**Religions, Denominations, and Social Capital**

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**Introduction**

While the appeal of social capital to scholars is undeniable, the lack of a consensus definition for this phenomenon is frustrating. Some scholars focus on networks when defining social capital. According to Coleman (1990) “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and persons” (302). Lin (2001) defines social capital as “resources embedded in social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (29). Other scholars focus on trust when defining social capital. Fukuyama (1995) defines social capital as “a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it” (26). Explaining individual and group behavior is inherently challenging and demonstrably powerful indicators, such as social capital, require a multi-dimensional definition. Social capital is a concept that is simply too complex to be defined by a single component. For this paper we will utilize the more comprehensive definition offered by Putman (1995), which is the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (67).

**The Elements of Social Capital**

The building blocks of social capital are networks of civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and generalized trust. In a strong **network of civic engagement**, an individual who fails to cooperate in order to achieve a short-term objective could potentially lose gains from future interactions. Networks of civic engagement promote strong **norms of reciprocity**, which members of the community learn through a lifetime of socialization. Norms of reciprocity can be best understood as a mixture of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest. In other words, “I will help you today, with the expectation that you will help me in the future.” **Generalized trust** extends beyond family and friends to members of different groups and communities and typically is the outcome of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement.

Scholars have identified two types of social capital, which are bridging and bonding. **Bridging social capital**, which is more inclusive, is **less insular** and includes people from different groups (e.g., socio-economic, ethnic, and religious). A group with a broad-based membership, such as Habitat for Humanity, would be an excellent example of this type of social capital. **Bonding social capital** is **more insular** and tends to strengthen the homogeneity of a group at the expense of engaging with outside groups. Bonding social capital is more common in groups with delimited memberships (e.g., the Amish).

Scholars and practitioners are particularly interested in social capital because of the many positive outcomes associated with this important resource. Positive outcomes correlated with social capital include higher levels of political, civic, and religious participation (Putnam, 2000), better self-reported health (Borgonovi and Pokropek, 2016), lower levels of crime victimization (Gottfredson and DiPietro, 2011) and higher levels of economic development (Westlund and Adam, 2010). Recent research provides tentative empirical evidence that individuals in jurisdictions (e.g., counties and countries) with higher levels of social capital were more likely to respond to the threat that COVID-19 posed to themselves and their communities by complying with shelter-in-place orders (Borgonovi and Andrieu, 2020) and practicing preventive behaviors, such as wearing face masks and avoiding crowded locations (Li et al., 2020). On the other hand, some scholars have provided evidence of a “dark side” of social capital. For example, Beyerlein and Hipp (2005) find that counties with a greater percentage of evangelical Protestants are more likely to have higher crime rates than counties with a greater percentage of Mainline Protestants and Catholics. According to their findings, evangelical Protestant communities are more likely to produce bonding social capital, which exacerbates crime rates, whereas Mainline and Catholic communities are more likely to produce bridging social capital, which mitigates crime rates.

Unfortunately, social capital in the United States has been declining for more than two decades. One common measure of social capital is a three-question social trust scale that is developed using questions from the General Social Survey (for more on the scale, see Mewes, et al., 2021). Since the beginning of the survey in 1972, respondents have shown significant declines on two of the three scale questions. The percentage of respondents who believe that most people can be trusted has declined from 45.75% in 1972 to 31.49% in 2018. In 1972, 59.22% of respondents felt that individuals would be fair to them if given the chance to take advantage of them; by 2018, that number had declined to 49.10%. Conversely, there have been corresponding increases in the belief that you can’t be too careful with people and the belief that people would take advantage of someone if given the opportunity.

**Religion and Social Capital**

Voluntary associations are an excellent source of “horizontally” formed social capital that allows individuals within a society to cooperate with each another in order overcome the collective action problem and achieve a common goal. Voluntary associations do not need to be political. In fact, churches are one of the most common types of voluntary associations in the United States. Churches should be excellent sources of bonding (within the church) and bridging (within the community) social capital. According to Putnam (2000), “faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America” (66). The overall decline in social capital in the United States is particularly troubling because of the implications of this trend for attendance at places of worship (e.g., churches and mosques), where individuals with the same religious beliefs can cultivate community and build bridging and bonding social capital.

