

# The difference between social capital and cultural capital

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## Abstract

The concepts of social capital and cultural capital share similarities and exhibit notable overlap, but their specific meanings and interpretations can vary, leading to diverse understandings of each concept. This article explores the differences and similarities between the concepts from different definitional positions. A matrix of definitions is proposed and the intersection of the meaning of each concept is explored. By recognising the various meanings and dimensions associated with social and cultural capital, researchers and practitioners can engage in more nuanced discussions and analyses, appreciating the complexities and contextual variations within these concepts. This broader understanding enables a richer exploration of their impacts on individuals, communities, and societies, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive comprehension of social dynamics and cultural phenomena.

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## Introduction

The concepts of social capital and cultural capital are similar and overlap in some significant ways depending on the meaning attributed to each concept. Cultural capital has at least two different meanings, and social capital has a multiplicity of definitions that can be grouped into at least four different broad groups.

Broadly speaking, any definition of social capital that extends beyond individual relationships (networks) and their properties (thick trust, reputation, goodwill, etc.) to the wider social context of social organisation, such as social norms and social trust, overlaps with most meanings of cultural capital.

A definition of social capital that focuses only on social networks is not closely related to cultural capital.

However, if the properties of the relationships are taken into account, then cultural capital is related since the nature of relationships is influenced by culture. And if the wider social setting (beyond individual relationships) is included in the definition of social capital, then there is clearly considerable overlap with most meanings of cultural capital. The inclusion of factors further to the right in Figure 1 is more likely to mean the concepts are related or overlapping.

Table 1 summarises the differences between cultural capital and social capital from different definitional positions. The meaning of each definitional position will be elucidated in the following section. Then I will provide some details of why each position in the matrix is different, related, or overlapping.

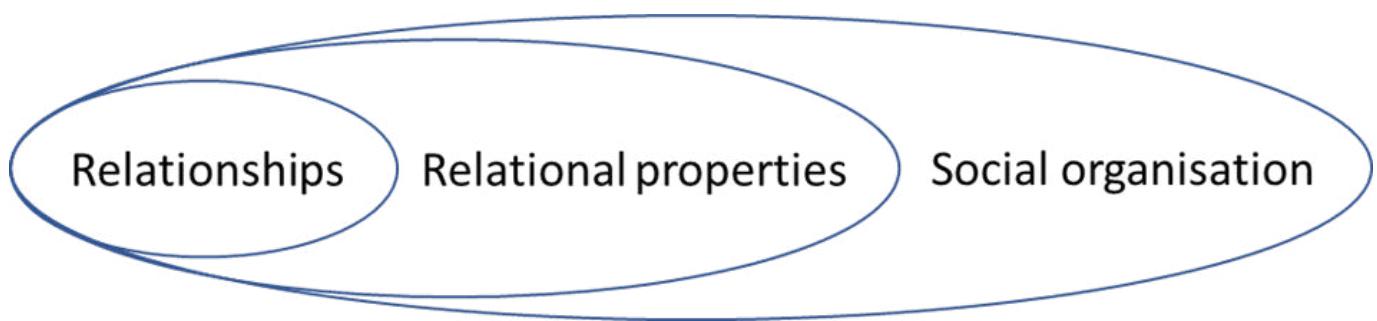


Figure 1. A generalisation of inclusions in the concept of social capital.

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| Cultural capital<br>Social capital                          | Social position, status, and power (S1) | Shared norms and values (S2) | Patterns of interconnected individuals (S3) | Degree of commitment to groups (S4) |
|---|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Some cultural values are constructive or useful (C1)</b> | Different (R1)                          | Overlap (R3)                 | Different (R5)                              | Related (R7)                        |
| <b>Some cultural traits are held in high regard (C2)</b>    | Related (R2)                            | Different (R4)               | Different (R6)                              | Related (R8)                        |

Table 1. The relationship between cultural capital and social capital from different definitional positions.

Before discussing the different meanings of cultural capital and social capital, I would like to acknowledge that these distinctions are not neat boxes that can be easily distinguished and that do not overlap and interrelate. This is particularly true for social capital. It is common for scholars to include aspects of two or more definitional positions, and it is not uncommon for scholars to attempt to integrate all four. Therefore, the following definitional distinctions are simply an analytical tool to help understand the different positions and the resulting relationships between the concepts.

### **C1. Cultural capital as cultural values which are constructive or useful**

One meaning of the term cultural capital is the cultural attitudes and shared values that are constructive and, therefore useful (Bankston, 2022). For example, in some cultures, parents teach their children to return lost objects and always to tell the truth (Robison et al., 2002). Some cultural values predispose individuals to engage in more constructive or productive actions than other cultures, and these values are referred to as cultural capital.

### **C2. Cultural capital as cultural traits which are held in high regard**

The second meaning of cultural capital considers the cultural traits that are held in high regard by a culture to be cultural capital. They may or may not be productive traits, but they provide benefits for those individuals who possess it. Examples can include an accent or dress that suggests social prestige. Bourdieu (1986) referred to cultural capital as the stable, internalised signs showing that an individual is (or should be) considered a member of a given social group.

Compared to the other meaning of cultural capital above, this meaning relates to the property of the individual that can produce individual benefit rather than the property of the social group, which produces collective (and individual) benefit.

