

# The ‘wicked problems’ of social capital theory

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## Article Info

Received 26 February 2021  
Available online 9 March 2021

Academic non peer reviewed  
Open-access

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### Keywords:

Social capital  
Criticisms of social capital  
Contested concepts  
Social capital theory  
Conceptual development  
Wicked problems

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## Abstract

The concept of social capital has been subject to ongoing challenges and often overlooked tensions, resulting in unresolved issues and contradictions. Despite criticism, the field of social capital research continues to grow, with scholars hoping that further empirical investigations will provide solutions. However, these investigations often lack strong conceptual foundations and fail to connect well with existing theories. The contested nature of social capital does not excuse poor scholarship, and precision in defining and articulating definitions, theoretical frameworks, and empirical referents is essential. Considering the complexities of social capital, it may be useful to view these problems through the lens of “wicked problems.” Although social capital’s conceptual and methodological challenges do not perfectly align with traditional wicked problems, adopting a wicked problem framework can help acknowledge the complexity without rendering the issues unresolvable. Wicked problems are distinct from ordinary difficulties because conventional processes cannot resolve them. Nine interrelated issues emerge as potential wicked problems within the conceptualisation of social capital and are explored in this article. While these problems are highly intertwined and subject to different theoretical perspectives, they collectively form a significant challenge in the field of social capital research. Further conceptual and empirical work may offer potential resolutions, but it is important to acknowledge and address these wicked problems to enhance our understanding of social capital and its implications for societies.

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## Introduction

Over the last 20 years of researching and applying the concept of social capital I have constantly navigated certain “problems” with the concept. There are several nagging tensions and incongruences associated with the concept that are typically ignored but are impossible to escape and, it seems, to resolve. Critics are quick to point to these problems but the growing body of literature on social capital seems immune to criticism.

Many scholars seem willing to ignore these problems, hopeful that further empirical investigation will resolve them. However, many of these investigations originate from uncertain ground, with shaky conceptual foundations and weak connection to theory. Their ability to resolve the underlying problems may be compromised before they begin.

### Social capital as a “contested concept”

Woolcock (2010) suggested that social capital is an “essentially contested” concept, implying that many of the disputes, conflicts, and contradictions associated with the concept may never be resolved.

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doi: 10.5281/zenodo.8015848

“No concept, and especially no social science concept, emerges fully formed, mapping neatly and obviously onto empirical referents, deftly spanning all theoretical traditions and speaking precisely to policy debates.” (Woolcock, 2010 p483).

This contested nature, however, does not provide a reason or excuse for poor scholarship. Social capital cuts across disciplinary, ideological, and methodological divides, which is both a strength and a weakness. It opens up new problem spaces (Walters, 2002) but its application can sidestep established standards of theory and practice allowing methodologies to avoid detailed scrutiny. Too frequently researchers engage in what Ben Fine calls “vulgar scholarship” (Fine, 2001) or “degradation of scholarship” (Fine, 2010). As Woolcock (2010) points out, the contested nature of social capital “does not in any way absolve individual users of the requirement to be as precise as possible in articulating their particular definitions, theoretical moorings, and empirical referents” (p470-471).

### Is social capital a “wicked problem”?

Considering social capital a “contested concept” highlights the different perspectives and approaches in a positive light that essentially accepts that differences will persist. While this is useful it does little to motivate work towards resolving these problems. I have been wondering

for some time whether it would be useful to frame these issues as “wicked problems”.

In 1973, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (Rittel & Webber, 1973) introduced the term “wicked problem” to draw attention to the complexities and challenges of addressing certain problems, particularly social problems. While the conceptual and methodological problems of social capital do not really fit with the normal understanding of wicked problems, there may be some value in considering them as such. A wicked problem framework may allow us to think of these problems differently, acknowledging their complexity, but not rendering them as unresolvable.

Wicked problems are not just tough or persistent – they are “wicked”. Wickedness is not a degree of difficulty. Wicked issues are different because traditional processes cannot resolve them. In the case of social capital, it appears further empiricism will not resolve these underlying tensions, nor will conceptual development from any one discipline. As an integration of sociology and economics, social capital is not based on a single ontological foundation. It is grounded on different theoretical traditions with different and somewhat incongruent foundations. This led Woolcock (1998 p156) to suggest that way social capital is conceptualised it “can be rational, pre-rational, or even non-rational” and therefore what Fine (1999 p9) described as a “totally chaotic concept”.

