



The effects of specific occupations in position generator measures of social capital



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ABSTRACT

The position generator is a widespread method for measuring latent social capital in which respondents are queried about contacts on a list of occupations predefined by the analyst. We separate out the unique contribution of each occupation to aggregated measures of social capital. It turns out that this contribution varies vastly: knowing a person in some occupations provides substance to measures of social capital, while knowing a person in a few occupations is irrelevant and contributes statistical noise and causes attenuation bias. We discuss the implication of our findings for the design of position generator measures generally.

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1. Introduction

Social relations between individuals are important for understanding many processes in contemporary society. Such relations are often referred to as *social capital*, and they are an increasingly popular explanation for social phenomena such as political participation, civic engagement, population health and longevity, and labor market outcomes. Sociologists such as Bourdieu (1986), Lin (2001, 2002), and Burt (2005) view social capital as individual-level resources (e.g. monetary resources) or other valued assets (e.g. information) that individuals can access through their social networks and use to achieve positive (or cause negative) outcomes. For our purposes, we will follow Lin (2001, 2002), who see social capital as formed out of both social embeddedness and strategic behavior (i.e., investment behavior).

The position generator (Lin and Dumin, 1986) offers a coherent measure of individual-level social capital. The instrument is simple. Individuals are queried about contacts with persons in different occupations, using a pre-specified list chosen to represent positions in the labor market. The list of occupations varies across implementations of the position generator, although many follow Lin and Dumin's seminal list. Previous research has used position generator social capital to understand, among other things, civic engagement (Magee, 2008), marriage patterns (Lai, 2008), and psychological well-being (Moore et al., 2009). Most research, however, is focused

on explaining inequality in labor market outcomes (Erickson, 2001; Flap and Boxman, 2001; Lin and Ao, 2008; Lin et al., 2001), which will also be our focus in this paper.

The aim of the position generator is to produce a *generic measure* of social capital, which can be used to explain subsequent outcomes. However, recent findings suggest that the position generator may not be as generic or content-free as desired (Van der Gaag et al., 2008, 2012; Verhaeghe et al., 2012). We add to this literature by analyzing whether the measure may be contingent on the analysts' choice of specific occupations that are included in the position generator. In order to evaluate each of the occupations' contribution to the measure of social capital, we set up a jack-knifing procedure in which criterion outcome variables are regressed on measures of social capital, where each of the occupations in the position generator list is in turn removed.

The paper is organized as follows: we briefly discuss the problems involved in measuring social capital and describe the position generator instrument. We then outline our analytical jack-knifing procedure, present our results, and close with a discussion of the practical and theoretical consequences for both the measurement and the concept of social capital itself.

2. Measures of social capital

Measuring individual-level social capital is difficult. The overall problem is that social capital often becomes visible to analysts only *after* it has been activated and employed through agency, yet there are many situations in which action is not necessary. Social capital is latent, it is mobilized only when needed, and observed only when

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mobilized. This is different from most forms of resources such as human capital: an individual's education, experience, and tenure are often readily observable by fairly simple methods.

Much of the literature implicitly or explicitly gauges social capital as *ex post realizations*, for example by asking how a person got a particular job, where personal contacts is one obvious response. Measures of *mobilized* social capital are always conditioned on a situation where mobilization was necessary, and often on mobilization producing some positive outcome. Asking individuals how they got their job ignores individuals who fail to get a job (with or without mobilizing social capital). *Ex post* realization captures the *effects* of social capital, not the social capital resource itself, which is tautological (as critically discussed in Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Lin and Dumin, 1986). Retrospective measures can therefore produce highly misleading results.

An ideal measure of social capital should tap the latent utility of social contacts *before* they are activated. The position generator is appealing for this reason. In a survey setting, respondents are asked if they know someone on a list of occupations, and then to further qualify whether this is a strong or weak contact (Lin and Dumin, 1986). Common response alternatives are that contacts are friends, acquaintances, or kin. This survey procedure allows the researcher to get a picture of the respondent's contact network and potential network resources. However, as discussed by Lin and Dumin, it is not feasible to ask for all occupations that exist, and the procedure is largely blind to the exact qualitative value of each specific contact (although tie strength is commonly queried). The measures generated out of the position generator thus *proxy* for direct network effects such as transfer of information, influence etc., and can be used to explain subsequent outcomes. Hence, the position generates gains in causal order but can also be said to lose in specificity and detail since the active mechanisms will remain latent.

