is identified as a metaphor if (a) it can be understood beyond the literal meaning in the context; (b) the literal meaning stems from an source domain of sensoric or cultural experience; and (c) this literal meaning is transferred to the abstract target area (Schmitt, 2005). In the quotation from Burt (1997) above, five out of the six words or phrases fulfil these criteria (hole, social capital, broker, disconnected and social structure).

Synthesizing collective metaphorical concepts

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), individual metaphors do not occur by chance but can be traced back to underlying primary metaphors. Individual metaphors that share the same source and target domains are part of a more common concept

(Schmitt, 2005). The next step in the analysis is to group together all words and phrases that use the same source domain and identify the underlying collective metaphorical concept. It is often possible to create a taxonomy of source domains in which one source domain is part of a larger domain (Andriessen, 2006). Sometimes it is difficult to identify the metaphorical concept of an individual word, like the word *hole* in the quotation from Burt (1997). However, by looking at the other individual metaphors surrounding the word, in most cases the source domain becomes clear. In this case a *hole* refers to a lack of connection between two networks, which is why we grouped the word *hole* under the *relationships as networks* metaphor.

Counting the number of words or phrases associated with each metaphorical concept

The final step is to count the number of words or phrases for each metaphorical concept and divide this by the total number of words and phrases. The hypothesis is that the number of words or phrases is related to the importance of a particular metaphor in a text. This allows for a comparison between texts and between authors. Andriessen (2006) found that a dominant metaphor used for a particular phenomenon in a text can be different from an author's official definition of that phenomenon. In other words, an author's metaphor-in-use (Morgan, 1996) can be different from his/her espoused metaphor.

FINDINGS

We were able to relate ninety-nine percent of all words and phrases to underlying metaphorical concepts. This indicates that metaphor plays a dominant role in the conceptualisation of and theorizing about social capital. We found seven dominant metaphors that each highlight a certain characteristic of relationships. The seven

metaphors are related to each other in the sense that each subsequent metaphor builds on the previous one, creating a ladder of relationship conceptualisations (see figure 1). The higher up the ladder one progresses, the more distant the conceptualisations get from the more concrete experience of *relationships as contacts*, and the more abstract they become. Each metaphor allows for a particular set of *nouns* to indicate relationships, *verbs* to indicate activities concerning relationships, and *adjectives* that depict attributes of relationships. These attributes can be described as dichotomies (for example strong versus weak relationships).

Insert figure 1 about here

In the following overview we briefly describe each metaphor, its relationship with the previous metaphor, and the elements the metaphor contributes to the discourse about social networks and social capital.

Relationships as contacts

All three authors conceptualise *relationships as contacts*, as in the following example taken from Granovetter (1973):

One point on which there is no general agreement is whether ego's network should be treated as composed only of those to whom he is tied directly, or should include the *contacts* of his *contacts*, and/or others. (p. 1370)

The source domain of this metaphor is the sensorimotor function of touch. This metaphor allows for the bracketing of an individual as a point of contact in a relationship. It adds to the discourse the idea of "direct" and "indirect" relationships.

A direct relationship has two contacts A and B that make direct contact. In an indirect relationship there are other contacts between A and B.

Relationships as links, ties, and connections

The coupling of two points of contacts into a relationship creates a link, tie or connection, as in the following quote from Granovetter (1973):

(...) the stronger the tie between A and B, the larger the proportion of individuals in S to whom they will both be tied, that is connected by a weak or strong tie. (p. 1362)

In the source domain of mechanical connections, a link, tie or connection can be weak or strong and the metaphor *relationships as links, ties, and connections* transfers this attribute to the target as when Granovetter (1973) discusses the strength of ties as being either weak or strong. The metaphor also adds to the discourse the dichotomy of "connected" and "disconnected" contacts. Burt (1992) utilises this entailment of the metaphor to discuss structural holes as the degree of connectivity in a network.

