Individual social capital: Accessibility and mobilization of resources embedded in social networks

José Atilano Pena-López *, José Manuel Sánchez-Santos

Applied Economics Department, University of A Coruña, Spain

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:

Keywords:
Individual social capital
General social capital
Lin's model
Social capital theory
Mobilization of social resources

A B S T R A C T

The objective of the present paper is to characterize the structure of individual social networks and to provide new insights into the underlying mechanism of individual social capitalization process. In particular, we put to the test three main assumptions underlying Lin’s seminal explanatory model of individual social capital determinants (Lin, 2001). We analyzed the results of an extensive and specifically designed survey on personal networks in Spanish society (OSIM, 2011). Our findings, based on the use of Principal Component Analysis (PCA), regression and structural methods allow us to complement Lin’s general model distinguishing accessibility and mobilization of social resources. Furthermore, the empirical evidence suggests the need for introducing a significant distinction between instrumental-expert and expressive mobilization. Finally, our analysis allows us to identify the main determining factors of both forms of capitalization of personal relations.

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1. Introduction

The notion of social capital has become a focal point of academic debate in a wide range of disciplines (e.g. economics, sociology, education, etc.). Following the micro perspective of authors such as Bourdieu (2001), Coleman (1988), Portes (1998) and Lin (1999a, 1999b, 2001) that considers social capital as an individual resource, the present paper conceives individual social capital as the network of relations that a specific subject has and its value lies in the resources he or she can draw from them. This approach emphasizes the idea that the resources embedded in social networks are a crucial element of social capital. These networks are made up of very diverse ties (family, work etc) whose maintenance is a cost for the individual and potentially can generate a return (Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2004; Glaeser et al., 2002).

From an economic point of view, one of the reasons why personal ties are decisive is that they provide opportunities for advantageous access to privileged information flows and resources. This characteristic can be explained in an analogous manner to the idea of a personal investment and then a form of capitalization. Indeed, social capital could be considered as a property of the individual, which he or she uses to extract resources from a network (Portes, 1998). Ultimately, in this perspective, the social capital of a particular individual would be the amount of networks built or received by that person through their previous relationship history granting access to a pool of resources. Therefore, this set of instruments is the product of a personal investment, or is inherited by status and may be useful for the individual in the achievement of personal goals, both instrumental (income, social status, reputation, etc) and expressive (personal identity, recognition, life satisfaction etc.).

According to the seminal works of Lin (1999a, 1999b, 2001), to assess the structure of individual relations networks and the capitalization process of individual social capital it is crucial to distinguish two dimensions: accessibility and mobilization of the resources embedded in an individual’s social network. Accessibility refers to the number of agents that an individual can access. Mobilization refers to the resources that an individual can effectively extract from the network that she or he has access to or for a given objective. Both dimensions are essential because, a priori, greater accessibility facilitates mobilization, although not automatically. Furthermore, Lin’s model considers that both accessibility and mobilization of resources imbricated in the individual network of social relations operate as a single dimension generating both expressive and instrumental yields.

In the present paper, we take Lin’s model (Lin, 2001) on the functioning of social networks that make up the individual social capital as theoretical framework of reference. This model is based on some empirically testable underlying assumptions and our aim

* Corresponding author at: Facultad de Economía y empresa, 15071, A Coruña, Spain.
E-mail address: atilano.pena@udc.es (J.A. Pena-López).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2016.11.003
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is to contrast three of these assumptions that address the capitalization character of individual social networks management. First, the analysis of social networks should highlight the difference between access and mobilization of social resources. Second, investment in social networks is goal oriented, thus it is necessary to distinguish between mobilization of expressive and instrumental resources. Third, the mobilization of these resources depends on accessibility but is conditioned by other social factors that influence the profitability of mobilized resources.

In order to reach such an objective, we develop an extensive empirical exercise that allows us to penetrate the black box of the accessibility and mobilization of social relations networks of an individual. More specifically, using the position generator and the resource generator respectively as measures of accessibility and mobilization we assess the validity of the above mentioned theoretical predictions and to propose some adjustments and extensions of the Lin's model. Our measures of individual social capital are based on an ample sample (sample size of 3400 personal interviews) conducted in Spain in 2011 with the aim of studying the determinants of individual social capital endowments and its effects (OSIM, 2011).

Despite the fact that the main effects of investment on individual social capital are especially linked to micro scale or personal networks (Yang, 2007), to the best of our knowledge, there are only a few contributions dealing with the micro mechanisms involved in this process of capitalization, in the literature on social capital. Indeed, most of the contributions in this field have focused on the impact of inequalities of this form of capitalization on specific social processes such as obtaining employment (Flap and Volker, 2001; Flap, 2004; Moerbeek and Flap, 2008; Verhaeghe et al., 2015) or status attainment (Moren Cross and Lin, 2008). More specifically, the paper by Lai et al., (1998) on the process of capitalization advances the study of the interrelations between social networks and social contacts in the job search and stratifications.

Our study goes further than previous works addressing issues related to the individual social capitalization and using new data from a specific survey on individual social capital and inequality which provides additional insights regarding the underlying mechanism of such a process. Our paper, in particular, contributes to the literature on individual social capital providing further evidence on the determinants that influence the effective capacity of an individual to mobilize the resources embedded in his or her social network, given a level of accessibility. Furthermore, our empirical analysis shows the need for a drawing between the mobilization of instrumental/expert (i.e. income, social status etc.) and expressive resources (i.e. life satisfaction, personal identity etc.).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we propose a general model of the process of capitalization of individual social capital and we set a system of measurement based on the analysis of personal ties (micro level). In Section 3, we provide some empirical evidence supporting and complementing the part of Lin’s model which refers to the process of capitalization of social networks. Finally, we draw some conclusions.

2. The model

2.1. The inequality in individual social capital endowment

In order to propose a model of the process of capitalization in individual networks we adopt Lin’s general model on individual social capital inequality (Lin, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2008) as starting point. This model is built on three blocks: precursors of inequality, capitalization and individual-social effects (Graph 1). Our interest lies in the first two blocks, that is, in the determinants of the capitalization and the capitalization itself.

In the first block, the precursor conditions of social capital, i.e., factors of the social structure and context that facilitate or restrict this capitalization are found. The link established between blocks one and two explains the inequality in the allocation of individual social capital. The opportunity of having a greater or lower endowment of individual social capital is linked to the position within the social structure and social trust determinants, strength of the family institutions, income level… Thus, from Lin’s perspective, the investment is linked with the variables that condition the profitability of the investment (Lin, 2001). That is, an individual’s decision about his investment in social relations (social capital) follows a profit maximization logic and is partially determined by his socioeconomic characteristics (Glaeser et al., 2002).

The capitalization block considers a distinction between social accessibility and mobilization. Lin (1999a, 1999b) insists on the need to distinguish these two dimensions: an individual can occupy a certain position in the social structure and have access to a series of embedded resources in his network’s membership; however, he can or cannot have mobilization capability. The measurement of accessibility provides us with an inventory of the subjects and resources accessible, a priori, for a given person, but that does not mean that this focal subject can mobilize them effectively. Hence, mobilization should focus on actions and achievements and its determinants should have greater complexity because it is associated with individual decisions and social context (needs, relational proximity, resources owned…). In addition, mobilization requires certain social skills, as well as the possibility of a return or deferred payment for the provided resource. In this sense, even values and
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