

# Education, Social Capital and the Accordion Effect

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*The 'accordion effect' is an effect of language which allows us to describe one and the same thing more or less narrowly. Social capital has been conceived in terms of our access to institutional resources, but also in terms that extend to the levels of trust and related resources found in the social networks we are embedded in. The former conception is narrower, favoured for its specificity and analytical utility. The latter conception is broader, favoured for its acknowledgement of context, including the qualitative features of relations between individuals and within communities. These conceptions appear incompatible, but both have numerous adherents in educational research, and it is unclear whether either can be eliminated without some threat to the intelligibility and explanatory promise of social capital theory in an educational context. This raises hard questions about the domains, questions and methods that the social capital concept is best applied to. Should the concept prove resistant to any defensible specification, this will require a significant revision to the stock of conceptual resources available for understanding and explaining educational progress.*

The concept of social capital has undergone a meteoric rise to prominence over the last 15 years. . . . This prominence is clearly reflected in educational research (Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2003).

Social capital is a totally chaotic, ambiguous, and general category that can be used as a notional umbrella for almost any purpose (Fine, 2001).

## I INTRODUCTION

The philosopher Joel Feinberg coined the phrase 'the accordion effect', an effect of language which allows us to describe one and the same thing more

or less narrowly. We can, for example, choose whether or not to ‘puff out’ our description of a human action so as to include its effects. If A does an action X with the consequence Y we may describe A’s action narrowly, saying ‘A did X’ (where Y is the effect), or describe A’s action broadly, as ‘A did Y’, including Y in the description of what A did. So we might (narrowly) say that ‘A pulled the trigger, or (broadly) that ‘A killed a man’ (Feinberg, 1965). Something similar applies to social capital, which has been conceived in terms of our access to institutional resources, but also in terms that extend to the levels of trust and related resources found in the social networks we are embedded in. The former conception is narrower, favoured for its specificity and analytical utility. The latter conception is broader, favoured for its acknowledgement of context, including the qualitative features of relations between individuals and within communities. Both conceptions have numerous adherents in educational research.

In this context it is helpful to refer to a familiar distinction between concepts and conceptions; between the general idea or concept of social capital and particular conceptions of social capital. The accordion effect of itself does not automatically signify that anything is amiss with either: conceptions of varying magnitude may properly reflect differences in the interests and purposes of their sponsors. My argument, however, is not only that there are significant difficulties with the conceptions I review here but that, owing to how the accordion effect operates in this case, the difficulties are such as to call into question the coherence of the concept itself.

In Section II I briefly itemise various conceptions of social capital, illustrating the range of candidates on offer and introducing some representative criticism. In Section III I explore what I call ‘restricted’ conceptions of social capital. Beginning with Coleman’s seminal contribution, I look at several notable attempts in the educational literature to offer ever more closely demarcated conceptions, focussing on aspects of social structure that he sought to emphasise, and mentioning trust and norms, if at all, as effects of and not as part of social capital itself. In Section IV I consider attempts to elaborate on what I call an expansive conception of social capital, ‘expansive’ because it includes a place not only for social structure, but also trust, social norms and other aspects of the cultural context. In Section V I show why the demands for both a narrow and expansive conceptualisation of social capital make for the accordion effect, and why this phenomenon places significant strain on the serviceability of a social capital concept.

There is very little philosophical work on social capital, including in the philosophy of education,<sup>1</sup> and source materials are therefore largely drawn from the social sciences. Besides a brief acknowledgement of influential social theorists such as Putnam and Bourdieu, attention is given to a number of writers (but by no means all) whose contribution to educational theory has attracted significant attention; these include Coleman, Horvat, Stanton-Salazar, Lee, Ream and Palardy, Bankston and also Dika and Singh, for their comprehensive review of educational literature on social capital theory.

## II THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Interest in the subject arose from a recognition amongst social scientists that seemingly obvious opportunities for mutually beneficial collective action were frequently squandered in parts of the developing world, the Middle East and the former communist countries. Arrow remarks that ‘among the properties of many societies whose economic development is backward is a lack of mutual trust’ (Arrow, 1974, p. 26). Trust is included in many contemporary accounts of social capital, which is often used to refer to the information, trust and norms of reciprocity embedded in social networks. Social capital in this contemporary guise was first made use of by Jacobs (1961) and Loury (1977), and has since been elaborated upon by Coleman (1988, 1990) and also Putnam (2000), for whom social capital includes ‘features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (Putnam, 1996, p. 66). Halpern finds that most forms of social capital include a network together with the norms, values and expectancies shared by group members (Halpern, 2005, p. 10). And recent literature on the educational performance of immigrants emphasises that social capital involves the ‘values, beliefs and expectations that are maintained and transmitted within a group by social structures’ (Bankston, 2004, p.177). Social networks, and the associated attributes of trust, reciprocity and so on, are here conceived as social capital that individuals and other social agents draw upon in pursuit of their goals (see also Schuller *et al.*, 2000, p. 1; Field, 2005, p. 6).

