Social Relations, Social Capital, and Social Networks: A Conceptual Classification

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Overview
- The terms social support, social capital, social cohesion, and social network are defined and delimited.
- Similarities and differences of the respective concepts are identified in order to enhance precision and understanding of the research field.
- Social networks can be described on the level of single individuals (micro) as well as on the level of groups and communities (meso-/macro-level).
- Social network theories include both quantitative aspects of social relations (structure) and qualitative aspects (function).

1 Introduction and Background

Social relations lie at the core of sociology; they are basically its framework. Without social relations, no social interactions develop. The study of social relations looks back on a long tradition of research, and this tradition is continuing in constantly differentiating and specializing subsystems. The aim of this chapter is to give a brief overview of research traditions on social relations. In particular, it aims to clarify and, where possible, differentiate between concepts that have been developed in the course of research on social relations in sociology and other related disciplines (such as social psychology). Why is a classification necessary? When dealing with research on social relations, it can be observed that different terms are used

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synonymously and that originally intended demarcations between them blur over time. This chapter addresses the following questions: What terms are used in sociological research on social relations? How are they defined? And how can an overarching concept of social networks emerge from these different terms?

The field of research on social relations is broad and is the subject of many disciplines. It ranges from sociology to social psychology, from economics to public health to epidemiology. The study of social relations has a long history in sociology. This extends from Durkheim's famous work on suicide (Durkheim, 2005 [Orig. 1897]) through Parsons' functionalist analysis of society (Parsons, 1951), which pays attention to the values and norms underlying social interactions, to Bourdieu's theories of capital and his analyses of social differentiation (Bourdieu, 2000). The conceptual diversity that emerged in the process is certainly desired and acknowledges the plurality of research activities. It ranges from social capital to social cohesion to social networks. At the same time, however, such differentiation is problematic if the terms and the concepts behind them overlap or are used synonymously without clear definitions and demarcations being associated with them (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Berkman & Krishna, 2014). Berkman and Glass summarize this succinctly: "When investigators write about the impact of social relationships on health, many terms are used loosely and interchangeably, including social networks, social support, social ties and social integration" (Berkman et al., 2000, p. 137).

In the context of this chapter, social relations serve as a generic overarching term for a whole range of different concepts for describing social interaction in societies. Different characteristics can be named here. For example, the quantity and quality of social relations can be differentiated. Quantity means the number of different social contacts or the frequency of social contacts. Each social contact can be attributed to a certain quality. What are these contacts like or what resources are available through them? Social contacts are a precondition for the exchange of resources and social support. However, it cannot necessarily be assumed that an increasing number of social contacts are accompanied by an increasing availability of resources and support services. Not every person within a social structure provides access to resources.

Another potential for differentiation results from the level at which social relations can be classified. While on the *micro-level* social relations of an individual are examined, on the *meso-level* (institutional) networks of, for example, communities, municipalities, districts, or schools are studied, and accordingly on the *macro-level* countries and states. The latter is often measured on the basis of indicators for trust and norms, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Based on these basic differentiations, the following section introduces and discusses central concepts such as social support, social capital, social cohesion, and social networks.

2 Disambiguation

2.1 *Social Support*

The main qualitative dimension at the micro-level of social relations is social support. Social support cannot take place without social contacts and without being embedded in social networks. If the number and frequency of social contacts are measures of the quantity of social relationships, then social support is a measure of the quality of these relationships. Support research distinguishes between objective and subjective aspects of support (Turner & Marino, 1994). It has been shown that the individual perception of available support itself can have a positive impact, for example on mental health and that it does not necessarily need actually received support itself. The feeling of social support in an emergency can mitigate negative effects of acute stress without actually receiving support (Cobb, 1976; House et al., 1988; Turner & Marino, 1994; Uchino, 2009). In addition, little correlation has been found between received support and subjectively perceived support, suggesting that each can be considered a relatively independent construct (Barrera, 1986; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). This functional aspect of social relationships usually includes forms of support on emotional, instrumental, and informational levels.

Emotional support refers to those social contacts that are available for conversations about one's own feelings that can contribute to the discussion of everyday fears and worries or that can provide confirmation of sympathy and affection (Lin et al., 1999). Instrumental support comprises those forms of support that are characterized by practical help, for example, in the household, with childcare, or by borrowing money or other goods. Informational support includes all those services that provide knowledge for solving specific problems or knowledge about access to specific resources, for example, within communities. Table 1 provides a brief account of different aspects of social support, based on Wills and Shinar (2000).

