The power of social capital: adapting Bourdieu to the study of public relations

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Abstract
All organizations have relationships with their environments that can be described as their social capital. The development of this social capital is a crucial public relations activity. Taking a cue from the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, social capital can also be seen as one of several resources used to obtain or maintain positions of power. Bourdieu, however, was quite vague about how social capital should be analyzed and did not write about organizations per se. Accordingly, I will discuss and elaborate on the social capital concept by drawing from the work of Nan Lin (2002).
Public relations has increasingly been likened to *relationship management* (Heath, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). A common definition of public relations is that it is “the management function that *establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships* between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends [emphasis added]” (Cutlip *et al.*, 1999, p. 6). I argue that such relationships can be called the *social capital* of an organization, and that this concept has greater explanatory strength than relationship management because it engages more directly with issues of power.

The idea of social capital has become something of a buzzword in social science (e.g., Baron *et al.*, 2000; Coleman, 1990; Field, 2002; Halpern, 2004; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2001, 2004). It tends to be used to describe the resources of a community and the degree of shared values and trust within it. Here, however, the notion is rooted in the critical sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), whose work has rarely featured in public relations. For Bourdieu, social capital is seen as one of several resources that an actor uses to pursue their interests and to position themselves.

However, two problems with Bourdieu’s use of social capital, are, first, that he made few attempts to construct an operational definition and, second, he largely ignored organizations. Accordingly, I strengthen the concept’s suitability for analyzing public relations by adding insights from Lin (2002). My aim, in combining their approaches to social capital, is to move public relations forward. The combined approach allows a focus on issues of power that, even in critical approaches addressing hegemonic influences through discourse (e.g., Berger, 1999; Motion & Weaver, 2005), is downplayed or ignored.

1. **Field and capital**

Bourdieu’s status as a prominent contemporary social thinkers has been confirmed by a number of books that introduce and discuss his contributions to knowledge (e.g., Fowler, 2001; e.g., Jenkins, 2002; Robbins, 2000). Nevertheless, his contributions are largely overlooked within public relations. Of particular relevance here are Bourdieu’s notions of *field* and *capital* (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

In Thompson’s (1991) useful description, a field is typically understood to be “a
structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or ‘capital’’’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 14). The actors in the field compete for profits and capital, which are unequally shared. Capital might be specific to a certain field and relatively worthless in other fields. It is, for instance, possible to talk about an intellectual field where, although some kind of recognition can be won outside the field, scholarly significance is only grasped thoroughly within the field. At the organizational level, a research center belongs to the scientific field, a parent-teacher association belongs to the educational field, a bank belongs to the economic field, a theater belongs to the cultural field, a ministry belongs to the bureaucratic field, and so on. At the same time, every one of these fields can be part of one or several other larger fields, or contain subfields within itself. The research center may, for instance, be part of the political field through its connections with a political agenda and political institutions.

The types of capital for which agents or organizations compete can be incorporated, or materialized, capital, which might be considered as, for example, economic, linguistic, and scholastic capital. Bourdieu’s (1986) article on the forms of capital narrows the notion down to three fundamental types: economic capital (money, property, etc.), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications), and social capital (connections and membership of groups). At the same time though, he writes that these forms of capital may be apprehended as symbolic capital (prestige, honor). Social capital, for instance, always functions as symbolic capital because it is “governed by the logic of knowledge and acknowledgement” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 257). The amount and type of capital that an agent possesses also locates it in the field:

The social field can be described as a multi-dimensional space of positions such that each actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the first pertinent variables. Agents are thus distributed, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the composition of their capital—in other words,
according to the relative weight of the different kinds of capital in the total set of their assets. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 231)

Agents in a field pursue their interests knowingly or unknowingly. There is a continuous struggle to maintain or alter the distribution, or to convert the type of capital. Bourdieu (1998) usefully directs the researcher’s focus to these competing interests, the conflicts that they generate, and the whole logic of the field. The only accompanying approach he advocates is plunging “into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated, but with the objective of constructing it as a ‘special case of what is possible’” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 2). Public relations practice fits this picture if it is regarded as a practice that assists organizational actors in the different fields in pursuing their interests with the help of various forms of capital. The distribution of capital is also an expression of power relationships that should be studied.