A social capital account of these facts raises familiar questions. A network is one thing, and it is a job in itself to characterise what this is, so as, for example, to distinguish a network, or networks of different kinds, from groups and other forms of association. And trust and norms—whether of reciprocity or otherwise—are similarly in need of more differentiation than they tend to receive in some of the more expansive conceptions of social capital, and that is before we consider whether expansiveness is a fault. And it will be a fault unless advocates can rebut Dasgupta’s charge that the elements expansively amalgamated are in fact incommensurable (Dasgupta, 2000, p. 327).

The principal alternative to conceiving social capital in terms that emphasise social norms is to adopt Bourdieu’s focus on access to institutional resources, commonly preferred by those for whom the more expansive option is vulnerable to Dasgupta’s challenge. Defining social capital as ‘investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace’ (Lin, 2001, p. 19) Lin suggests that social capital is best understood by examining the processes by which the resources found in social networks are captured as investment’ (op. cit., p. 3), a view informed by the work of Bourdieu (1986), Burt (1992) and Portes (1998). Stanton-Salazar suggests that the term ‘social capital’ is ‘reserved for instrumental or supportive relationships with institutional agents’ (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p.7), and Lee conceives social capital as ‘resources accessed or utilized by individuals via durable interpersonal social ties or certain group memberships’

(Lee, 2010, p. 781). These conceptions are of varying scope, depending on how much they exclude, but the exclusions are held to yield a number of analytical benefits that will become apparent as the argument proceeds.

In surveying proposals for the optimum scope of a social capital concept it becomes apparent how many alternatives are on offer. This led Baron and Hannan to remark that sociologists 'have begun referring to virtually every feature of social life as a form of capital' (Baron and Hannan, 1994, pp. 1122–1124). We are approaching the point 'at which social capital comes to be applied to so many events and in so many different contexts as to lose any distinct meaning' (Portes, 1998, p. 2). Fine goes so far as to insist that the concept of social capital is a 'totally chaotic, ambiguous, and general category that can be used as a notional umbrella for almost any purpose' (Fine, 2001, p. 155). This anxiety has animated recent educational writing. Dika and Singh observe that social capital is 'a fuzzy concept as developed by both Coleman and Bourdieu' (2002, p. 44), and that the 'conceptual umbrella of social capital has been stretched to include a variety of social factors that do not coherently hang together (ibid., p. 46); McGonigal *et al.* remark on the 'chameleon-like quality to notions of social capital' (2007, p. 78); and Horvat *et al.* comment that the use of the term 'social capital' has been plagued by conceptual murkiness' and that some analyses do little more than 'attach new labels to familiar variables (Horvat *et al.*, 2003, p. 321).

There is a response to this development, that makes a valuable point, but that moves the argument less far than its proponents intend. Baron (in Baron *et al.*, 2000, p. 24) observes that social capital theory is in its infancy, and rapid conceptual proliferation is to be expected at this stage. Mondak writes that '[w]e are too early in the game for some paths of enquiry to be excluded from our sights' (1998, p. 434). And it is frequently asserted that social capital theory, however immature, serves the purpose of 'opening up new issues and providing fresh perspectives' (Baron *et al.*, 2000, p. 23). This is the heuristic value of the social capital concept, calling attention to aspects of social relations that impinge on economic and political life, and which are otherwise ignored or mishandled by models that lack this conceptual feature (Edwards and Foley, 1998, p. 126).

Advocates perhaps protest too much when proclaiming the infancy of social capital theory; we have identified a lineage that goes back some decades. In any case a state of immaturity can only explain current conceptual proliferation; the question remains whether the conceptual candidates can withstand critical scrutiny. Whilst Mondak is right to warn against premature rejection of disparate candidates, this merely puts off the day when those candidates are subject to critical assessment. And although it is true that social capital theory draws attention to social phenomena that might otherwise be neglected, that merit must largely trade on what it remains to establish: the existence of the phenomena the theory serves to point up. If there are no such phenomena, so much the worse for the theory. This is, roughly, Fine's view, according to which there is no defensible concept of social capital, because all capital is and must be ineliminably social (Fine, 2001). Alternatively, the coherence of the concept might be

denied on the grounds that capital entails investment, and social capital does not entail any investment activity. These objections to the very idea of social capital cannot be considered here.<sup>2</sup> But any comprehensive treatment of social capital in education should face them, not least because it forces writers to explain what is distinctive about social capital, as distinct from other capitals; and it forces explicitness on the question what capital entails beyond the prospect of some advantage, if the concept of 'capital' is indeed related to investment, or on how 'capital' should be understood if it isn't. Here, however, I confine attention to features that apply to social capital specifically as it is treated in the educational literature.

### III TOWARDS A RESTRICTED CONCEPTION

A significant strain of social capital theory conceives social capital as a feature of social structure, and I characterise conceptions of this kind as 'restricted', in the sense that there is an attempt either largely to exclude any reference to the norms, expectations and cultural characteristics that distinguish forms of social behaviour and interaction, or to include these only in virtue of their status as effects of social capital, not as features of social capital itself. The exclusion is imposed for the purpose of analytical clarity: a more expansive conception is thought to allow for too many and different kinds of social characteristics. We will observe a tendency to move from Coleman's relatively broad account to more confined accounts, as writers confront questions about the extent to which social capital comprises (some set of) relationships or other social resources, whether and how far social capital can be considered independently of social class, and the basis on which we recognise a distinction between social capital, its sources and its effects. I will suggest that it remains unclear exactly what social capital consists of, but we will also see why writers are motivated, with good reason, to seek ever more closely circumscribed accounts of social capital, just as, later, we will observe why writers have good reason to promote a more expansive account.