Relationships as paths

Several links can be connected into a "chain of relations". However, in the three articles examined the chain metaphor was only used once. The spatial metaphor of *relationships as paths* though, produces the same meaning and was used a total of eighty-two times (see Figure 2), as in (Granovetter, 1973):

The significance of weak ties, then, would be that those, which are local bridges, create more, and shorter, paths. (p. 1365)

This quotation illustrates the consistent conceptual nature of metaphors. Because we conceptualise relationships as paths or roads it is meaningful in the target domain to use other, related nouns from the same source domain, like a bridge. The *relationships as paths* metaphor is very rich as it opens up the source domain of movement and allows us to start acting on and controlling relationships. We found references to movement activities concerning relationships, like *to move between*, *to bring together*, *to traverse*, *to follow along*, *to reach* (a destination), *to trace*, and *to cross* (a bridge). It also adds to the discourse the dichotomy of "long" and "short" paths of relationships as well as "distant" and "close" relationships. The literature on social networks points out that there may be a distance (length of path) beyond which it is not feasible for an actor to communicate with another actor because of costs or distortions entailed in each act or transaction (Harary, Norman, & Cartwright, 1965). Understanding social networks utilising the *relationships as paths* metaphor facilitates greater understanding of the actor's ability to act on (in this case communicate) or control in long or short paths of relationships. Furthermore, Granovetter (1973) refers to a specific type of weak tie – a bridge – defined as a line in a network, which provides the only path between two points or a tie that links two networks with each other that otherwise would not be connected. Again, utilising the relationships as paths metaphor and its source domain of movement makes it possible to illuminate how the "bridge" enables actors to "act" in cases where "paths" are otherwise too long for action to occur.

Relationships as networks

A complex set of paths constitutes a network. The metaphor of *relationships as a network* was the most used metaphor in the articles analysed. A network is in itself an

abstract concept, which can be conceptualised as a spatial, two-dimensional pattern or structure with points, positions and locations; as well as lines, lines with holes in them, patterns, circles, groups, clusters, and sectors. All of these nouns were found in the texts with reference to relationships. The network metaphor adds a number of important distinctions to the discourse: *central* versus *marginal* relationships, *small* and *large* social networks, *sparse* and *dense* patterns of relationships, *close-knit* and *loose-knit*, *cohesive* and *fragmented*, and *hierarchical* versus *non-hierarchical* patterns. The following quote from Lin et al. (1981) illustrates how the metaphor is used:

Social networks link persons of different statuses in the social structure both directly and indirectly. (p. 1165)

The moment relationships are conceptualised as a two-dimensional pattern, then suddenly the question arises as to where the network ends and where are its boundaries. It is useful to realize that these questions become especially meaningful in the context of the *relationships as networks* metaphor. Thus, the ability to demarcate relationships becomes more difficult when relationships are defined using this metaphor. Utilising the former metaphors, one can define the relationships boundaries. The metaphor of *relationships as contacts* includes those in direct and indirect physical contact with the focal actor. The metaphor of *relationships as ties* includes those who are strongly or weakly "connected" to the focal actor and recognises areas of "disconnect". The metaphor of *relationships as paths* includes the actors along the path. However, *relationships as networks* encompasses all these entailments and the metaphor adds the infinity of 2-dimensional space. The researcher is forced to make such decisions as, which paths, ties or contacts to focus on, whether

to focus on central or marginal relationships or whether cohesiveness or fragmentation is more important. Researchers faced with the difficulties encountered through utilising this metaphor sometimes decide to focus on egocentric rather than whole networks (Wasserman & Faust, 1999). They thereby focus on all paths, ties, contacts, central, marginal, cohesive and fragmented attributes etcetera of a focal individuals network, rather than the broader group, organisational, community or infinite network. In addition, when relationships are seen as networks it becomes possible to configure those networks by adding links or bridges and strengthening ties, thereby exercising some form of control over their structure. Literature, which attempts to manage social networks and develop social capital, is therefore proposing to configure social networks in this way (e.g. Cross & Parker, 2004).