### **What are the wicked problems of social capital?**

There are numerous problems and challenges associated with the investigation and application of social capital but not all are necessarily wicked problems. After a great deal of reflection over a long period of time I have identified nine issues that I think could currently be framed as wicked problems. These problems are highly interrelated and there is some overlap between them. Within and related to these problems there may be other problems that could be framed as wicked problems but seem to fit well under the problems identified. This situation may change as further conceptual and empirical work on social capital may help to resolve some of these problems. It must also be noted that there are numerous theoretical perspectives to social capital, so these problems identified below may only be wicked problems from some perspectives.

In many ways there are not nine wicked problems of social capital theory, but simply one problem: the conceptualisation of social capital, with nine interrelated components.

1. What is “it”? Separating what it is from what it does
2. Linked to action (or is it?)
3. Reality and rationality (ontology)
4. Tangible, Intangible, Transcendental
5. Positivity paradox

6. Circularity and tautology

7. Potentiality and contingency

8. Universality and fluidity (neglect of context)

9. Explanatory power (or lack of)

I will explore each of these in a little detail below.

#### **I. What is “it”? Separating what it is from what it does**

Edwards & Foley (1997) discussed the problems of separating what social capital is from what it does when defining social capital functionally – that is when social capital is defined as whatever facilitates cooperation or collective action. But whether social capital is defined functionally, as in Coleman’s conception, or not, this is a problem that plagues all but the most abstracted and reduced approaches to the concept.

There are many different perspectives on what social capital actually is and is not. Some authors equate social capital with trust, others with rates of associational membership, and others still with the number and structure of network ties. There is considerable variety in the literature, however, most conceptualisations of social capital include both structures such as networks and shared understandings such as social norms and trust.

Some conceptual approaches social capital focus on the benefits or ‘resources’ or outcomes, while other approaches focus on the infrastructure such as networks (micro) or institutions (macro), and still other approaches focus on beliefs, values, and dispositions such as norms and trust. To complicate things further, most approaches include different aspects of some or all of these, thus creating conceptual chaos.

Fox & Gershman (2000 p187) suggested that “conflating norms and networks under the same conceptual umbrella makes it difficult to understand causal flows: is trust generated by relationships, or do relationships generate trust?” This highlights the complex and dynamic nature of social experience. For example, action is influenced by social norms and this action influences the nature of norms. Therefore, social action is both an outcome and determinant. The social setting is created and recreated through action and interaction. Social systems are non-linear and even chaotic. Any empirical investigation must reconcile this complexity or be confounded. Traditional “positivist” approaches to social capital are fundamentally doomed to failure as such attempts usually fail to recognize the complexity of social phenomena and processes (Adam & Roncevic, 2003).

Untangling the causes, effects, correlations, and conjunctions of social processes is a difficult task involving complex interdependencies (Haynes, 2014). Fine (2010 p206) discussed how conceptual approaches to social capital tend to incorporate its determinants and consequences as part of itself, with the boundaries between its parts becoming blurred. This makes it difficult to differentiate what it is from what it does.

This is a wicked problem because it is exceedingly difficult to untangle the complexity of social systems without excessive abstraction and reductionism that reifies the social characteristics of interest. The dominant action-theoretical foundations of social capital are ill equipped for this task and tend to result in reification that undermines the purpose and utility of the concept.

## 2. Linked to action (or is it?)

Many definitions specifically consider social capital as an action or creating some type of action such as collaboration, cooperation, or collective action. But is action the outcome of social capital or the substance? This question complicates conceptual approaches to social capital and is rarely addressed in the literature. Are norms only social capital if they relate to, or result in, action? And do those norms have to result in beneficial action to be social capital? Are actions the only outcomes of social capital?

This issue is closely related to the previous issue of what social capital is. Many authors have discussed the non-action benefits of sociability such as psychological benefits (Chan et al., 2019; De Silva et al., 2006; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Roberts, 2013). These include or relate to, for example, inclusion, belonging, and social support. These issues are abundant in the health and wellness literature on social capital, particularly the literature dealing with mental health.