An important principle of social support is *social reciprocity* (Siegrist & Wahrendorf, 2016). People expect a return for giving support (principle of reciprocity). This expectation of reciprocity enables forms of social interaction in the first place. A service in return does not necessarily have the same form as the service received, but it should be perceived as adequate and similar. If, for example, one helps in moving house (instrumental support), one can expect to receive a similar service, if necessary. If these expectations are not met, the reciprocity norm is violated and permanent social exchange is less likely. The reciprocity norm can change depending on the specific relationships. Within the family, for close friends or relatives, one is more willing to provide a service without expecting a temporal indirect corresponding consideration. Generalized reciprocity means that services that have not been provided individually are always reciprocated accordingly. Rather, a general reciprocity can be expected at a much later point in time, for example in a parent-child relationship.

The research approach to social support strongly focuses on the individual level, inquiring about forms of support that are available to individuals. Since the focus on

Table 1 Different functions of social support according to Wills and Shinar (2000)

Different functions of social support	Examples	Potential benefit
Emotional support	Discussion of feelings, talk about worries and fears, confirmation of sympathy and affection	Reduction of perceived threat of critical life events, strengthening self-confidence, improving coping strategies
Instrumental support	Availability of goods, money, tools, transport, help with childcare, household support	Contributes to solving practical problems, allows more time for recovery, supports further coping strategies
Informational support	Information about resources, proposal of alternative, and more effective strategies for action	Increases the amount of useful information available, contributes to the accessibility of necessary support, leads to more effective management
Friendship support	Partner for joint activities (sports, theater, cinema, parties, travel, etc.)	Positive affect, relief and recovery from duties and demands, positive distraction
Confirmation (feedback, social comparisons)	Offers orientation to norms and values, feedback on individual status in comparison to the respective population	Reduces subjective perception of own deviation, acceptance of own attitudes and feelings, offers the possibility of favorable comparisons (self-worth)

the individual might oversee structural aspects, it has repeatedly been suggested that the overall structure of the networks should also be examined in order to be able to work out the structural conditionality of individual support services and possibilities (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Berkman & Krishna, 2014). Here, the focus is on questions of how social relationship structures must be created in order for social support to take place. Which factors within social relationships determine social support, and which ones are more likely to hinder? Can structural features of social support be identified? This is difficult to answer if the analysis focuses on individual support.

2.2 Social Capital

Social capital as an object of investigation can be located in various disciplines (sociology, economics, social psychology, political science). Social capital is understood as a resource that is not produced by individuals, but only through social interaction with others (Berkman & Krishna, 2014; Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). In sociology, two research traditions can be distinguished: a French research tradition represented by Bourdieu and an American tradition that includes the work of James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Both represent different views on social capital.

According to Bourdieu's capital theory, cultural capital and social capital are available in addition to economic capital. Social capital means that access to resources can be made possible through social relations (Bourdieu, 2000). Individuals can also invest specifically in these social relationships in order to gain access to social capital, which in turn can affect other forms of capital. One can imagine a "competition between investments in social capital and other capital" (Lüdicke & Diewald, 2007, p. 15, authors' translation). Social capital is seen as a characteristic of single individuals who can trade with or through it.

Coleman (1990) and Putnam understand social capital more as a characteristic of social networks, and, accordingly, the emphasis is on the interpersonal level. "Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors" (Coleman, 1990, p. 98). This North American tradition develops its understanding of social capital from the study of social networks. In the foreground is the question of how and under what conditions social capital is formed in social networks (Lin, 2000).

When looking at social capital at the micro-level of individuals, there is an overlap with both the concept of social support and social networks. Social support mostly starts from close, rather strong social relationships. The concept of social capital, on the other hand, distinguishes between strong and weak relationships. Weak social relations are more likely to provide new information and resources. This relates the concept closely to the concept of social network. It has been discussed as the concept of the *strength of weak ties* (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1995). The thesis developed by Granovetter states that it is not the frequent, close, and higher-intensity relationships (also known as *bonding social capital*) that can provide relevant resources, such as access to the labor market. Rather, those resources can be made possible through contacts that are characterized by lower contact frequencies and lower intensity. These contacts, called *bridging social capital,* are differentiated by the fact that they are established across different social groups and that they increase the probability of access to certain resources (Lin et al., 1999). In contrast, closer contacts are more likely to provide instrumental and emotional support (Dahl & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2010).

Viewed at the meso- or macro-level, social capital can be determined both as a property of social groups and as a characteristic of habitats or communities. Based on the recording of individual assessments, such as reciprocity and trust in the respective living environment (e.g., neighborhood, district), social and voluntary commitment, and general attitudes toward groups or living spaces, indices are formed on an aggregate level that reflect the extent of social capital and are used accordingly as characteristics of groups or defined spaces. The basic assumption here is that only through experienced reciprocity and trust as well as on the basis of shared values and norms does regular interaction arise, which in turn enables access to resources within groups and the development of social capital (Putnam, 1995; Ichida et al., 2009; Dahl & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2010). Accordingly, the higher the level of trust in one's own living environment, the more likely it is that stable social relationship structures develop. A number of studies have confirmed such relationships (Airaksinen et al., 2015; Pickett & Pearl, 2001).