There is a growing literature on social capital and religion (e.g., Swart, 2006; Brown and Brown, 2003; Liu, Austin, and Orey, 2009; Yeung, 2004). However, there is likely a considerable amount of variation in the level of social capital produced by specific churches, denominations, or religions. However, the literature that examines the relationship between social capital and specific religions and denominations is relatively underdeveloped. Putnam et al. (1993) provided us with a promising starting point for addressing this gap in the literature. They used Italy’s transition from a highly centralized national government to twenty regional governments to demonstrate a link between a “civic community” and good governance, which they characterized as responsive and effective political institutions. Putnam et al. utilized data from interviews, surveys, case studies, and legislative analysis that spanned from 1968 to 1989 to demonstrate that the “horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation” that characterized the northern regions were more likely to produce a civic culture than the “vertical relation of authority and dependency” prevalent in the southern regions. The characteristics of community life in the northern regions were civic engagement, political equality (equal rights and obligations), trust, and associations. The feudal system with “vertical patron-client relations of exploitation and dependence, not horizontal collaboration among equals” that dominated Southern Italy is comparable with the Catholic Church. Putnam (1993) hypothesized that more hierarchical religions, such as Catholicism, create a similar vertical relationship between priest and parishioner that could hinder the formation of trust and subsequently social capital. Presumably less hierarchical religions, such as Protestantism, would have higher levels of trust and social capital. Putnam (2000) also offered an explanation for a possible variation in the types of social capital produced by Catholic and Protestant congregations. Putnam (2000) asserted that Evangelical Protestants “are more likely to be involved in activities within their own religious community but are less likely to be involved in the broader community” (77). On the other hand, Putman (2000) claims that Mainline Protestants and Catholics are more likely to volunteer in their community than Evangelicals Protestants (78). Welch et al. (2004) counter Putnam’s argument by claiming that the reforms of the Second Vatican Council should have resulted in Catholics being as trusting as Protestants. Elisha (2011) and Hempel et al. (2012) differentiate between conservative and liberal Protestants. Elisha (2011) argues that trust could represent an unacceptable risk for conservative Protestants. Misplaced trust in this ‘fallen’ world could jeopardize the salvation of a conservative Protestant. Hempel et al. (2012) contend that liberal Protestant denominations are very likely to be bridging networks since their members will be less threatened by the secular world and thus will be more likely to engage in ecumenical activities because of their higher levels of trust.

The literature does offer modest support for Putnam’s assertions about the relationship between denominations and social capital. Smidt (1999) concluded that Evangelical Protestants are relatively untrusting while Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants are equally trusting. According to Rhodes (2012), Evangelical Protestants are significantly less tolerant of political out-groups than Mainline Protestants and Catholics. In addition, the type of dense friendship network consistent with bonding social capital within a church was a significant predictor of intolerance only if the congregants were Evangelical Protestants. Leonard and Bellamy (2010) provide empirical evidence that contradicts Putnam’s hypotheses, which is Catholics produce significantly lower levels of bridging and bonding social capital than other denominations. They did discover that Catholics with a high level of bonding social capital had a corresponding high level of bridging social capital, which suggests that many Catholics attend church while remaining engaged in activities within their church and community. The literature on the relationship between non-Christian religions and social capital is even more sparse. Johansson-Stenman et al. (2009) find that while Muslims and Hindus are more likely to trust people that practice their religion, Muslims are relatively more distrustful of Hindus than vice versa. Using Canadian General Social Survey data, Mata (2013) concluded that members of Protestant denominations are more likely to exhibit personal trust than Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

**Religion and Political Trust**

Scholars have also found empirical evidence that specific religion traditions (e.g., hierarchical versus non-hierarchical) may affect the level of political corruption in a country by influencing the prevailing political culture. Treisman (2000) argues that countries with a strong Protestant tradition should experience low levels of political corruption. He contends that political corruption should be higher in countries where a majority of the population adheres to a hierarchical religion, such as Islam, Catholicism, or Eastern Orthodoxy. Socialized not to challenge authority, citizens raised within a hierarchical religion should be less likely to confront a public official suspected of engaging in acts of political corruption. On the other hand, countries dominated by a non-hierarchical or more egalitarian religion, such as Protestantism, should experience lower levels of political corruption. Citizens conditioned within a non-hierarchical church to adopt a more egalitarian perspective should be more willing to bring a corrupt public official to justice. Treisman (2000) and Sandholtz and Koetzle (2000) find a strong negative correlation between Protestantism and perceived political corruption.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