This problem may be resolved if social capital was more clearly defined, including the interrelationships between its determinants and consequences. If action is an outcome of social capital and there are also non-action outcomes, then this may not be a wicked problem. Further discussion can be found in the potentiality section.

## 3. Reality and rationality (ontology)

Social capital is considered an integration of economics and sociology since the core intuition of social capital is that social processes have value in economic terms, specifically, are a form of capital. But how can the ontological foundations of economics and sociology be reconciled? That is, how each perspective theorizes the nature of individual experience and motivation. In broad terms, economics views the individual as motivated by rational utility-maximizing self-interest whereas sociology views individual reality as socially constructed.

Much of the early conceptual development of social capital was explicitly based on rational choice theory, with the notable exception of Bourdieu's theory which has been largely overlooked. Even where Bourdieu's theory of social capital has been applied it is often done so only partially and with distortion that minimises or eliminates his socially situation concept of the individual (Fine, 2010).

Putnam's version of social capital divorced the concept from explicit reference to rational choice

theory but strengthened its methodological individualism foundations, particularly its connection to network theories and game theory. This somewhat obscured the concept's ontological foundations, leaving it in uncertain ground between economics and social theory. From a thorough reading of the literature, it seems explicit grounding to either tradition has been seen as undesirable and potentially alienating to either camp. This leaves social capital's ontological foundations generally undefined, uncertain, and often confused. Woolcock (1998:p156) commented on this problem: "if social capital can be rational, pre-rational, or even non-rational, what is it not?"

Ben Fine has discussed social capital's lack of theoretical foundations at length in numerous publications (for example Fine, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2010; Fine & Green, 2000). "Whilst the social capitalist is nowhere near as reduced as the homo economicus of the dismal science, it is striking how shallow and incoherent is homo socio-capitalus" (Fine, 2010:p158). This is perhaps the biggest problem with social capital theory and underpins many of the other problems.

Does social capital need to remain in the ontological wilderness to maintain its appeal and utility as a concept? I believe the demand for the concept of social capital comes from its ability to incorporate and value social process that are typically overlooked by mainstream economic theories which dominate much of modern life. It is understandable that scholars would think they need to maintain some degree of neoclassical framing for the concept to be useful. However, I believe this view comes from misunderstand the nature of current economic theory. While neoclassical theories still have a strong influence, there are now many more progressive approaches that are breaking down the supremacy of homo economicus. Since I believe social capital is a response to the shortcomings of neoclassical economic theories, I think it should not appeal to what it is trying to overcome. Doing so will continue to undermine the value of the concept and perpetuate the problems described in this article.

## 4. Tangible, Intangible, Transcendental

Social capital is generally considered to be intangible or have important intangible aspects (Arrow, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Collins, 2009; Portes, 1998). This relates to the question of what social capital is and the nature of individual experience and action. Many approaches consider some aspects to be tangible, such as the existence of networks or rules, and other aspects that are intangible such as norms, trust, and shared understandings. From some perspectives, social capital relates to the transcendental nature of experience, in Kantian philosophy, since it relates to that which is presupposed in and necessary to experience. Bourdieu's concept of habitus relates to these background presuppositions, although as noted previously, habitus is typically excluded from consideration in conceptualisations of social capital because it conflicts with methodological individualism.

Numerous authors has noted that there is a fundamental mismatch between social capital's theory and the vast majority of empirical work that has explored various proxies for social capital (Fine, 2010; Gannon & Roberts, 2018). Many approaches acknowledge the intangible nature of social capital but treat it as tangible or invent tangible proxies for its intangible nature. These proxies are often determined more by data availability than any connection to theory. This tends to create gross assumptions or simplifications that reify the concept to something else entirely. This is an example of what Ben Fine has described as hack academia or hackademia (Fine, 2008). The problem is not so much the intangible nature of social capital but the lack of theoretical foundations that allow for poor empiricism to occur largely unchecked.