Coleman's account of social capital is the most commonly cited in educational literature (Dika and Singh, 2002, p. 33). He provides an instructive example of how the concept lends itself to including reference to both social structure and social norms, and why at the same time it has been thought necessary to focus increasingly on the former.

A basic difference between human and social capital lies in how far the former inheres in individuals and the latter in relations between individuals and groups. Only social capital 'inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). How, then, is it defined?

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain

actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure (Coleman, 1988, p. 98).

This is not yet a satisfactory specification: ‘some aspect of social structures’ and ‘certain actions of actors’ are phrases which only faintly gesture towards the features of structure and action they are designed to pick out. Any such conception of social capital ‘is too vague to develop testable hypotheses (Dika and Singh, 2002, p. 44). And some account is required of the resources that function in ways that are congenial to our interests, which should both identify what is common to the functions of the disparate items referred to, and show how the common function attaches to all but only social capital resources. This should serve, for example, to distinguish those interest-supporting social resources which do constitute social capital from those that do not. Nor is it only the functions that are in need of further specification. Coleman asserts:

[S]ocial organisation constitutes social capital, facilitating the achievement of goals that could not be achieved in its absence or could be achieved only at a higher cost (Coleman, 1990, p. 304).

Statements of this kind lead Durlauf and Fafchamps to complain that accounts of social capital that invoke its function frequently under-characterise its effects; in so far as social capital is defined as generating positive externalities for group members, this fails to distinguish social capital from other phenomena having similar effects (Durlauf and Fafchamps, 2004, p. 6). Lee agrees, commenting on an ‘elastic’ use of the concept of social capital, which makes it equivalent to all the positive functions associated with resources embedded in social relationships (Lee, 2010, p. 780).

We will, perhaps, better understand Coleman’s intent if we look at an example of how social capital functions to support or inhibit educational outcomes, in which he identifies ‘intergenerational closure’ as helping to explain drop-out rates amongst high school pupils in the US.<sup>3</sup> Coleman asserts that a necessary condition for the emergence of effective norms is ‘action that imposes external effects on others’ (Coleman, 1988, p. 105). Norms arise as a means to limit negative external effects or encourage positive effects. But many social structures lack the properties necessary to support effective norms, and one of these properties is ‘closure’. Closure is illustrated by the intergenerational case in which the norms of parents are imposed on children. In a simple case two parents are related to each other, to their children, and to the parents of their children’s friends. With a high degree of closure, parents meet daily with their peers, acquire expectations towards each other, and develop common norms in respect of how each is expected to behave. Where closure is minimal or non-existent, and relations between parents are looser or less frequent, there are few mutual expectations, and the conditions for the development of common norms are less likely to emerge. Coleman finds that intergenerational closure is negatively correlated with high school drop-out rates (1988, p. 115).

Just as a view of social capital as inhering in social structure and facilitating social action is open to charges of vagueness and elasticity, so too Coleman's claims for the phenomenon of intergeneration closure are found to be overly ambitious and under-specified. In their examination of social capital in schools Horvat *et al.* (2003) find that there is a need to refine the account so as to take account of social class. They explore social-class differences in relations between families and schools, detailing how networks are utilised when parents seek to resolve problems in a school context (2003, p. 323). Their argument is that parental networks and their impact vary across class categories, and that, as against Coleman, intergenerational closure is largely a middle-class phenomenon (2003, pp. 343–7). Parental networks emerge, at least in part, as a result of children's participation in organised activities, and activity of this kind is far more frequent amongst middle-class parents. When responding to difficulties, middle class parents were found commonly to react collectively, drawing on professionals for information and expertise in order to challenge and influence the judgements of school officials (2003, p. 320). The resources made available to middle-class parents through their networks were found to affect aspects of children's schooling, including the behaviour of teachers and participation in courses (2003, pp. 320–1). Amongst working-class and poor families, on the other hand, 'closure' assumed a different form, being organised predominantly along kinship lines. Working class and poor parents were found more commonly to act alone, and their social networks were not often seen to include ties to schools or children's activity-based contacts (2003, pp. 343–7).

The development and form of social capital is here conceived in terms that acknowledge the location of a parental network within a social class structure, and the kind and quality of goods any network provides access to. Social capital, in other words, is not 'class neutral': there are 'important class-specific differences in the architecture of parental networks and, associated with this, in parents' capacity to effectively intervene in school matters' (Horvat *et al.*, 2003, pp. 320–1). Horvat *et al.* are led to recommend a social capital conception comprising 'the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties' (*ibid.*). This resource based account allows for class-related variation, and is drawn from Lin (2001) and, especially, Bourdieu (1980; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) who asserts:

Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 119).