In short, different religions and different denominations within Christianity seem to create different amounts of the ingredients needed for a healthy amount of social capital in the community. Variations in religious identity have been linked to variations in trust and social capital in general, and bonding and bridging social capital in particular. For this study, we focus specifically on the bonding and bridging dimensions of social capital production and how different religious traditions differ on those dimensions. We are hypothesizing that Mainline Protestant denominations will be more likely to produce bridging social capital due to a ministry emphasis that focuses on meeting the needs of groups marginalized within the community. Conversely, we are hypothesizing that Evangelical Christian denominations will be more associated with bonding social capital due to a focus on evangelism that is more likely to increase the number of their members and less likely to develop connections with non-attendees in the community.

**Research Design**

To explore this research question, we depend on the 2018 iteration of the General Social Survey. Although as noted earlier, the GSS has had measures of social trust since its inception in 1972, the 2018 version included a more extensive battery of social capital questions across its split ballot design. Importantly, the framing of these questions allows for the measurement of social capital to be split into bonding and bridging dimensions. The survey questioned 2,348 respondents split across three ballots (785 on ballot A, 774 on ballot B, and 789 on ballot C). We identified three sets of social capital questions that appeared in various combinations across the three ballots.

General Social Capital Questions

We identified six questions to use as general measures of social capital. In addition to the three social trust scale questions (which appeared on Ballots B and C in 2018), we also tapped a measure of voting in the 2016 election (all three ballots), the frequency of dining with friends (Ballots B and C), and a question about how often in the past month the respondent has felt isolated from others (Ballots and C). Voting is a measure of civic participation; therefore, respondents who voted in the 2016 election were coded as having social capital on that dimension. Dining with friends is a measure of connection with others. The wording of the question does not allow us to distinguish between bridging and bonding social capital (i.e. to what extent are these friends outside of traditional social networks), so we treated the question as a measure of general social capital. If a respondent dined with friends at least 2-3 times a month, then that respondent was coded as having social capital due to the frequency of connections. The survey contains three questions related to how lonely a respondent has felt in the past month, but we chose to measure social capital using the question that focused specifically on how isolated a respondent has felt (i.e. disconnected from others). If the respondent said they “never” or “rarely” felt isolated from others, we considered that to be another example of social capital.

Thus, for voting, dining with friends, and feeling isolated, we measured the presence or absence of social capital using a dummy variable. For the social trust scale variables, we used an ordinal variable that measured the amount of social capital a respondent demonstrated for each question. For each of the social trust questions, we recoded the responses on to a scale of 1-3, moving from lowest level of capital to highest. For example, on the question of if people can be trusted, a respondent received a 1 if the respondent said that you can’t be too careful, and 2 if they said it depends, and a 3 if they said that people can be trusted. We followed a similar coding strategy for the appropriate responses on the fairness and helpfulness questions. Since the six general social capital questions are scaled differently and appear on different combinations of ballots, we opted to model them separately rather than creating an index variable. General social capital is also not our primary dependent variable of interest, but in our results below, we report on some intriguing findings regarding the relationship between religious traditions and general social capital.

The Bonding and Bridging Indices

To measure our primary dependent variable of interest, we created four index variables (two types of social capital across two ballot combinations). There were four variables unique to the measure of bonding social capital. Two of these variables (religious service attendance and participation in religious activities outside of religious services) are treated as measures of bonding on the assumption that they measure participation in the insular religious community rather than participation in the wider community that is characteristic of bridging social capital. This is an imperfect assumption for this pilot stage of the project. Future survey research will aim to understand the demographics of the religious communities themselves to determine the extent to which religious participation can be its own form of bridging social capital. As with socialization variables based on frequency, we consider religious participation that happens at least 2-3 times a month to be evidence of bonding social capital.

