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# A social capital approach: An examination of Putnam's civic engagement and public relations roles



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## ABSTRACT

Social capital approaches to public relations suggest that public relations professionals serve as brokers of social resources on behalf of organizations in that just as other forms of capital (e.g., financial capital) may be exchanged for organizational outcomes, so too can social resources (e.g., relationships, reputation, trust and so on) embedded in the networks of organizational publics. Robert D. Putnam's widely recognized conceptualization of social capital suggests that civic engagement behaviors serve as surrogate measures of social capital. Results of the current research support such a social capital approach to public relations. Data indicated public relations professionals are more likely to participate in civic engagement behaviors than the general U.S. population, and differences were found between public relations roles (manager/technician) for three researcher-created subcategories of civic engagement behaviors: political involvement, participation in voluntary organizations, and personal interaction. Theoretical implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Social capital has received substantive attention from scholars across a variety of disciplines. From an organizational standpoint, social capital is generally understood as a combination of social and economic approaches that suggests social resources may be used as a form of exchange to achieve organizational outcomes (Andrews, 2010; Fussell, Harrison-Rexrode, Kennan, & Hazleton, 2006). In other words, just as financial capital may be exchanged to provide tangible benefits for organizations, social resources (e.g., relationships, reputation, trust) may serve in a similar capacity.

Despite having roots in sociology, social capital scholarship has most recently garnered extensive attention in applied disciplines like business management, political science, and public relations. Public relations research to-date has focused largely on the conceptual development of social capital approaches and provided a foundation for developing research on the topic. This research has highlighted social capital's potential to explain the public relations discipline (Dodd, 2012; Edwards, 2006; Fussell, Harrison-Rexrode, Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Ihlen, 2005, 2007; Luoma-aho, 2009), serve as a meta-theory that offers an ontological argument for the discipline (Dodd, 2012; Ihlen, 2005, 2007; Luoma-aho, 2009), and explain the contribution of public relations to society (Jin & Lee, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2013).

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The scope of this study is to provide a conceptual representation of a social capital approach to public relations by discussing connections between social capital, civic engagement and public relations roles. The study provides empirical evidence to support these connections by using secondary data to identify how public relations managers and technicians take part in civic engagement behaviors more than the general U.S. population.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social capital approaches

**Bourdieu (1986)** defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances or recognition” (p. 248). Researchers have used this foundational definition to further examine social capital from varying levels of analysis (e.g., macro, meso, or micro) and according to the benefits, ties and incentives that result from individuals and collectives that acquire social capital. Despite apparent differences stemming from the early works of the founding fathers of social capital – Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam – the premise behind these approaches is the same: “investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” (**Lin, 2001**; p. 19). The social capital approach to public relations discussed in this study takes a micro-level (i.e., individual-level) approach and is based on political scientist Robert D. Putnam’s concept of civic engagement.

### 2.2. Putnam’s civic engagement

**Putnam (2000)** presented social capital as a function of civic engagement behaviors – a perspective that views individual civic engagement activities like involvement in voluntary organizations, reading the newspaper, and voting as surrogate measures of communities’ social capital. Furthermore, he claimed that “civic virtue” is closely related to social capital and “most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (p. 19). He argued, “A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (p. 19). In short, Putnam’s approach makes the argument that individual-level engagement in civic behaviors realizes costs and benefits at the societal level.

**Putnam’s (2000)** civic engagement approach to social capital emphasizes the role of network density and how it facilitates the establishment of two equally important types of social capital – bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital refers to social resources created with those outside the group or community; whereas bonding social capital refers to social resources created among individuals inside the group or community. In other words, the behaviors that facilitate social resources may be understood as heterophilous versus homophilous interactions, respectively.

### 2.3. Social capital approaches to public relations

Social capital has the ability to serve as a natural extension of public relations scholarship because of the theoretical emphasis practitioners and scholars have placed on measuring the value of intangible (e.g., relationships, reputation, trust) and tangible (e.g., financial profitability) outcomes of public relations activities. Social capital is generally viewed as a desirable outcome that results in assets that include favorable reputations; increased trust; education; health; and community life, work, democracy and internal-external governance (**Woolcock, 2010**), among others.

The majority of research that has produced empirical support for social capital approaches to the discipline has emphasized work related to the founding fathers. For example, scholars have approached the study of social capital by examining Bourdieu’s concept of fields – wherein networks of actors are afforded power based on the possession of resources (**Edwards, 2006; Ihlen, 2005, 2007**) – and by expanding notions of the processes and consequences of possessing social capital (**Lin, 2001**). Similarly, (**Dodd, 2012**) tested the social capital propositions posed by **Lin (2001)** in a public relations context to develop a comprehensive model for social capital in public relations. Similarly, other scholars have afforded particular attention to the processes and resources of social capital in a public relations context (**Fussel, et al., 2006; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Hazleton & Kennan, 2000**).

Using work from Putnam, public relations scholars have also examined social capital as a community building function with societal-level impacts (**Luoma-aho, 2009; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2013**). According to **Yang and Taylor (2013)**, “social capital formation is one way that the profession of public relations contributes to society. Its contribution is in disseminating information and facilitating relationships in what Putnam called vigorous civic connections” (p. 260).

**Putnam (2000)** claimed that community bonds arise from engagement in civic behaviors. Several public relations scholars have similarly emphasized the importance of community in the public relations discipline. For example, **Hallahan (2004)** suggested that the public relations profession be re-named community relations. Similarly, **Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012)** supported a Community Building Theory of Public Relations that views public relations as serving fundamental roles of building and maintaining community. According to **Luoma-aho (2009)**, Putnam’s work offers a holistic view that gives deeper meaning to the relationships established by public relations activities. She argues, “Public relations could profit from a redefinition [and] be understood as the practice of creating organizational social capital” (p. 240).

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