2.3   Social Cohesion

Another term that is repeatedly mentioned in the field of social relations is social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to the subjective assessments of the connections between members within social groups. Within each group, there is a certain degree of social cohesion. A distinction can be made between *structural cohesion* and *perceived cohesion,* a sense of togetherness of the individual members (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). By emphasizing the sense of belonging, which implicitly includes shared values and norms, the concept of *perceived social cohesion* closely follows the concept of social capital.

High structural social cohesion means that the members of a particular group are closely linked to each other. Thus, the strongest cohesion within a group is achieved when each member of a network is directly connected to every other member, while low cohesion is achieved when many members of a network are only loosely and indirectly connected to each other. The subjective cohesion does not have to correspond to the structural cohesion. Social cohesion is described as a characteristic of groups or spatial areas and can therefore be assigned to the meso- and macro-perspective of social relations.

Social cohesion is often measured by subjective assessments. The focus is on individual assessments and perceptions of the respective groups as well as actual activities of individuals within groups. Strong cohesion within social groups is more often accompanied by greater social control internally, while such groups remain relatively closed to the outside world (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). Examples of such cohesive groups can be found among immigrants who are likely to build strong ties among themselves, for example, because of language and other social barriers, but remain relatively closed to the outside world. The same applies to densely connected neighborhoods or village communities.

The concept of *perceived social cohesion* has been criticized because it has many overlaps with social capital. However, since the assessment of structures of social capitals in communities or neighborhoods is very costly and difficult to implement, perceived social cohesion can be understood as an alternative form of measurement. It gains justification from its methodological feasibility rather than its theoretical location.

Both terms, social capital and social cohesion, inherit the possibility of negative processes within social groups. These include social exclusion, stigmatization, discrimination, and other negative effects of social relationships such as ongoing conflicts (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). In addition, groups with high social cohesion tend to have little contact with other groups. Contact between different groups can support positive attitudes toward others as well as reduce prejudice and negative attitudes. This has been studied in particular in the context of different ethnic groups (Laurence & Bentley, 2016; Hewstone, 2015) and discussed in the light of two different theories: *conflict theory* (Putnam, 2007) and *intergroup contact theory* (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). For more information on negative aspects of social relations, see the chapter on "Negative Ties and Inequalities in Health".

2.4   Social Networks

Sociological network analysis is interested in relationships between individuals as well as in the characteristics of these relationships, but less interested in the characteristics of the individuals themselves. The basic idea is that individual actions are embedded in a network of interpersonal relationships (Burt, 1982). Furthermore, the focus is not only on the relationship between the *ego*, that is, the central actor from whom the network is viewed, and various *alteri*, that is, reference persons of the ego in the network under study. Network analysis is about examining an entire network of relationships. The relationship between the ego and the *alters* is also influenced by the relationships between the *alteri* themselves (*alter-alter-ties)*, which are in turn indirectly connected to the ego. Social interaction and social processes can be explained not only by the characteristics of individuals, but also by their integration into a social environment (Light & Moody, 2020). Graphical network models are developed in order to illustrate these social relationships. From the perspective of network research, the micro-perspective of the individual is quickly abandoned. The meso-level illustrating the interdependencies of individuals and groups is of interest. An important idea in network research is that not only can an individual's position within a social network be identified, but that by revealing the structures of a network, the possibilities for contact, influence, and control within networks can be analyzed. These structures, which can be described using network theoretical concepts such as nodes, density, centrality, and position, are used to describe social phenomena (Holzer, 2009). An explanation of the different terms is given in the chapter "Social Network Theories: An Overview". The complexity of social networks results from the various possible forms and types of interactions between individuals and groups. For example, egocentric networks focus on the relationships of a given *ego* with various alteri, while sociocentric or complete networks focus on all relationships between network members in a given and bounded social network (e.g., community).

In addition, social networks can be distinguished according to their respective character, which can be formal in the case of organizations and associations, or informal in the case of personal, kinship, or friendship networks and contacts. Furthermore, a differentiation according to frequency, intensity, and size and reach of the networks—the extension—is possible. Early (sociological) network research concentrated mainly on these more quantitative aspects of social relationships. Here, the concept of social networks overlaps with the concept of social integration. According to a definition by Laireiter (1993), social integration can be understood as the integration of individuals into social groups, associations, or voluntary organizations; the number of social contacts with family, relatives, and friends; and the availability of and access to social and interpersonal resources. At the same time, social integration refers to norms and values as orientation for individual actions, which are created and sustained by social interaction. Numerous indicators have been developed to measure the degree of social integration within social networks. For example, the *Social Integration Index* by Berkman or the *Social*

Connection Index by Kaplan can be cited from social epidemiological research (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Kaplan et al., 1977). More recently, network research has also increasingly attempted to expand the quantitative understanding of social networks and to include qualitative aspects in the study of social networks, for example, by considering the availability of resources or shared norms and values within networks (Henning & Kohl, 2011).