For Bourdieu, and his successors, the concept of social capital should give prominence to the social-structural location of actors and to the resources transferred or pooled through social networks; it should also form part of a theory of inequality (Horvat *et al.*, p. 345; see also Lin, 2001). This is evidence of a distinction, noted in Dika and Singh, between Coleman's

emphasis on social capital as a resource for social control, and Bourdieu's emphasis on capital as a resource within a class stratified society for maintaining and reproducing the position of the dominant class (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 34). Educational theorists influenced by Bourdieu, including Horvat, seek to elaborate on Coleman-like social capital explanations by showing how social capital and the effects of social networks are related to the social class of network members. But we should pause to notice a difference between Horvat's specification, which refers to immaterial resources, and Bourdieu's, which refers to virtual resources. 'Immaterial' resources might include the social norms evident in Coleman's account; a 'virtual' resource might take the form of a school-home liaison team which some parents choose not to engage with. This is one of several distinctions to which we return, and which provide evidence of the difficulty in specifying exactly which resources social capital is composed of.

Like Horvat *et al.*, Stanton-Salazar examines how institutional mechanisms operate to create and reproduce the exclusion and subordination of people on the basis of race, class and gender. 'Institutional support' comprises forms of social support that 'function to help children and adolescents become effective participants within mainstream institutional spheres, particularly the school system' (1997, p. 10). 'Instrumental action' is the process by which individuals convert social capital into institutional support in order to reach certain goals. In detailing the efficacy of instrumental action Stanton Salazar finds that social networks are 'implicated at every turn' (1997, p. 3.), supporting young people in virtue of the 'number and quality of relationships potentially available to them' (1997, p. 7), and representing 'interpersonal ties to people committed to and capable of transmitting vital, diversified resources' (*ibid.*). School success 'depends upon regular and unobstructed opportunities for constructing instrumental relationships with institutional agents across key social spheres'. At the same, however, for low status children 'the development of supportive relations outside the immediate kinship unit is systematically problematic' (1997, p. 6).

For 'purposes of analytical clarity', Stanton-Salazar is here conceiving social capital as 'instrumental or supportive relationships with institutional agents' (1997, p. 7). This is a narrower conception than those canvassed previously since it includes only *relationships* of a specified kind, but it has the advantage of prompting examination of the relationship-related mechanisms by which dominant social groups create and maintain access to institutional resources, and by which disadvantaged children do or do not become successful within mainstream institutions. In particular, Stanton-Salazar is concerned to explore how the properties of social relationships function so as to determine opportunities for either possessing social capital or converting it into a valuable resource (1997, pp. 10–11). It is a merit of his account that he makes this last distinction: some children are able to turn a social network location to educational advantage, whilst others, often members of disadvantaged groups, are impeded or prevented from doing so. An important question here, recognised by Stanton-Salazar, is whether individuals with access to institutional agents, but who do not



convert this into resources that yield an educational dividend, should be said to possess social capital or only to have access to it. This bears on the related question whether a social relationship as such constitutes social capital. Winch suggests not:

Social capital has to be available to fulfil some economic purpose. Not all forms of social relationship . . . are available for such purposes . . . Social networks do not, of themselves, constitute social capital, although they may . . . contribute to its composition (Winch, 2000, p. 181).

The distinction between social capital, social networks, and social relationships is recognised by Ream and Palardy, who examine whether effects of social ties between US schools and parents vary according to the extent of parental material (dis)advantage (2008, p. 239). As with their predecessors Ream and Palardy find an association between social capital and social class, with families on the higher rungs of the class ladder possessing larger amongst of parental social capital, as compared with families less well situated. They conclude that material and social network resources contribute to the process of educational stratification, but that this is also partly the product of a variation in the forms of social capital, as with the unequal distribution of information and such informal resources as school-oriented dispositions between parents and students away from home:

Thus, although class-based differences in the availability of social capital matter, there may also be variation in the educational utility of certain forms of parental social capital that work to the particular advantage of middle class structures (Ream and Palardy, 2008, p. 242).<sup>4</sup>

Parental social capital is of greatest value when it is both readily accumulated and strategically put to use in ways that are educationally beneficial (pp. 256–6):

[t]he usefulness of social capital depends highly on the people who actually possess it and the ‘fields’ wherein they attempt its exchange. This is attributable to individual differences in skill in accumulating and activating social capital . . . to subtle contextual features, or to discernible structural features that vary within and across social class groupings both in and out of schools (2008, p. 256).

It will now be apparent that any resource-based account of social capital should acknowledge the profile and structural location of agents variously positioned to take advantage of it. Amongst other things, this will help to overcome a common objection, that social capital theorists frequently fail to distinguish between the elements of which social capital is composed, the means by which it is put to use, and the effects of which it is said to be the source (Horvat *et al.*, 2003, p. 321). In his account of how social capital

is treated conceptually in the educational literature Lee proposes a series of distinctions that incorporate those found in the writers we have been discussing. Focussing on social networks, he recommends, first, a distinction between social capital, conceived as a set of resources, and the sources from which it is drawn, including social structures and relationships (Lee, 2010, p. 781). This is a striking recommendation: if social structure is, after all, no part of social capital as such, we will need a specification of Lee's 'set of resources' that shows how these are independent of the features of social structure that Coleman and others sought to emphasise.