A prime advantage of drawing on Bourdieu over other analyses of resources is his emphasis on the relational and dynamic aspects. The positions of the actors are seen in relation to each other and explained as functions of the types and amounts of capital, the field-specific appreciations of these forms of capital, and the constant attempts to acquire, hold on to, or convert capital.

Elsewhere (Ihlen, 2002, 2004a, 2004b), I have argued for a reworked typology of the different types of capital, fusing the work of Bourdieu with that of media sociology, which has been more focused on the capital of organizations (Davis, 2002; Schlesinger, 1990; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). The fusion of ideas justifies, and enables, the study an organization’s economic capital, its degree of institutionalization (the size of its administration and the number of public relations practitioners), its knowledge capital (the composite of formal professional education or informal skills, including public relations knowledge), its symbolic capital (reputation), and its social capital.

Different fields give different values to the forms of capital, but organizational power positions must be understood as anchored in the different types of capital. Even though the focus here will be on social capital alone, other forms of capital also matter. For instance, the
knowledge capital (e.g., how to conduct a campaign, how to use rhetoric), and the economic capital needed to conduct campaigns, are highly significant.

There are three further reasons for choosing to discuss social capital over the other forms. First, the development of social capital, and through it symbolic capital, seems to be at the heart of public relations. Second, although management is obviously engaged in increasing social capital, it seems to be an exclusive function of public relations to develop programs in this area. Third, Bourdieu’s concept of social capital needs to be elaborated upon, as it does not lend itself easily to empirical studies of organizations.

2. Social capital

Social capital can broadly be defined as connections and membership in a group, but Bourdieu (1986) also gave a more detailed definition:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248-249)

This definition implies that social capital must be understood as having two components: the size of an individual’s network and the volume of the capital that the other parts of the network have, and to which the individual gains access. Social capital accrues as a result of a conscious or unconscious investment strategy involving exchanges of, for instance, gifts, services, words, time, attention, care, or concern. It also implies “obligations” or “credit.” The members of the network can subjectively feel gratitude, respect, or friendship; the relationship can also be formalized as juridical rights and obligations. The credit can be called on, but without a guarantee that it will be recognized.

There is clearly a risk involved in investment in social capital. From a narrow economic perspective, investing in social capital seems to be pointless because it may only yield interest in the long run. However, there are several “services” and “goods,” which
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cannot be obtained without social capital, and this capital has to be established well before a need appears, “as if for [its] own sake, and therefore outside [its] period of use” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252).

Despite this, social capital is “curiously undeveloped” (Schuller et al., 2000, p. 5) in Bourdieu’s hands, and his use of the notion is often more metaphorical than analytically disciplined. Accordingly, this article augments his work with writings of other scholars who use the concept and relates it to relevant public relations literature.

3. Social capital and public relations

The notion of social capital fits in well with much public relations thinking that emphasizes how relationship building has both short and long-term effects for an organization. Nonetheless, only a few public relations studies have used the concept. Leichty and Warner (Leichty & Warner, 2001), for instance, point out how public relations practice can be criticized for its positive or negative effect on social capital in a community or society. Their work refers to Robert Putnam (2001), who has focused on the disintegration of social cohesion and community values, but has been criticized for conflating means and ends. It is unclear if they see huge amounts of social capital as an end in itself, or as a means of achieving a good society (Schuller et al., 2000)? Most importantly, this use of social capital shifts the focus away from power issues.

Hazelton and Kennan (Hazelton Jr. & Kennan, 2000) identify how social capital can contribute to the organizational bottom line by leading to increased, or more complex, forms of social capital, reduced transaction costs, and organizational advantage (in the form of, for instance, improved productivity and efficiency). From this perspective, social capital has three dimensions: structural (network ties), content-communicative, and relational. However, Hazelton and Kennan do not address the need for a focus on power either, and provide little in the way of suggestions for empirical investigation.