Relationships as channels

So far the metaphors did not allow for bracketing anything about the quality of the relationship. All metaphors were about the structure of social relations. The *relationships as channels* metaphor makes it possible to think about the "content" and the "channel" through which content flows within the network; content which is often portrayed as information, ideas, and power, as in Granovetter (1973):

Indirect contacts are thus typically reached through the ties in this sector, such ties are then of importance not only in ego's manipulation of networks, but also in that they are the channels through which ideas, influences, or information socially distant from ego may reach him. (p. 1370)

The *relationships as channels* metaphor allows the bracketing of "transfer of content" in relationships, whereas relationships without channels but with ties only

facilitates "access" to the content but not the transfer. The channelling of content gives access to even more verbs for exercising control, including *to filter*, *to transmit*, *to direct*, and *to concentrate*. It also allows for the distinction between high-quality and low-quality relationships, because the quality depends on the ability to transfer content. Hansen's (1999) discussion on the different utility value of weak and strong ties utilises the relationships as channel metaphor. Hansen argues that weak ties are more beneficial in terms of *accessing* novel information but strong ties are more capable of enabling *transfer* of information. This differentiation goes straight to the heart of the channel metaphor suggesting that strong ties possess attributes from the connection and channel metaphors, whereas weak ties only possess attributes from the connection metaphor. Structural holes theory also utilises the *relationships as channel* metaphor. The actor who becomes the "bridge" between otherwise disconnected actors has a say in whose interests are served by the bridge and can filter the information and benefits flowing through the bridge or channel (Burt, 1997).

Relationships as resources

We are at the point on the ladder of relationship conceptualisations that we have a structure and we have transfer of content, and we have some verbs to bracket ways to control both the structure and the content flow. The next metaphor we found adds more content to the picture and allows for the use of the structure and the content flow as a means to an end. The *relationships as resources* metaphor is based on the source domain of physical resources for survival. The metaphor makes relationships instrumental and places them in a taxonomy of organizational resources that also includes financial resources, human resources and physical resources. It allows us to include relationships in the well-known conceptualisation of organizations as input-

throughput-output systems (Morgan, 1997). Through this metaphor, relationships are conceptualised as "substance", which gives access to more control verbs, like *to use*, *to benefit from*, and *to measure* (an amount). It also adds to the discourse the attribute dichotomy of "more" versus "less" of this particular resource.

The instrumental nature of relationships in this metaphor is illustrated by the following quote from Lin et al. (1981):

The wealth, status, and power, as well as the social ties, of these persons who are directly or indirectly linked to the individual and who, therefore comprise his social network, are considered potential social resources for the individual. (p. 1165)

A synonym for resource is the word *asset*. Assets have a specific meaning in the accounting community. Therefore, the metaphor of *relationships as assets* makes it possible to include relationships in the accounting discourse on organizations.

The majority of definitions of social networks/social capital highlight the benefits, actions, and outcomes of social relationships, which are of value to the individual actors or the network as a whole (Adler et al. 2002; Nahapiet et al. 1998; Paldam, 2000). At a minimum the definitions recognise that social networks provide access to resources (Lin et al. 1981). Thus there is general consensus that social networks/social capital provides resources. The *relationships as resources* metaphor is, as outlined, at a point in the ladder of relationship conceptualisations where there is both structure and a channel through which resources can flow. Lin et al. (1981) argue that it is not the weakness of the tie per se nor the bridging property of weak ties, but the fact that such ties are more likely to reach a contact with the resources or information that the focal actor requires to fulfil his/her objectives. Lin et al. (1981)

thus use a number of metaphors, as per the ladder of relationship conceptualisations presented in this paper, culminating in the use of relationships as resources metaphor.

Relationships as capital

Capital is a special type of "substance" that has in part the same characteristics as other resources, but also shows additional characteristics. The word capital comes with a number of popular connotations: capital is valuable and important, it is an asset for the future and not an expenditure, it can be invested in, it can be capitalized, capital itself can be invested, it allows for a return, it resonates with managers and Chief Financial Officers, having more capital is better, capital can be owned, capital can be valued financially, capital often appears on the balance sheet, capital is additive, capital is a stock, and capital can and must be measured and managed. In economic theory, the concept of capital is part of a wider theoretical structure that includes capital as an investment with a rate of return, the ability of the investor to appropriate the returns, associated opportunity costs, the issue of the funding of the investment, and the availability of a market for capital (Baron & Hannan, 1994). The *relationships as capital* metaphor selectively transports some of these attributes of capital from the source to the target domain. An example of the use of this metaphor can be found in the quote from Burt (1997: 340) on page 12. Because of the many positive connotations of capital in the source domain, the metaphor seems to indicate that relationships are important, valuable and an asset instead of expenditure. While we also recognise that social capital can be a liability (Adler et al. 2000), it is outside the scope of this paper to explore it further.