Lee also distinguishes between what Bourdieu refers to as 'actual' and 'potential' resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992): 'actual' resources are drawn from social relationships and memberships, whilst 'potential' resources are 'accessible but un-utilized sources of social capital' (Lee, 2010, p. 781). Hence, 'social capital' is conceptualised as 'utilized (i.e. actual) resources' whilst 'Bourdieu's 'potential resources' are conceived as accessible but unutilised sources for the generation of social capital (Lee, 2010, p. 783). Finally, Lee remarks on a distinction first made by Portes between social capital resources and the 'ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership' (Portes, 1998, pp. 5–6). Portes had noted the 'growing consensus' that 'social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (1998, p. 6). Lee, to the contrary, regards the ability to secure resources not as social capital itself but as a matter of 'social capital formation' (Lee, 2010, pp. 784–5). A student may have the ability to obtain resources from social relationships but enjoy few such relationships. Her social capital extends only to the resources she is in fact able to obtain; what she might otherwise be able to secure is another matter: 'individual actors' abilities to secure resources by virtue of membership seem likely to be significantly related to the 'formation' of social capital, not social capital itself' (2010, p. 787).

The distinction between social capital and social capital formation may not be as clear as Lee contends; at any rate it requires a specification of 'ability' such that we are able to do something even when we lack the resources to do it. We might say, for example, that parents are able to support their children in learning to read, but that they lack access to the teaching support and reading materials that would allow for the development of that ability. Distinctions of this kind require sensitive handling. Nevertheless, Lee succeeds in drawing attention to the distinction between what social capital itself comprises and what either contributes to its formation or results from its presence.

At a minimum, what is required of any account of social capital is that it should distinguish: (i) the sources of social capital; (ii) the resources that social capital comprises; (iii) the possessors of social capital; and (iv) its effects.<sup>5</sup> As an example, we might say that social capital comprises the resources accessed from social networks associated with a school. The possessors of social capital are those parents and children who successfully make demands on, or who benefit from others—acquiring information or support they would otherwise not have access to. The sources of social

capital include those who agree or consent to the demands made on them—sharing local intelligence or supervising other parents' children for example. And the effects of social capital might include the levels of trust evident in parental networks, and the expectations of reciprocity associated with making and acceding to demands. Any attempt to arrive at a satisfactory conception of social capital should show sensitivity to (something like) this four-fold distinction.

This also allows for the case that Lee and others are concerned to emphasise, when children have access to social capital resources which they do not succeed in taking advantage of. Initiatives aimed at disadvantaged groups of children are often designed to improve engagement in learning and school achievement. Lee cites cases in the US in which pupils are provided with support in the form of work-based learning opportunities, personalised learning, and support for building relationships with institutional agents in their school (2010, p. 790). In some cases Latino and Asian students were found to mobilise resources by engaging in their social networks, whilst low-income African American male students did not (*ibid.*) In a case such as this we would certainly want to mark the distinction between actualised, un-utilised and under-utilised social capital, and to note any differences in the ability of children to convert resources into outcomes that yield an educational benefit.

It is an undeniable advance in social capital theory that it should provide increasingly nuanced resources for examining the details and educational impact of social networks and structures, the socio-structural location of actors within those networks, their access to institutional support and the mechanisms that promote or inhibit this. At the same time there remain points of significant unclarity. If, as Lee recommends, social capital is, after all, distinct from social structure, then we need a better understanding of how social structure as a source is related to the 'utilised' and 'actual' resources that social capital is said to comprise. And there is more to be said about the relationship between the status of a resource as social capital and its conversion to advantage. The idea of 'unrealised' social capital is not incoherent and allows for the possibility that not all social capital is taken advantage of. But any insistence that social capital is, of its nature, 'actualised' or 'converted' runs counter to these possibilities. The distinction between social networks and social structures also requires close examination: social structures tend to be characterised by higher levels of formality in respect of roles and rules as compared with social networks (Lin, 2001, p. 38). And it is not obvious that social relations, of whatever strength, are a feature of social structure; it might be more accurate to assert that they occur within a structure, since a structure can be defined in terms that make no reference to the (quality of) relations that exist between individuals. Whilst social structure, social networks and social relations have become the preferred currency of social capital in much recent educational writing, these terms may not be as closely and compatibly related as some writers suggest.

There is a further anxiety: on the one hand there is a requirement that we have been exploring in this section, for a closely demarcated conception of

social capital; on the other hand, it may turn out that this can be achieved only at the cost of omitting elements which are essential to any concept capable of realising its promised heuristic and explanatory potential. As we will see, this latter possibility has the effect of discouraging narrowness, and, to the contrary, prompting a more expansive view of social capital and the conceptual elements that account for its significance.

#### IV TOWARDS AN EXPANSIVE CONCEPTION

The tendency to expansiveness does not arise solely in virtue of the inclusion of social norms within the ambit of social capital. For just as with social structure there is the option of adopting a narrow focus, and even, perhaps, of singling out a social norm of just one kind. Trust would be an obvious candidate, given its undeniable and central importance in explanatory social and economic theory. Nevertheless, as we will see, norm-related approaches to social capital tend not to single out any one social norm in particular but to include a broad range of expectations, attitudes and beliefs. And in any case, the expansiveness I am most concerned with is of a distinctive kind; it arises from the inclusion of one or more aspects of social structure and one or more features of the normative social context. These are features of quite different kinds, at any rate as these are treated in the social capital literature, where social structure tends to be characterised by the forms and patterns of social ties, and the formal aspects of social relations (including the distribution of power and influence, for example); whilst the normative social context tends to be characterised by the qualitative details of social relations, including how members of a group or society regard, or trust or interact with each other. It is the *joint* presence of these two dimensions that largely accounts for the expansiveness I am drawing attention to.