### **S1. Social capital as social position, status, and power**

This meaning of social capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and is derived primarily from one's social position and status, enabling a person to exert power on groups or individuals to obtain benefit. Bourdieu (1986 p.248) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". For Bourdieu social capital is irreducibly attached to class and other forms of stratification which in turn are associated with various forms of benefit or advancement.

### **S2. Social capital as shared norms and values**

This view of social capital is often called the "normative" approach, which sees shared norms and values as the basis for constructive outcomes. Francis Fukuyama defined social capital as "the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them" (Fukuyama, 1997). Several authors have pointed to the theoretical origins of this approach in the work of Emile Durkheim (see Farr, 2004; Fehr & Gintis, 2007; Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998).

### **S3. Social capital as patterns of interconnected individuals**

This approach to social capital focuses on the patterns of connections between people that produce benefits. From this perspective, an individual's potential stock of social capital consists of the collection and pattern of relationships in which an individual is involved and to which they have access, and further to the location and patterning of their associations in larger social space (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998).

#### S4. Social capital as the degree of commitment to groups

This meaning of social capital is based on the idea that engagement in public life generates benefits both for the individuals involved but also for society as a whole. Robert Putnam's work on *Bowling Alone* (1995, 2000) utilised this approach and was an important driver in popularising the concept of social capital.

#### R1

The meanings of cultural capital and social capital in position R1 in Table I are different and have little to no relationship or overlap. The cultural values that are constructive or useful do not afford someone possessing them any special position, status or power since the cultural values are broadly held by members of the social group.

#### R2

The grid R2 in Table I compares Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and social capital. It is widely understood that in Bourdieu's theory, the forms of capital are closely related. For example, cultural capital enhances the ability of groups to use social capital, and

social capital creates the types of environments for the development of cultural capital (Kang & Glassman, 2010). The higher the level of cultural capital, the more certain and swift is access to the group's reservoirs of social capital (Kang & Glassman, 2010). Some authors have suggested that cultural capital is indivisible from social capital (for example, see Wilks & Quinn, 2016). Therefore, the concepts are closely related.

#### R3

The concepts of social capital as shared norms and values and cultural capital as constructive values are nearly synonymous or overlapping in their meaning. It should be noted that many scholars using this meaning of social capital also tend to include the existence of networks in their definitions, and this is beyond the scope of cultural capital.

#### R4

The meanings of the concepts at R4 in Table I are incompatible because these definitions define social capital as a public good and cultural capital as a private good. This makes the concepts entirely different.

| Dimension<br>Level  | Structural dimension<br>Configuration and pattern of social relationships including structures of social organisation   | Relational dimension<br>Characteristics and qualities of social relationships  | Cognitive dimension<br>Shared understandings that provide systems of meaning   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Micro</b><br>Factors related to, or embedded in, specific social relationships                   | Social networks<br>Bonding ties<br>Bridging ties<br>Linking ties<br>Network configuration<br>Associational membership<br><i>Similar to connectedness</i>                | Thick trust and trustworthiness<br>Norms and sanctions<br>Obligations and expectations<br>Identity and identification<br><i>Similar to reputation and goodwill</i>   | Shared language, codes, and narratives<br>Shared values, attitudes, and beliefs<br>Shared goals and purpose  |
| <b>Meso</b><br>Factors that are applicable in the context of a social grouping                      | Roles (formal and informal)<br>Rules (formalised and informal)<br>Procedures and precedents<br>Networks of institutions   | The relational dimension is generally not applicable above the micro level since it relates to the properties of relationships. Factors such as norms and identity operating at higher levels are shared understandings not necessarily embedded in specific relationships but generally understood so are cognitive. An exception could be the relational properties of networks of institutions. | All cognitive micro level factors<br>Thin/generalised trust<br>Norms and sanctions<br>Identity and belonging<br><i>Similar to group or organisational culture</i>  |
| <b>Macro</b><br>Factors that are generally relevant and widely applicable to a community or society | Coordinating institutions<br>Law and enforcement<br>Generalised patterns of institutional collaboration<br>Structures and systems that perpetuate social stratification |  | All cognitive micro level factors<br>Thin/generalised trust<br>Norms and sanctions<br>Identity and belonging<br>Shared understandings that perpetuate social stratification<br><i>Similar to culture and mores</i> |

Table 2. Factors relevant to different dimensions of social capital at different levels of analysis.a

## R5 and R6

When social capital is defined as patterns of interconnections, there is no similarity with cultural capital since this approach does not consider cultural values and beliefs such as norms, social trust, and belonging.

## R7 and R8

Social capital, defined as the degree of commitment to groups, is related to cultural capital since public life is where cultural values and understandings are developed and maintained. The commitment to a group is related to these cultural values, and so the concepts are related.

## Cultural capital and the dimensions approach to social capital

The dimensions approach to social capital has become popular in recent years and acknowledges the multidimensional nature of social capital by identifying three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Under the dimensions framework, cultural capital overlaps with the cognitive dimension, particularly at the macro level (see the bottom right box in Table 2).

This article has discussed the differences between cultural capital and social capital, which depend on the definition of each concept. For many approaches to social capital, there is considerable overlap with the concept of cultural capital, which for others, there is no relationship. Embracing the multifaceted nature of social and cultural capital allows for more nuanced discussions and analyses. This comprehensive understanding leads to a richer exploration of their effects on individuals, communities, and societies, ultimately enhancing our comprehension of social dynamics and cultural phenomena.

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