In addition, the metaphor gives access to the powerful concept of value and valuation. In his text, Burt (1997) uses the idea of the value of relationships seventy-

five times. The metaphor also makes it possible to include relationships in the model of *organizations as financial flows*. The oldest and most widely recognised form of intangible capital that businesses own is goodwill; a concept sometimes referred to in explicit definitions of social capital. Accountants and tax inspectors recognise this intangible capital, despite some arguments about the valuation (Warner & Witzel, 2004). The *relationships as capital* metaphor not only offers new means for control (to invest in relationships, relationships are invested in something else), but also adds the notion to the discourse that a proper return on relationships is to be expected and that the investor should be able to appropriate the return from the investment. This further emphasizes the instrumental use of social relationships.

Differences between authors

The relative importance of the seven metaphors in each of the three texts is illustrated in Figure 2. In the oldest text by Granovetter (1973) the structural metaphors of *relationships as links, ties and connections*, and *relationships as networks* are dominant. Structural metaphors account for ninety-three percent of the metaphorical words and phrases in his text. This is consistent with his specified structural perspective on social capital. In Lin et al. (1981) the dominant metaphor utilised is *relationships as resources*. This text is the only one of the three in which content related metaphors are dominant. However, structural metaphors still represented fourth-three percent of the metaphorical words and phrases in the text. Again, the use of content related metaphors is consistent with the fact that Lin et al. (1981) introduced the social resource perspective to the field of social capital. The use of structural metaphors in Lin's work is reflective of his recognition of the role of network structure for accessing social resources. *Relationships as networks* and

relationships as capital are the dominant metaphors in Burt (1997). The balance between structural and content metaphors in this text is fifty-eight versus thirty-seven percent. Again, this finding is reflective of Burt's (1997) emphasises social network structure, in his work. It is also reflective of the progression of the concept. Burt speaks of social networks (the structural element of social capital) but refers to the concept as social capital (which according to some definitions also encompasses social resources), thus moving the definition of the concept up the ladder of relationship conceptualisations.

Insert figure 2 about here

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses some implications of the systematic metaphor analysis for theorizing about social networks and social capital. The ladder of relationship conceptualisations that emanated from the systematic metaphor analysis supports the view that the phenomenon of social relationships can be understood as a combination of structural (or network) elements and content (or resource) elements. Some authors emphasise on the structural element by the intensive use of *contacts*, *tie*, *path* or *network* metaphors. Others accentuate the content element by the frequent use of *channel*, *resource*, or *capital* metaphors.

Johanson's (2001) criticisms that those definitions of social capital that incorporate both the structure and the resources result in circular inference can be explored further in light of our analysis. He makes a comparison between social and financial capital and states that financial capital can be defined as an amount of wealth without reference to the possible profits it may produce and thus definitions of social

capital should also not refer to potential outcomes. Johanson thus defines financial capital as wealth. The amount of wealth of financial capital is a direct function of its value and value can be defined as "degree of usefulness" (Andriessen, 2004); money only has value when it is useful for buying things. So, in essence the value of financial capital is dependent on its usefulness, which is an outcome. Similarly, social capital can be defined in terms of its value and so in terms of its outcome, when researchers consider the mapping of the attribute of "value" from the source domain of "capital" useful in terms of understanding, visualising or measuring social capital.

A similar argument can be made with regard to the discussion about the sources and effects of social capital. The idea that relationships have sources (input) and effects (output) comes with the use of the *relationships as resources* metaphor. In the source domain a resource is something that is used in a process to produce an output. The metaphor maps this input-throughput-output system onto the concept of relationships and raises the question as to where phenomena that are related to relationships, such as trust and motivation, should be positioned in the system. Is trust an input or an output of relationships? Again we should be aware that the question of the appropriateness of the input-throughput-output entailment of the resource metaphor cannot be decided upon from the metaphor itself and is open for debate. It could very well be that this entailment is not useful when it comes to the issue of trust or motivation in relationships. If we do think it is useful to identify the sources of social capital, then the ladder of relationship conceptualisations may help. How social capital comes into existence depends on what metaphor we chose to conceptualise it with. With the *relationships as contacts* metaphor, social capital originates when people "get in touch", which requires motivation. When viewed as *links, ties and*