For advocates of an expansive conception it is not sufficient to regard qualitative contextual features as featuring only amongst the *effects* of social capital; they are integral to social capital *itself*. For it remains unclear how far social networks and structures can be specified *without* including such elements as trust and related social norms, elements that make up the social and cultural context. An exclusion policy may anyhow prove hard to enforce: we saw that Horvat *et al.* conceive social capital as including ‘immaterial’ resources, and allow for ‘qualitative’ differences between the social capital resources available to working and middle class parents; and Ream and Palardy take note of the ‘fields’ in which social capital is accessed and other ‘subtle contextual features’. Can we account for these features without bringing norms and trust back into the concept of social capital, as Schuller *et al.* (2000), Fukuyama (2001) and Field (2005) have recommended?

Recent educational writing on social capital in relation to ethnicity lends support to this recommendation (Kao, 2004; Bankston, 2004; Noguera, 2004). Coleman’s work had prompted the hypothesis that children from some immigrant groups are successful in American schools because they

belong to communities with close and bounded networks. However, as Bankston points out, if close and strongly tied networks were of themselves advantageous for children, the details of the norms those networks reinforce would be superfluous to the social capital argument. But social capital is not simply a product of social networks; it also comprises the values, beliefs and expectations that are maintained and transmitted within a group. When examining Vietnamese American students, therefore, we should look at ‘how achievement levels are related to cultural values . . . [f]or we are examining . . . Vietnamese *immigrant* relations’ and these include responses to the conditions of living in the host country (2004, p. 177).

Bankston emphasises the importance of understanding the qualitative elements of social relations that characterise the networks these groups belong to:

The cultural content of social capital can help us see how the ‘input factor’ of social relations outside the school can become a ‘process’ factor’ by influencing teachers of Vietnamese American students. Teachers develop positive generalisations about Vietnamese students . . . which are the products of experience with young people who are conforming to a selective, idealised set of cultural values that are maintained by close social ties among a specific set of adults and young people (2004, p. 177).

The suggestion is that a social capital analysis of school achievement should take account of the *cultural* characteristics of children and the networks they belong to (Bankston, 2004, p. 178). For the elements of social capital are themselves bound up with or at least sensitive to the presence of what has been described as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). And a cultural perspective on social capital is indeed evident in the ethnographic studies of recent writers, including Allard’s discussion of the lives of economically disadvantaged young women designated as ‘at risk’ of leaving school (Allard, 2005).

However, the inclusion of qualitative and cultural elements in a concept of social capital can also lead to obfuscation, which is one reason why Woolcock was keen to insist that social capital exclusively comprises a community’s personal and institutional relationships:

[T]rust, norms of reciprocity, fairness and co-operation are ‘benefits’ that are nurtured in and by particular combinations of social relationships; they are undeniably important for facilitating and reinforcing efficient institutional performance, but they do not exist independently of social relationships. In short ‘consequences’ may be one indicator of the types and combinations of social capital that are present, but they are not to be confused with social capital itself (Woolcock, 1998, p. 185).

It is true that trust and norms do not exist independently of social relationships, but equally social relations do not exist independently of trust and

norms. How can we define social relationships without making some reference to the norms that apply to the individuals between whom those relationships obtain? This is also a question for Edwards and Foley, who, like Woolcock, conceive social capital as a ‘social relational and structural resource characteristic of social networks and organisation, leaving aside the norms of reciprocity and trust that might more properly be considered a sort of cultural capital’ (1998, p. 135). This marks a clear line between social and cultural capital, and would appear to exclude norms of reciprocity and trust from the former. But Edwards and Foley proceed to draw a distinction between the ‘norms and values of individuals *per se*’ and the ‘norms and values available as resources to those individuals who share access to that particular social context’ (1998, p. 129). Individuals’ characteristics can be ‘capitalised’ but what they are converted into depends on the context:

Norms and values held by individuals become social capital only insofar as they facilitate action by others. And in this respect, they are context specific; outside that situation they may be of little or no value (Edwards and Foley, 1998, p. 129).

This conception of social capital, therefore, is characterised by an emphasis upon ‘socially embedded (and context-specific) resources and its attention to social networks and organisation’ (1998, p. 131). Edwards and Foley are right to insist on the importance of context. But the question remains whether social capital comprises networks and organisation, or both these and the context-specific values and contexts they are associated with. Perhaps there is no conception of social relations that can do without such context dependent variables as norms and trust; social relations, for example, might be defined in terms of the levels and nature of trust and reciprocity expectations between persons who are socially related. And it is hard to conceive how social relations can be measured without an understanding of the norms governing the conduct expected of socially related agents. How are we to identify whether a social tie is strong or weak without drawing on our knowledge of what is expected in the way of frequency of contact? Identifying frequencies requires no knowledge of norms—we simply record that agents are related in specifiable ways on a specifiable number of occasions. But the judgement whether a given frequency represents a weak tie requires some knowledge of the expectations which inform any attempt to distinguish between the strength of relations.

