



Social capital in Singapore: Gender differences, ethnic hierarchies, and their intersection



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Occupation-specific social capital
Gender differences
Ethnic hierarchies
Intersectionality
Social capital inequality
Singapore

ABSTRACT

Our inquiry probes the association of the ascriptive categories of gender and ethnicity with different kinds and amounts of social capital in Singapore. For both forms of inequality, people most easily meet contacts in occupations dominated by their own categories (e.g., women are more likely to meet nurses as they are overrepresented in nursing; likewise, dominant ethnic groups are more likely to meet managers and CEOs, being overrepresented in high-status roles). Yet we also find distinctive patterns: childcare is a major factor influencing women's contact with teachers, cashiers, and cleaners. Education is a major factor affecting ethnic groups' unequal access to contacts such as professors and bankers, cleaners and taxi drivers. Examining the intersection of gender and ethnicity, we find Malay men have less access to contacts in high-status occupations compared with Malay women, Non-Malay men, and Non-Malay women. Moreover, a university education accrues social capital at a slower rate for Malay men than for the other combinations of gender and ethnicity.

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1. Introduction

Social capital – the resources embedded in social networks – facilitates a better life (Lin, 2001a). These resources make people healthier (Lin and Ensel, 1989; Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Song, 2011), provide support in difficult times (Cobb, 1976; Thoits, 1982; Wellman and Wortley, 1990), and lead people to better jobs that include promotion into positions of authority and better pay (Erickson, 2001; Lin, 2001b; Son, 2013). Those without social capital often find themselves isolated, lacking opportunities in mainstream society and suffering a variety of hardships, including financial troubles and poor health (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Wilson, 1987; Cattell, 2001; Smith, 2007). Given the nexus of social capital and life chances, the question of access becomes critical. Who has more (or less) of what types of social capital and why?

This article probes the origins of social network inequality. It begins with two ascriptive categories, gender and ethnicity, as these represent fundamental social divisions, are critical starting points in the life course, and are central markers of social identity (Lofland, 1973; Shanahan, 2000; Erickson, 2004). First, we

are born into the pre-existing categories of gender and ethnicity, which influence the course of our lives, the treatments we receive, the social esteem and/or discriminations we face, etc. (Lofland, 1973). Second, actors mobilize gender and ethnicity to resolve the everyday problems of coordination. In organizations, people mobilize gender categorization (and their associated meanings) when allocating workers into 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles, such as 'manager' and 'secretary' respectively. Likewise, management uses ethnic categorization designating specific ethnic groups to specific jobs, e.g., deeming restaurant server as "Mexicans' work", etc. (Tilly, 1998, pp. 104). They also mobilize ethnicity when deciding whom to admit to or exclude from a country (Wimmer, 2002). Third, gender and ethnicity are different forms of inequality. The cultural and systemic differences that constitute gender (e.g., the notions of masculinity and femininity and gender roles) are distinct from those that make up class, occupational and ethnic boundaries (e.g., segregation into different neighbourhoods, unequal class backgrounds, and ethnic conflict) (Hall, 1992; Olzak, 1992; Erickson, 2006).

This is very general, however, and we need a better understanding of how the categories of gender and ethnicity 'work' (Tilly, 1998) to produce specific patterns of social inequalities, for example, differences in educational, labour market, and network opportunities (van Tubergen et al., 2016). In this article, then, we seek a better understanding of the mechanisms – the structural locations (and

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categorization of groups), the social opportunities they have for interaction, and the barriers to institutional access (e.g., to education and work) – that frame and shape the kinds of contacts gender and ethnic groups get to meet and associate with in everyday life.

Using survey data from 3128 Singaporean respondents, we probe several questions about access to social capital. Which gender and ethnic groups have greater (or lesser) access to social capital? What patterns of network inequality arise from gender and ethnic categorization? Why do some groups have more (and less) social capital than others? Do relevant inputs (such as education) increase social capital equally across gender and ethnic groups? We also consider the interplay of multiple categorizations, what Patricia Hill Collins (1999) terms ‘intersectionality’, asking how the categories of gender and ethnicity combine and/or intersect to create unequal access to social capital. In the next section of the article, we review the literature on unequal access to social capital and offer a series of hypotheses based on that literature. We go on to describe the data and methods used to test these hypotheses. After presenting our findings, we conclude by discussing the main arguments and noting the study’s limitations.