For each individual, the position generator produces discrete information on access to each of the occupations queried for. This information can be further processed and refined by using characteristics on the specific occupation, where the gold standard is to measure the value of occupations in terms of their prestige or status. For each dimension, this information is then summarized *within* individuals. Lin et al. (2001) proposed computing the following dimensions of social capital:

- Extensity (total number of occupational contacts)
- Upper reachability (the highest accessed prestige)
- Prestige range (the range between highest and lowest access prestige)

Van der Gaag et al. (2008) also discussed some common complementary measures:

- Average prestige (average prestige per contact)
- Total prestige (total accessed prestige)

These measures are often highly correlated, and to get a unidimensional measure of social capital, Lin et al. (2001) have suggested using factor analysis to compute a composite measure that overcomes these problems.¹ Even though the underlying data structure is truly discrete, the first step of summing over all the occupations for each individual creates at least approximate continuous

variables that are suitable for factor analysis. While this generic measure conceals differences in the underlying dimensions it circumvents the problems of multicollinearity, which can be severe in small samples.

3. Previous labor market studies employing the position generator

There is now consistent evidence that social network resources—using different instruments—are positively correlated with labor market outcomes such as job prestige, income, and wages (Lin, 1999).² In 1986, Lin and Dumin (1986) introduced the position generator methodology and showed that there was a great deal of inequality in the access to social capital. In a comparison of different measures of social capital, Van der Gaag et al. (2008) argued that the position generator tends to reflect resources useful in instrumental (as opposed to expressive) actions. A number of studies have shown that position generator social capital is positively associated with labor market outcomes (Erickson, 2001; Flap and Boxman, 2001; Lin and Ao, 2008; Lin et al., 2001).

Since Lin and Dumin's seminal study, a substantial number of studies have employed the position generator instrument. Bartelski (2010) listed 42 surveys that include the position generator. Many of them have small samples size (<1000) and only include 10–20 occupations, but there are exceptions. Many of these have examined access to social capital, labor market returns on social capital, and the consequences of social capital for other outcomes such as trust and political participation. This is not the place to summarize all of these studies, although the majority of them find non-trivial associations between position generator social capital and labor market outcomes.

4. Data

The position generator was included in the 2009 wave of the Swedish survey *Social Capital and Labor Market Integration*, which is a survey of school leavers. The survey sample consisted of 5695 individuals selected for telephone interview and carried out by Statistics Sweden between October and December 2009. A total of 2942 interviews were conducted, hence a response rate of 51.6%. The sample was based on three different cohorts of Swedes born in 1990: (a) all individuals with at least one parent born in Iran; (b) 50% of all individuals with at least one parent born in (former) Yugoslavia; and (c) a simple random sample of 2500 individuals with two Swedish-born parents. It thus gauges conditions for young individuals at age 19.

In the survey, a list of 40 occupations represents the contact space.³ Table 1 shows the occupations and their associated social class codes (Swedish SEI, Statistics Sweden, 1982)—analogous to the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero EGP scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992)—, the ISCO code, Treimans occupational prestige (Ganzeboom and Treiman, 1996), the occupational size according to the 1990 census (number of incumbents), and finally the access to the occupation in the survey and its associated variance. Because access is a discrete Bernoulli variable; the variance is only a function of the mean ($\sigma^2 = p(1-p)$). We compute variance of access since the performance of the social capital measure depends on

¹ Lin et al. (2001) and Lin and Ao (2008) used the first *rotated* principal component factor, whereas Van der Gaag et al. (2008) suggested using the first *unrotated* factor of a factor analysis. The reasons behind these diverse practices are beyond the scope of the paper. In our case the rotated solution is less associated with our criterion outcomes than the unrotated solution; hence the latter was chosen for further analysis.

² One should note that the causation of this association is contested, homophily being proposed as an alternative explanation (Mouw, 2003).

³ The wording of the survey question is as follows: "I will read you a list of occupations and ask you if a close friend, acquaintance, family member, girlfriend/boyfriend, or relative has the occupation. [Name of occupation]? Does any close friend, acquaintance, family member, girlfriend/boyfriend, or relative have that profession?"

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