Although their study does mention Bourdieu, it makes most use of, James Coleman, an early advocate of social capital (e.g., Coleman, 1990), whose contribution included moving attention away from the study of elites. The problem, however, is that Coleman is an
exponent of rational choice thinking and has a distinctly functionalistic approach. His concept of capital is also “somewhat conservative and organicist,” (Schuller et al., 2000, p. 8) lamenting, for instance, the decline of the family.

4. Questions of empiricism and the work of Lin

In contrast to the work of Bourdieu, Putnam, and Coleman, Nan Lin’s approach is better suited for adaptation to the meso-level of organizations. Lin (2002) suggests that social capital should be defined operationally as “the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions” (pp. 24–25).

Social capital in this sense can be both an outcome and a causal factor. As a relational asset it should not, as is often the case, be confused with collective assets such as culture, norms, or trust in a society. For Lin it is important to keep in mind that the roots of social capital lie in individual interaction and networks.

Lin also differentiates between two prime motives for actions, that of preserving or maintaining resources--what he calls expressive actions, and that of searching for and obtaining resources--or instrumental actions. Instrumental actions have economic, political, or social outcomes. For an organization this may imply earnings or reduced costs, favorable political decisions, or representation, in public committees, or an enhanced reputation. The survival of an organization is the prime outcome when seeking to preserve and maintain resources.

Lin proposes that the success of action is positively associated with social capital. Social capital may, for instance, facilitate the flow of information, and social ties may exert influence on agents. Social capital may function as certification of social credentials, and may also reinforce identity and recognition (Lin, 2002). In short, social capital may strengthen the symbolic capital, as Bourdieu remarked, and could also have political and economic significance.

The vast number of connections gathered by most organizations, points to how they are socially embedded in a much stronger sense than individuals. Despite this, individuals are the focus of most theories of social capital. In addition, an organization faces a far more
diverse audience than do individuals. This also creates challenges for organizations, as a
multiple audience will also have multiple organizational identifications. An organizational
strategy that is designed to communicate with one group of stakeholders might alienate others
(Ice, 1991). However, the many linkages of an organization can provide a powerful resource
to draw upon in the furtherance of its interests. The implication is, again, that organizations
may increase their power to the detriment of individual citizens.

In Coleman’s (1990) view, the analysis of social capital is best achieved with
qualitative methods, although the concept could be used in quantitative analyses, building on
qualitative indicators. Bourdieu (1991), in contrast, claimed that statistical analysis is the sole
means of demonstrating the structure of the social space, and that includes the assessment of
social capital. The “truth” probably lies more in the middle. That is, both quantitative and
qualitative methods are needed to grasp an organization’s social capital and its influence. To
use the concept in a comprehensive analysis of public relations and link the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis, it seems fruitful to integrate the insights from Bourdieu with the
work of Lin.

Lin (2002) suggests certain empirical questions which also can be elaborated upon:
What kind of investment does an organization make in social capital? That is, how does it
attempt to strengthen connections with politicians, journalists, activist groups, bureaucrats,
researchers, and other organizations?
a) What is the size of an organization’s network? How many connections does the
organization have with politicians, journalists, activist groups, bureaucrats, researchers, and
other organizations, and how does this compare with similar organizations? b) What kinds of
capital does the organization potentially have access to through its network?
And finally, what is the return on the social capital? What has the organization gained
economically, politically, and socially?

These questions provide a useful starting point for empirical analysis of public
relations and power. They can help to explore, and to explain, such traditional public
relations activities as alliance building, community programs, lobbying, and media relations.
The social capital of each organization within a field needs to be compared, and also linked to
the analysis of other types of capital, in order to understand the relative power dispositions and how public relations contributes to them.

5. Conclusion

My aims in this article were to confirm the importance of the concept of social capital for public relations, and to elaborate social capital further through Lin’s (2002) research in an organizational context, and Bourdieu’s critical sociology. While Lin suggests useful questions for empirical analysis, my reasons for grounding the analysis more in Bourdieu are based on his insistence on: the need for comparison, the implied relational dimension, and the centrality of power issues. Further research should seek to develop richer and more stringent categories for the analysis of social capital and its relation to the other forms of capital and the field. Because it is decisive to public relations practice, social capital needs to be better understood, better integrated, and further researched.
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