What is lacking in the sociological study of social networks to date is an independent theory (Holzer, 2009). There are links to *rational choice approaches* and to structuralist social theories. In systems theory, connections can be established to investigate social networks. In network research, formal and methodological questions are in the foreground rather than the development of a common theoretical basis. In earlier work, this lack of basic theory was also referred to as the *structural intuition of* network theory (Freeman, 2004). Network theories have found acceptance in various scientific disciplines, such as physics, biology, psychology, and sociology, but these respective approaches are not always transferable to other areas and make a common theoretical foundation difficult. So far, there are only isolated approaches that attempt to fill relational analysis with cultural and symbolic aspects on the basis of theoretical considerations in order to explain actions and interactions (White, 1995; Gibson, 2005; Fuhse, 2008). The theoretical background and methodological aspects of network research are discussed in more detail in the chapter "Network Analysis and Health Inequalities: A Methodological Introduction".

The authors of this anthology have a common understanding of social networks. Accordingly, social networks are first of all more than the social contacts of a single individual. Social networks stand out from social integration when they allow statements to be made about the structure of social contacts, that is, illustrating the networking of the *alteri* among each other, visible through individual social contacts. Thus, such a concept of network goes beyond the understanding of networks as in the abovementioned indices (e.g., *Social Network Index*). In terms of social capital, the concept of social network is delimited in that it not only describes what resources or norms and values are available in certain groups but also focuses on how these are created and reproduced and what patterns of social networks enable or prevent certain resources. Such a network concept questions the structural conditionality of social support and can thus complement research on social support, since focusing on individual forms and patterns of support neglects the social structure behind the perceived or actual support. Social cohesion can help describe the interconnectedness of social networks.

3 Summary and Outlook

The aim of this chapter was to clarify and order the different concepts in research on social relations. Especially, in the sociology of health and the medical sociology, social capital, social networks, and social support have been established as concepts in research on social relations, sometimes independently, sometimes closely linked.

Terms in the field are defined unclearly or even used synonymously, which does not help to clarify the concepts.

Based on a conceptual clarification, a common understanding of social networks needs to be developed. A comprehensive understanding of social networks includes both quantitative and qualitative aspects of social relationships. First, social networks represent the structure within which social support and social integration can take place. By their very nature, social networks enable or prevent the emergence and spread of social capital. Social networks can be used to show the structural conditionality of social support, the degree to which individuals are in contact with each other, and the extent to which these relationships extend and how lasting they are. Qualitative aspects are also embedded: the intensity of interactions, the available resources between network members, or the norms and values and their correspondence within networks allow inferences about the quality of the networks, including aspects of social capital, such as weak ties and their ability to gain access to resources.

Likewise, networks can be measured on different levels. On a micro-level, contacts between the ego and various *alteri* can be analyzed, including the connections between the *alteri*. On a meso-level, these networks can be measured for larger groups or small-scale areas such as schools or neighborhoods. From such a perspective, conclusions about connections between networks can be drawn. The central disadvantage of such a comprehensive understanding of social networks is the methodological effort required to record social networks as described above (see chapter "Network Analysis and Health Inequalities: A Methodological Introduction").

The aspect of measuring and surveying social networks understood in such a comprehensive way is an important aspect of the present work. Many of the previous works, especially in connection with the investigation of health inequalities, could not meet the demands of complex social networks, as they often focused on quantitative aspects of social networks (e.g., the number of contacts) or on social support without taking other members of the social networks into account. For a complex analysis of social networks, there is a lack of a common conceptual understanding and corresponding data. At this point, the present anthology aims to show what opportunities for research on health inequalities could result from a more complex understanding of social networks and where "gaps" in previous research could be expected to lead to new insights.

Reading Recommendations

Berkman, L. F., & Krishna, A. (2014). Social network epidemiology. In L. F. Berkman & I. Kawachi (Eds.), *Social epidemiology* (pp. 234–289). Oxford University Press. *Fundamental and well-founded treatment of the topic "Social Networks and Health," both theoretical foundations and empirical correlations are presented.*

Light, R. & Moody, J. (2020). *The Oxford Handbook of Social Networks*. Oxford University Press. *Comprehensive introduction to social network theories and applications.*

Kawachi, I., Berkman, L. (2014). Social Cohesion, Social Capital, and Health. In L. Berkman & I. Kawachi (Eds.), *Social Epidemiology (*290–319). Oxford: University Press. *Very thorough and detailed review of the topic "Social Capital and Health."*

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