## **V TAKING STOCK: THE ACCORDION EFFECT**

Is there any one concept of social capital that is able to accommodate demands for analytical economy on the one hand and contextual sensitivity on the other? This is not a question this article has yet attempted to answer head on, beyond suggesting that this is indeed a real question, and one which has yet to receive a decisive answer, certainly in the context of

education. The argument I will now develop is that it is in the nature of a social capital concept to encourage an accordion effect, whereby the concept is susceptible to both narrow and broad specifications, and that as a result it may not prove possible to arrive at a conception of social capital that is both coherent and stable.

Whilst we have seen evidence of the sheer number of social capital conceptions this does not, of itself, impugn the social capital concept, for any difficult concept will attract numerous and diverse attempts to provide a compelling explication. However, although there may be good reasons for adopting narrower conceptions to suit one purpose and wider conceptions to suit another, there is perhaps a more troubling explanation which does not simply invoke the multiple purposes of social capital theorists. The explanation stems from the fact that the two principal theoretical desiderata—economy, on the one hand, and sensitivity to context on the other—may turn out to be both ineliminable and mutually incompatible.

Economy implies a preference for parsimony, a virtue, perhaps, of a social capital concept in particular, in light of the myriad elements often in evidence in the weaker conceptualisations. Previous evidence of conceptual profligacy may help to explain a preference on the part of some writers to adopt an increasingly narrow focus on the anatomy of social structure to the exclusion of the norms, expectations and other details that characterise the cultural context; or, at any rate to designate these as effects of social capital and not as any part of social capital *per se*. Whilst recent discussion suggested the importance of cultural elements in social capital, their inclusion also yields a conception that makes for what many theorists consider an unwieldy and blunt analytical tool. It is considered in these terms not simply in virtue of expansiveness, which is not necessarily, in itself, a fault; but owing to the inclusion of elements some of which appear to be incommensurable, and whose number and variety make it difficult to pin down precisely the social capital component in any attempted explanation of social and educational outcomes.

It is not only for the sake of economy that we observe a tendency to present an ever more circumscribed account of social capital; it is also encouraged by the findings of empirical research. We have seen, for example, why it was thought unacceptably vague to speak about social capital as any aspect of social structure that facilitates the achievement of goals. Not only does this fail to distinguish social capital from other social phenomena having similar effects, it doesn't sufficiently acknowledge the effects of social class in explaining differences between pupils' educational trajectories. But a class-sensitive account of social capital was also found in need of further refinement, prompting some writers to focus on membership of social networks as the principle mechanism for securing educational benefits. Subsequently the focus was narrowed further—by Stanton-Salazar, for example—so that social capital comprised one aspect of membership of social networks in particular, namely, instrumental relationships with institutional agents. These various revisions represent a response to emerging empirical data which commonly encouraged analysts to single out as explanatory variables some aspects of social structure in

particular; otherwise, the analysis was thought to fall short, both in its specification of the social capital concept, and in respect of the explanatory potential of any theory in which that concept is embedded.

But the price of this natural tendency towards analytical economy may turn out to be the omission of elements which a social capital concept is in need of. For there is a strong case for social capital theory exhibiting contextual sensitivity, and it is not at all clear how this is to be achieved in the absence of a comprehension of norms and culture. In particular, it is not yet clear whether we can offer a coherent account of a *social capital* concept which the narrower focus requires without resorting to norm-related theory. I have suggested, for example, that a specification of the idea of a 'social network', or an 'instrumental relationship' requires some reference to the norms governing social behaviour in the first case, and to expectations of reciprocity in the second. Of course it is possible, in principle, to distinguish the details of social structure from their context; but the *raison d'être* for a concept of social capital includes its contribution to understanding how people are differentially rewarded in virtue of their socio-structural location. And to fulfil *this* role, any specification is likely to require reference to the social norms, attitudes and expectations that allow us not only to characterise some particular social structure but to explain how it operates so as both to privilege some people and to impede others in respect of their access to desirable social goods.

Perhaps we should endeavour to hive off all cultural content and include it under a concept of cultural capital, in an effort to reduce the scope of a social capital concept. But I am suggesting that this may not be a coherent manoeuvre; further, it would invite the charge we met with at the beginning of this article, that we thereby contribute to a proliferation of 'capitals', and there is anyway the question of how we invest in our beliefs and expectations.

There is, in any case, an additional source of the tendency to favour a more expansive conception: this stems from the view that it is only in virtue of its extensive reach and heuristic potential that a social capital concept can justify itself alongside an already well established and extensive set of conceptual resources. It is not in doubt that each of the primary features that social capital theorists emphasise are valuable concepts and points of reference in their own right—this is obviously true of the notions of trust, social norms, social networks and social structure. The question is not whether some acknowledgement of each of these elements is necessary to understanding the development and patterns of social and educational outcomes; it is rather whether there is any *one* concept capable of encompassing *several* or *all* of them. Social capital has been offered up as just such a concept. But we have also seen arguments that tend to suggest that the concept can only do justice to one or some of these elements at *the expense* of some of the others; that, for example, an adequate purchase on the content of social capital, conceived in terms of access to institutional agents, can be achieved only by excluding such related but distinct qualitative features as levels of trust and expectations of reciprocity. It is not yet a charge against the use of some concept if it turns out that it can succeed



in illuminating some aspect of social structure in virtue of recognising just that aspect and excluding all else. But it does become a source of unease if the promise of the concept—its distinguishing feature, even—was thought to lie precisely in the fact that it is not equivalent to just one or two such aspects of the social world, but that what it adds as a social capital concept is that it can encompass and account for a broad range of social phenomena, related, for example, by their function of securing or consolidating access to desirable social goods.