connections, social capital is created when two people develop a stronger connection, which is where motivation to maintain the contact is required. In the *relationships as paths* metaphor, social capital develops when several people "can be reached". In the "network" metaphor, it is the connections between clusters of people that is important, which is where associability, defined as the willingness and ability of individuals to define collective goals that are then enacted collectively (Leana et al. 1999), becomes important. The *channels* metaphor requires that there is something that can flow through the channels before social capital exists, be it information, influence or solidarity. This is where trust becomes important as it differentiates between those channels that enable or hinder "flows". And finally, the *resource* and *capital* metaphors point towards the need for investments into relationships, in the form of effort and ability. This explanation shows that the sources of social capital depend on how one chooses to conceptualise relationships.

There is also the issue of empirical measurement. Empirical measurement of social capital requires concrete constructs. Our ladder of relationship conceptualisations shows why this is difficult. Each metaphor on the ladder maps several attributes from source domains to the target domain of relationships, so there are many attributes to choose from when it comes to measurement: number of contacts, strength of ties, length of paths, transfer capability through the existence/non-existence of channels, volume and quality of content transported through the channels, amount of resources, value of social capital, etcetera. However, the higher one progresses up the ladder the more abstract the conceptualisation and the more difficult it becomes to operationalise the associated attributes. It is

considerably more difficult to measure the value of social capital than to measure the number of contacts people have.

The issue of defining the boundaries of a social network, most often referred to in discussions of empirical measurement of social capital, can also be understood through understanding the metaphors utilised. The question of boundaries seems to arise automatically with the adoption of the network metaphor, however mapping the boundary entailment of the network metaphor to relationships is not always appropriate. The decisions whether to map entailments of particular metaphors onto concepts depends on whether the characteristic (in this case boundaries) can produce useful new insights for the conceptualisation of the target domain (in this case relationships). Definitions of social capital utilising the "network" metaphor can be categorised depending on whether they focus on internal network relations or relations external to the network (Adler et al. 2002; Oh et al. 1999). Thus these authors are concerned with boundary specification. As discussed previously and evident from our ladder of relationship conceptualisations, this boundary issue arises due to the use of the more abstract metaphor of "network" rather than the more tangible metaphor of "connections". Adler & Kwon (2002) further highlight that definitions that are neutral or adopt both the internal and external definitions of social capital consider that the distinctions between the views are a matter of perspective and unit of analysis and they are not mutually exclusive. Thus the chosen definition and network boundary depends on the researchers perspective and which aspect of social networks s/he wishes to focus on. Laumann, Marsden and Prensky (1983) offer a practical solution to the issue of operationalising boundaries. They identify two different approaches to boundary specification in social network studies. The realist

approach involves the actors setting the boundaries themselves. For example, the respondent may be asked to identify all those that provide him/her with support and advice. The nominalist approach is based on the theoretical concerns of the researcher. For example, the researcher may be concerned with how the respondent is connected to all other members of the organization, thereby defining the boundaries of the network according to the members of the organization. The appropriateness of the boundary entailment of the network metaphor thus depends on whether the researcher can gather useful data through recognition and definition of the social network boundary.

Baron and Hannan (1994) use social capital as an example of the "plethora of capitals" in contemporary sociology. They seem here to argue that unless the target domain and source domain have a cluster of specific attributes in common, the metaphor of *relationships as capital* is not apt. They when state:

(...) unless a characteristic is regarded as an investment for which there is a capital market and opportunity cost, we fail to see the value of calling it a type of capital. (p. 1124)

The aptness of a metaphorical mapping does not depend on whether a whole cluster of attributes is mapped from the source to the target domain. Selective mappings can provide useful additional insights, as long as it is recognised that the mapping is metaphorical and not literal. The work of Burt (1997) and others have shown that metaphorical entailments like "investments in social capital" and "value of social capital" provide useful additional insight into the concept of social relationships.