2. Review of literature and hypotheses

2.1. Gender

Generally speaking, findings in the literature point to men and women having the same number of personal contacts (Fischer, 1982; Marsden, 1987; Moore, 1990), but with differences in the composition and influence of their ties. Women’s networks have a greater number, proportion, and diversity of kin (Bott, 1971; Fischer, 1982; Fischer and Olicker, 1983; Wellman, 1985; Marsden, 1987; Moore, 1990), as well a greater number of neighbours (Moore, 1990). Men’s networks have more friends, advisors, and coworkers (Fischer, 1982); their networks reach further to contacts that provide opportunities for status and occupational advancement (Campbell, 1988; Hanson and Pratt, 1991; Lin, 2001a). Although men and women have the same number of organizational affiliations, women belong to smaller organizations emphasizing religion, environment, domestic life, and community affairs (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1982; Caiazza and Gault, 2006; O’Neill, 2006). Men’s organizations are comparatively larger and more economically oriented (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1982).

To explain these networking patterns, we should consider the role of gender in the kinds of social opportunities men and women have for building social capital. This means studying gender in the context of the life course, socialization, education, paid work, the household, and so on (Smith-Lovin and McPherson, 1993; Erickson, 2004).

Let us begin with the home. Boys and girls are born in equal numbers to the rich and poor but are socialized into prescribed notions of masculinity and femininity. Females are often perceived as, and are socialized towards, caring and communication, while males are often perceived as, and are taught to become less communal, more agentic, and more achievement-oriented (Ridgeway, 2011). These gendered perceptions become gendered expectations, which map onto different gender roles within the household and in work organizations (Tilly, 1998).

In the workplace, women tend to occupy service and caregiving occupational roles such as nurse, teacher, clerical worker; roles include those with less authority and those deemed to require the use of stereotypical feminine skills. The workplace is known to be an important source for social connections (Feld, 1982). Logically then, the gender composition of jobs is a salient factor in the kinds of occupational contacts men and women have. If women are more

likely to be nurses, they more likely know other nurses (who are likely women as well) (McPherson et al., 2001).

In the household, although men are beginning to do more, women still do the larger share of housework and childcare (Bianchi et al., 2006). The gender script continues to write women as ‘devoted caregivers and mothers’, and men as ‘providers’ (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 129). In their roles as family caregivers of children and the elderly, women are likely to meet contacts in occupational roles such as nurse, teacher, and cleaner in the contexts of medical care facilities, schools, and the home (Erickson, 2004; Small, 2009).

Tellingly, women are doing better than men in education (DiPrete and Buchmann, 2013), not only in North America but in Singapore as well. Singaporean women achieve better grades in school and are as likely to be university graduates as men. They are also as likely to be professionals, managers, and technicians (Department of Statistics, 2010). A noticeable gender gap begins to appear when women reach their mid-thirties; many become parents and stop working (e.g., the labour force participation is 76% for men and 58% for women in Singapore). Parenting sends men and women onto different gender-typical paths, affecting their domains of social interaction and their consequent accumulation of social capital (Smith-Lovin and McPherson, 1993; England, 2010). If they continue working, women often experience a limit to their promotion to the highest levels (England, 2010).

While women face disadvantages, having to juggle work and family, dropping out of work, and/or facing limits to work promotion, the gender gap seems to have narrowed much faster and more progressively than the ethnic gap, particularly in education, and, subsequently, in earnings in the labour market (Gamoran, 2001). It is in this sense that Tilly (1998, p. 82) can rightly assert: ‘In much of our world, race and class overlap far more than gender and class, with the result that importing a gender boundary line has different consequences than importing racial frontiers.’ In many contemporary societies, ‘women do not constitute a class’ (Lockwood, 1986, p. 199), at least not in the same manner as ethnic groups, who often find themselves engaged in intense battles for resources, recognition, and equality (Olzak, 1992). In the latter case, the overlapping, or in Blau’s (1977) words, the ‘consolidation’ of ethnic and class boundaries increases the salience of ethnicity, typecasting one group as an ‘out-group’ and other groups as dominant and superior (Massey, 2007, p. 12).

This is not to say women are never exploited or viewed as incompetent, but women are not – as an entire category – entrenched in the same sweeping kinds of material and educational disadvantages as those faced by less dominant ethnic groups. For example, girls in contemporary societies are not usually born into poor families at the same rates that ethnic minorities are; furthermore, they often do better than boys in school; women also know more about health than men, live longer, have social connections of no lesser quality than men’s (as this study shows). Therefore, Massey frames the difference between gender and ethnicity in this way:

The mechanisms devised by human beings to promote gender stratification are different from those used to perpetuate inequalities on the basis of race and class. Whereas elites may frame minorities and poor as unlikeable and incompetent, and thus prime targets for exploitation and exclusion, such a framing cannot very well be used to anchor categorical distinctions based on gender. Husbands have wives, fathers have daughters, brothers have sisters, and sons have mothers to whom they are emotionally attached and with whom they live in intimate association. These emotional bonds preclude the positioning of women as a despised out-group. As a result, gender stratification relies on a different framing, one that positions women as likeable and approachable yet exploitable, a tricky balancing act

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