## 5. The positivity paradox

The term social capital implies a positive character by the inclusion of the word "capital" and many authors specifically define social capital as positive. For example, Robert Putnam talked about "mutual benefit" (Putnam, 2000 p67), Nan Lin talked about "expected returns" (Lin, 2001 p30), and various authors describe "resources" (for example Bourdieu, 1986; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

The term implies positive outcomes and many conceptualisations, especially those based on Putnam's work, treat social capital as universally positive. However, social capital is not a universally beneficial resource. As Coleman (1990 p302) observed, "[A] given form of social capital that is useful for facilitating certain actions may be useless or harmful for others". As Portes & Landolt (1996) discussed at length, social capital can have numerous downsides. "Sociability cuts both ways... it can also lead to public 'bads'" (Portes 1998:p16). "Social capital borders on the utopian in its vision of individuals, communities and politics." (Fine, 2010:p200).

This is a wicked problem for two reasons. First, the same aspects of social capital can have positive or negative outcomes depending on a range of factors (or some positive and some negative outcomes at the same time). And second, discussions about the negative outcomes of social capital take the form of a paradox. How can something that implies positive outcomes, and is often defined specifically as such, have negative outcomes?

## 6. Circularity and tautology

Gearin (2017:p613) claimed that "all of the predominant theories of social capital (i.e., those by Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam) are tautologies or can be argued to have tautological aspects".

A tautology is a statement that is true by necessity or by virtue of its logical form. So, claiming that social capital has positive outcomes but only inferring its existence from the existence of positive outcomes is tautological. Portes (1998:p19) identified this problem, "it leads to positive outcomes, such as economic development and

less crime, and its existence is inferred from the same outcomes". Putnam's conceptualisation confuses means and ends, which means he uses social capital as both an explanatory variable for social cohesion and to describe the same phenomenon (Schuller et al., 2000). Since Putnam is the most highly cited and influential author on social capital this type of problem is commonplace in the literature.

A lot of social capital research also takes the form of a truism. Social capital is typically and broadly defined as benefits of sociability, so research that investigates its role in a social activity will logically find it is important or beneficial. Social capital is not a neutral concept – it implies benefits or value by definition (see the positivity paradox section). Generally, the broader the concept of social capital is defined, the more likely to involve truism when investigating its importance. If any particular research was to find social capital is not important to a social activity, logically one would have to question the validity of the measurement instrument. This issue is complicated by lack of theoretical foundations (and most of the other problems identified here).

## 7. Potentiality and contingency

The outcomes of social capital "can" come about depending on a range of factors (unless you believe social capital is the outcomes). This potentiality is a characteristic of almost all approaches to social capital, although rarely acknowledged.

Many of the most commonly used definitions of social capital unambiguously identify the potential nature of outcomes. For example, "investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin, 2001 p30), "the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action" (Adler & Kwon, 2002 p17), "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986 p21), and "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 2000 p67).

Potentiality is a wicked problem because the existence of social capital does not necessarily result in the desired outcomes and, in fact, the same or very similar social capital can result in positive or negative outcomes depending on context. Potentiality also complicates investigation and application of social capital because social capital is difficult to observe directly. It is often measured using proxies, many of which are measures of outcomes of social capital rather than social capital itself. Measuring potential outcomes confounds empirical investigations because the presence or absence of certain outcomes does not necessarily equate to the nature of social capital present. This is particularly evident in the 'spontaneous' manifestations of social capital that tend to occur during certain types of events such as natural disasters.

## 8. Universality and fluidity (neglect of context)

Social capital theory generally applies universalising categories and tends to overlook important factors such as power, conflict, gender, race and ethnicity, class, inequality, discrimination, etc. "Social capital ... [is] stripped of power relations and imbued with the assumption that social networks are win-win and that individual gains, interests, and profits are synonymous with group gains, interests, and profits" (DeFilippis, 2001:p800). For example, social capital approaches generally include networks but ignore power, race, ethnicity, gender, etc that create different experiences for different individuals and groups. Social capital also often includes social norms but ignores the aforementioned processes as well as inclusion and exclusion, discrimination, and other factors that create differential experiences.

"Social capital is an attempt to have relations of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and mutual obligation without having to bother too much about the deeper cultural mooring points to which those relations are tied ... Social capital is thus an expression of cultural contradiction, an attempt to realise a particular social ethic but in a form that comprehensively undermines the deeper cultural grounds within which that ethic takes root" (Scanlon, 2004: pBB3). Graham (2016) observed that viewing civil society as having unified values and beliefs is naïve and all but nullifies issues of inequality, power, discrimination, etc. Social capital creates a "romantic naïve view of rural communities, where civic harmony and inclusion triumphs and there is little room for power struggles, exclusionary tactics by privileged groups, or ideological conflicts" (Shortall, 2004: p110).