Finally, the results from our small sample of texts analysed seems to indicate that earlier texts focus only on structural elements, utilising metaphors from the lower steps of the ladder. Later texts, however, focus on content and structural elements, applying metaphors from the upper steps of the ladder. Over the years, the conceptualisations of relationships in publications of social capital, seem to have become more and more abstract and instrumental. With the *relationship as capital* metaphor the utility of relationships is paramount, which is in great contrast to the warm, personal, and humane idea of a relationship as a moment of contact between people. This poses the question on whether this evolution towards instrumentalism and control can be placed in a general trend in organisations toward rationalisation, the bringing under rational control of people, and the strive for efficiency ("make your resources sweat"). If it can, then there is a danger that instrumental conceptualisations of relationships in the hands of managers will lead to more cold and inhumane organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

The question remains as to why the diversity and large number of definitions of social capital. The systematic metaphor analysis shows that this is the result of various authors trying to conceptualise relationships in a variety of ways depending on which characteristics they prefer to bracket and highlight. There is no objective reality that can referee which metaphorical conceptualisation is right and which is wrong. Critics that plead for a precise definition of the concept assume that social capital is something that is objectively "out there", instead of a human construct created by metaphorical conceptualisation. The concept of relationships is not independent of the metaphor used for the concept. One can argue however, about the appropriateness of

certain metaphorical mappings. A mapping can be useful to thought, crucial to thought, or misleading (Lakoff et al. 1999). Each of the seven metaphors on the ladder of relationship conceptualisations is useful because it adds attributes and control potential to the concept of relationships, thus deepening our understanding of the concept and our ability to influence it. Thus, in response to those concerned with the diversity and number of definitions of social capital, we argue that a comprehensive definition of social capital may include all seven steps of the ladder. Researchers can choose at a later stage, which step of the ladder of relationship conceptualisations they wish to focus their empirical work on. There freedom to choose will also depend on developments in methodologies for measuring the more abstract conceptualisations of the concept.

So rather than critique the use of metaphors in the social capital field, we argue that it facilitates a greater understanding of the invisible and intangible nature of the concept and facilitates measurement of what is generally accepted as a valuable "resource" or "capital". The exploration presented in this paper enables a deeper understanding of the meaning and origins of the definitions used in social capital literature. The ladder of relationship conceptualisations can progress the debate on the diversity of definitions, facilitate recognition, respect, and maybe even reconciliation of the different perspectives on social capital and help explain the difficulties involved in measuring social capital. It can also facilitate consensus on a definition of social capital through recognition of the interrelationships of each attributed metaphor and the added value of each subsequent metaphor on the ladder to our understanding of this phenomenon.