In this way we find that the concept of social capital is subject to demands for both economy and expansiveness. There are good reasons for each demand, and each, taken singly, is desirable; yet the two together tend to pull in opposite directions, and it is this latter tendency that explains why the accordion effect is not innocuous in this context. We are not simply observing a plurality of conceptions of varying magnitude. The legitimate demand for economy leaves little or no room for norm related elements within a conception of social capital (as distinct from their numbering only amongst its effects); yet their inclusion within a social capital conception is necessary both to provide an adequate specification of ideas integral to the concept of social capital, and to allow for the contextual sensitivity often thought of as an essential desideratum. Hence, it is the distinguishing features of the concept itself that generates pressure to lean towards both narrower and larger conceptions, and the effect is some movement between the two that it is difficult to eliminate.

How much does any of this matter for education? Is it not unsurprising that social theoretic concepts are used variously and not always with precise boundaries? The argument, however, is that the concept may prove *inherently* unstable, and to the point that its coherence is under threat. In this case, an influential resource for educational analysis, widely used in social scientific research, comes under a strain that may render it unusable.

Perhaps, however, the argument for the accordion effect fails: either the movement I have described can be brought to a halt or any residual momentum proves less damaging than I have claimed. In this case we might succeed in retaining a coherent social capital concept fit for explanatory service in education. But if so several pressing questions remain. Even supposing a conception that comprehends both social norms and social networks it is then unclear what remains of the distinctions previously identified as essential for analytical purposes, as between social capital itself, its sources, formation and effects. Perhaps it will turn out that the concept is best suited to serving analyses of social networks and structures, and of how socio-structural emplacement benefits or disadvantages children's education; alternatively, it may prove better fitted to assisting the exploration of the social norms—trust, reciprocity expectations and so on—whose presence variously benefits or impedes educational trajectories. To say the least, these are widely different options. And these options are related to the questions that social capital theory is best equipped to answer: whether focussed on the mechanisms for creating and maintaining social control or on the creation and reproduction of social inequality, a distinction marking a familiar difference in emphasis between Coleman and

Bourdieu, each suggesting a distinct research agenda in education. Finally, there is a question about the methods of social enquiry that social capital theory is best allied to: whether quantitative methods of social analysis, employing extensive data sets, so as to explore educational outcomes at a macro level; or the qualitative methods that allow for ethnographic study of the social and cultural context for children's development throughout their educational career. Perhaps the social capital concept, and social capital theory more generally, can accommodate all the options presented here. But for reasons that should now be apparent, it is by no means obvious what the concept, and the theory, would then look like.

Either educational theory retains the social capital concept or it doesn't. If it is retained, there are some hard questions about the domains, questions and methods it is best applied to. If it is not retained, this will require a significant revision to the stock of conceptual resources available for understanding and explaining educational progress.

What, in any event, it is important to guard against is the toleration of weak conceptual endeavour that serves to encourage or conceal inadequate attempts to justify the inclusion of social capital as a significant item in a taxonomy of advantage. Social theory is hardly short of conceptual candidates to assist with explanations of educational inequality; if the concept of social capital is to warrant a permanent place in the lexicon any suspicions of endemic unclarity and incoherence should first be thoroughly dispelled.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Winch (2000) is an exception, although his principal interest lies in exploring conceptions of work and vocational education. I discuss the explanatory dimension of social capital in 'Function and functional explanation in social capital theory: a philosophical appraisal' (Vorhaus, forthcoming).
2. Fine's attack on the social capital literature is particularly strident, but he does not exaggerate in speaking of the carelessness often evident when it comes to acknowledging the historical development of the concept of capital (Fine, 2001, pp. 27–8). On investment, theorists should state whether and how investment is related to their preferred form of social capital, as with Bourdieu (1986) and Stanton-Salazar (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995); but this is by no means common practice. Arrow (2000) expresses doubts about the idea of investing in *social networks*. And it is a real question how *trust* is related to investment, since trust is not something we tend to invest in—directly, at any rate (but see Schuller *et al.*, 2004, pp. 10–11 on indirect investment). If 'investment' is not a criterion of social capital then theorists should make clear that they are using 'capital' in a sense quite different to the sense made familiar in other contexts. Although this cannot be considered here, it is an important question exactly how the concept of 'capital', as used in the social capital literature, is related to the concept of 'capital' as used and developed by economists; also, to what extent, in any domain, the concept should be considered (only) as a *metaphor*. (See, for example, contributions to Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000.)
3. There is an extensive literature on 'closure' as a form of social capital. See for example Carbonara 1998.
4. For an alternative account of forms of social capital, see Stevens *et al.*, 2007.

5. See Portes, 1998 for a similar account which informs my own.
6. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their many helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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