The religion bonding variables appeared on all three ballots. However, there were two socialization bonding variables that were exclusive to the A/B ballot combo: how often the respondent socializes with relatives and with friends. For both measures, socialization that occurred several times a month or more was treated as evidence of bonding social capital. There were companion socialization question on the A/B ballot combo that measured bridging social capital: how often the respondent goes to a bar and how often the respondent socializes with a neighbor. Bar attendance of at least once a month and socialization with neighbors at least more than once a month were coded as evidence of bridging social capital.

Three bridging social capital questions were exclusive to the B/C ballot combo: participation in political parties/associations, participation in religious/charitable volunteer organizations, and participation in leisure/sports/culture activities. For each participation variable, several times a year or more was coded for bridging social capital. A series of five questions exclusive to the B/C combo were coded as bridging or bonding depending on the response. These questions measured various needs for help: help around the house, help when sick, help when advice needed, help when down, and help when wanting a pleasant social occasion. For each variable, if the respondent answered that they would turn to family or friends first, this was considered evidence of bonding social capital (note the insularity). If the respondent would turn to someone outside of the family/friends circle first, this was considered bridging social capital.

In summary, the A/B and B/C ballot combos both had indices for bonding and bridging social capital. Each additive index ranged from 0 (no social capital of that type) to a varied maximum number depending on how many social capital questions were asked on that ballot combo. In the results reported below, each index is treated as a separate dependent variable to account for the differential compositions of each index.

Religious Traditions and Control Variables

Our primary independent variable of interest is the religious tradition of the respondent, particularly if the respondent falls into the Evangelical or Mainline Protestant traditions. To make this classification, we utilize the RELTRAD approach, developed by Steensland et al. (2000) and refined by Stetzer and Burge (2016). This approach leverages the religious, denominational, and racial self-identification of each respondent to sort the respondents into one of seven categories: Evangelical, Mainline, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Faith (such as Hinduism or Islam), and Non-affiliated. For all respondents where the information is available, we use the RELTRAD coding scheme to sort respondents into the appropriate tradition. There are other ways of measuring religious self-identification (such as through the dimension of religious beliefs), but RELTRAD is the easiest and most consistent way to make the categorization. In each model, we also control for a set of demographic variables that may help explain the development of social capital of any type: education (by degree level), age (18-29, 30-49, 50-69, 70+), income (by quartiles of respondents’ household income during the previous year placed within a $10,000 range), race, and sex.

**Results**

We begin with reporting findings regarding religious variation in general social capital measures. For the three general social capital measures that were coded as dummy variables, we ran logistic regressions. For ease of reporting, Table 1 (below) includes the significant predictors from each of these models. The chi-squared for all models were significant at the .00l level. We report the odds ratio of developing social capital relative to the baseline category. So, for instance, the baseline category for the religious traditions variable is Non-affiliated, which means that the odds that members of Other Faiths will demonstrate social capital in the isolation model is .500 relative to Non-affiliated respondents, holding other variables constant. For all models reported below, the baseline categories are as follows: religiously non-affiliated, household income of $0-$29,999, less than high school graduate, 18-29, white, and male.

**Table 1: General Social Capital Models (Dummy Variables)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Isolation | Voting | Dine w/ Friends |
| Black Protestant |  | 1.917\*  (.508) | 2.452\*  (.902) |
| Other Faith | .500\*  (.151) |  |  |
| $50,000 - $89,999 | 1.722\*  (.371) | 1.967\*\*\*  (.301) | 1.655\*  (.349) |
| $90,000+ | 2.774\*\*\*  (.639) | 1.646  (.246) | 1.745  (.008)\* |
| High School |  | 2.720\*\*\*  (.447) | 2.143\*\*  (.595) |
| Junior College |  | 6.491\*\*\*  (1.630) |  |
| Bachelor’s Degree |  | 7.425\*\*\*  (1.520) | 3.211\*\*\*  .981 |
| Graduate Degree |  | 8.583\*\*\*  (2.142) | 3.198\*\*\*  (1.061) |
| 30-49 |  | 1.751\*\*\*  (.251) | .353\*\*\*  (.072) |
| 50-69 |  | 4.227\*\*\*  (.641) | .324\*\*\*  (.066) |
| 70+ |  | 8.069\*\*\*  (1.608) |  |
| Other Race |  | .427\*\*\*  (.068) |  |
| \* *p* < .05 \*\* *p <* .01 \*\*\* *p* < .001 Odds ratios reported; SE in parentheses | | | |

The only pattern of interest which emerged among religious traditions was among Black Protestants; on two of the three measures of social capital, Black Protestants were significantly more likely to demonstrate social capital. We do not report the full results of the models here, but when we ran ordered logistic regressions on the three items in the social trust scale with the same control variables, the only religious tradition which came back as a significant predictor was Mainline Protestantism on the question of fairness. Mainline Protestants were significantly more likely to see people as likely to be fair than other religious traditions (OR 1.489, SE .294, significant at the .05 level).