FIGURE 1

Ladder of relationship conceptualisations

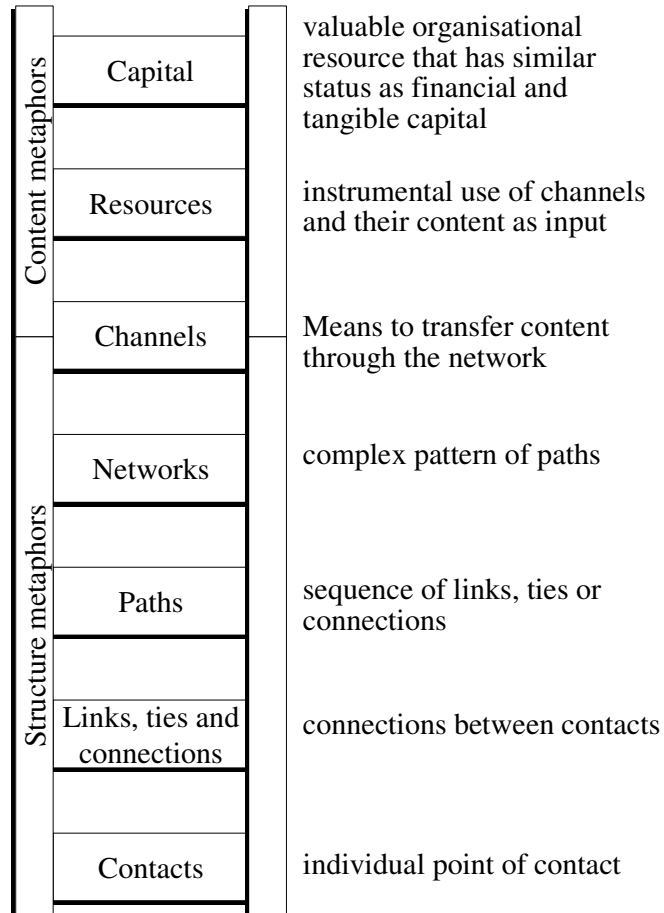
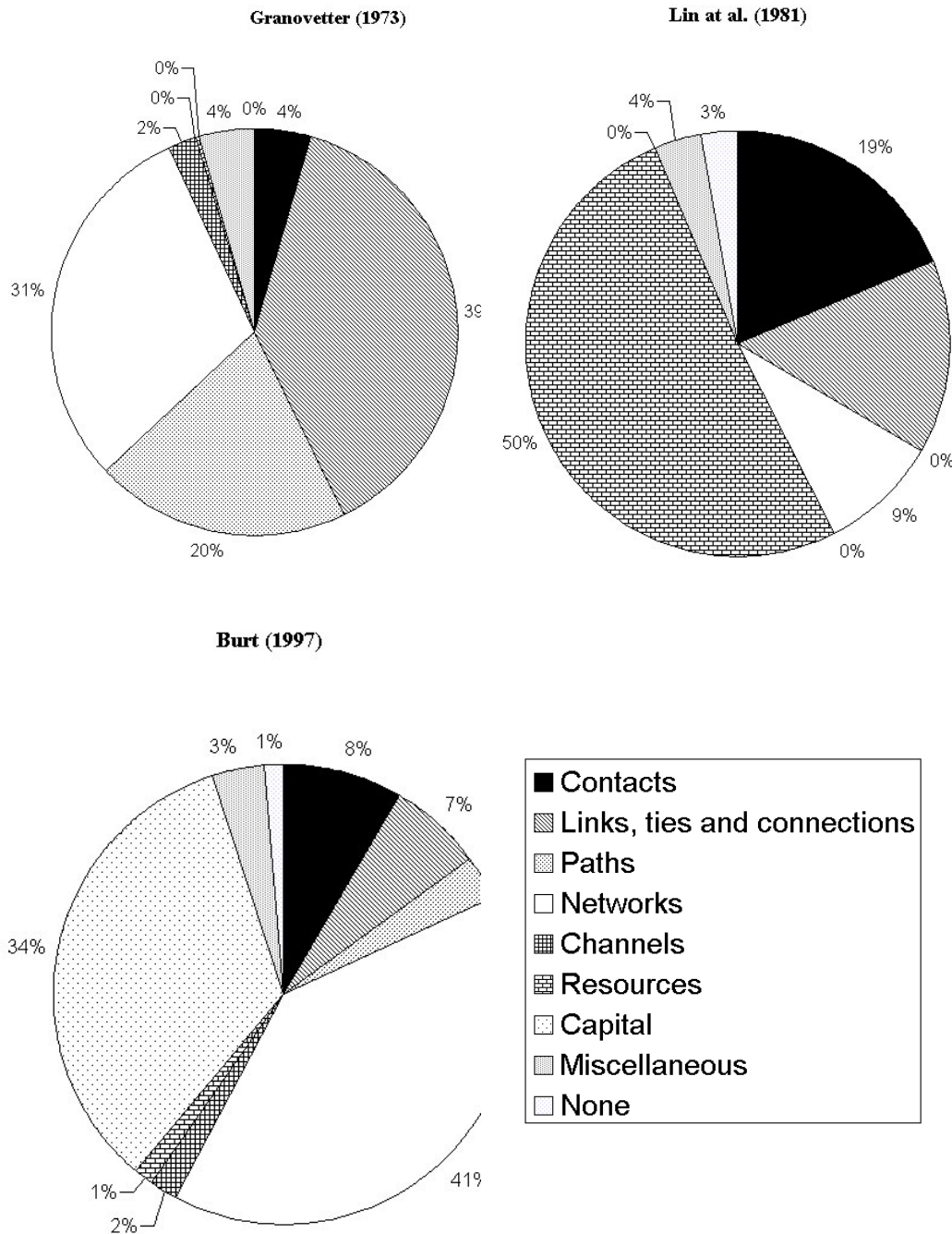


FIGURE 2

Distribution of metaphors used in the texts



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