Perhaps the worst offender is the bonding/bridging distinction that reduces the complexity of social processes by universalizing across the common divisions in social theory. For example, weak ties are bridging social capital that provide the ability to "get ahead" – but this ignores context, power, race, culture, etc. This makes it too easy to bypass or even disregard the underlying political, economic, and social systems that shape and reproduce inequality (Schafft & Brown, 2003).

According to Ben Fine, this problem is widely acknowledged, and scholars typically attempt to resolve it by bring back in the missing processes. This is often done ad hoc, with little or no consideration for theoretical implications, and this contributes to the already complex and chaotic theory (Fine, 2010). Social capital "has taken on a circus-tent quality; all things positive and social can be piled underneath" (De Souza Briggs, 1997: p111). Social capital leaves questions unanswered and opens the door for criticism dealing with the one-size-fits-all nature of the theory (Portes 1998).

## 9. Explanatory power (or lack of)

Social capital is too amorphous in reducing the complexity of the social world to a single concept (Wuthnow, 2002). Social capital is an umbrella concept that brings in, and diminishes, various sociological phenomena. "The social capital prism filters out more light than it lets through, in drawing simplistically upon basic categories of social analysis, stripped of their rich traditions and contested meanings" (Fine, 2010:p30). There is some logic in the suggestion that by including 'everything' it is not possible to give meaningful consideration of 'anything'. The term often serves to obfuscate meaning because social capital is ill-defined and all-encompassing, and other terms would often be more appropriate.

Ben Fine (2010) has described social capital as a middle-range theory. He discussed how this has the practical advantages of putting aside a deeper understanding but the corresponding disadvantage of its results being entirely subject to the qualification of what has been omitted (Fine 2010:p23).

Haynes (2009:p8) discussed that "by treating the concept as though it were a coherent whole and separated from the themes through which its meaning is derived, researchers will fail to explain how the specific mechanisms of trust, community, reciprocity, interpersonal relationships and networks impact on the features they are investigating".

Social capital is frequently deployed in correlational analysis but is poorly suited to identifying explanations and causations. Correlational results simply mean that there is a black box factor at work, but we cannot distinguish between alternative explanations because there is no underlying theory to inform the development of plausible hypotheses (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010). Without a theory of human experience, we cannot explain why, all we can do is identify correlation, the mechanisms remain a black box.

While this is a problem in many uses, social capital's umbrella quality provides a broad framework for consideration of a wide range of social and cultural processes under the proclamation of their value and importance. Once identified, each component can be given due consideration in its context. This would be most effective where the conceptual problems discussed in this article are resolved, particularly the action-theoretical foundations.

## Applying the wicked problem framework to social capital

These wicked problems of social capital may be unresolvable but may be managed or mitigated to some extent. Progress requires a reassessment of the traditional ways of conceptualising social capital and a thorough examination of the underlying assumptions and methodological inadequacies of current approaches. We need to look deeply into the theoretical foundations of conceptual approaches to social capital, or lack of such foundations.

Difficult questions need to be asked about the appropriateness of different approaches and we need to dig into the action-theoretical foundations of different approaches. We cannot continue to use complexity and the interdisciplinary nature of social capital as an excuse for poor scholarship. We need to acknowledge that continued empiricism on weak theoretical foundations is unlikely to resolve these problems.

An important first step is for these wicked problems to be recognised as such. Successfully tackling wicked problems requires a broad recognition and understanding that there are no quick fixes and simple solutions. Further selective conceptual approaches that shape theory to convenience or available data need to be discouraged.

Tackling wicked problems is an evolving art. These problems require thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the complex interrelationships between social factors and processes, and the deeper theoretical foundations. They require broader, more collaborative, and innovative approaches that tackle the difficult questions and do not look for simple and convenient answers that further reinforce the problems. This article intends to open these discussions and collaborations. These issues are a work-in-progress. After over 30 years of social capital research, it is high time to address these issues.

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