We now turn our attention to the bridging/bonding distinction of interest. We begin by reporting the mean values of the four index variables for both the Evangelicals and Mainlines.

**Figure 1: Bridging/Bonding Indices Mean Values**

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As expected, Evangelical Protestants have higher levels of bonding social capital on both ballots, and Mainline Protestants have higher levels of bridging social capital on both ballots. Difference of means testing indicates that these means are significantly different in the expected direction. For both of the bridging measures, the difference of Evangelicals and Mainlines is significant at the .001 level for a one-tailed test in the hypothesized direction and a two-tailed test. The A/B bonding measure is significant at the .001 level for a one-tailed test in the hypothesized direction and a two-tailed test. The B/C bonding measure is significant at the .05 level for a one-tailed test in the hypothesized direction, and barely misses significance on a two-tailed test at the .05 level (*t* = .0596). In Table 2 (below), we report the results of ordered logit models where each of the indices are dependent variables. As with Table 1, we only report statistically significant variables. The chi-squared test for each model is significant at the .001 level.

**Table 2: Bonding/Bridging Models**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Bonding A/B | Bonding B/C | Bridging A/B | Bridging B/C |
| Evangelical | 4.890\*\*\*  (.726) | 6.145\*\*\*  (1.068) |  | 1.459\*  (.236) |
| Mainline | 2.326\*\*\*  (.409) | 3.831\*\*\*  (.802) | 1.619\*  (.303) | 1.895\*\*  (.372) |
| Black Protestant | 3.332\*\*\*  (.853) | 7.195\*\*\*  (2.233) |  |  |
| Catholic | 2.264\*\*\*  (.321) | 2.519\*\*\*  (.444) | 1.452\*  (.223) |  |
| Jewish |  |  | 2.901\*\*  (.006) |  |
| Other Faith | 2.682\*\*\*  (.629) | 2.315\*\*  (.634) |  |  |
| $30,000 - $49,999 | 1.360\*  (.188) |  |  |  |
| $50,000 - $89,999 | 1.766\*\*\*  (.261) | 1.766\*\*  (.308) |  |  |
| $90,000+ | 1.553\*\*\*  (.225) | 1.635\*\*  (.285) |  | 1.548\*  (.266) |
| High School |  |  | 1.562\*  (.277) | 2.834\*\*\*  (.602) |
| Junior College |  |  |  | 4.469\*\*\*  (1.276) |
| Bachelor’s Degree | 1.670\*\*  (.314) |  | 2.162\*\*\*  (.444) | 6.918\*\*\*  (1.683) |
| Graduate Degree |  |  | 2.487\*\*\*  (.592) | 9.066\*\*\*  (2.422) |
| 30-49 | .578\*\*\*  (.087) |  | .515\*\*\*  (.083) |  |
| 50-69 | .531\*\*\*  (.081) | .642\*\*  (.112) | .339\*\*\*  (.056) | 1.439\*  (.249) |
| 70+ |  | .626\*  (.138) | .271\*\*\*  (.052) | 1.586\*  (.341) |
| Female | 1.601\*\*\*  (.158) | 1.469\*\*  (.174) |  |  |
| Black | 1.963\*\*\*  (.361) |  |  |  |
| Other Race | 1.453\*  (.225) |  | .427\*\*\*  (.068) |  |
| \* *p* < .05 \*\* *p <* .01 \*\*\* *p* < .001 Odds ratios reported; SE in parentheses | | | | |

In ordered logit models, odds ratios are the odds of being in a higher category relative to all lower categories. For each model, a higher value of the index variable means more social capital, so higher odds ratio means a higher chance of having more social capital relative to the baseline categories (which are the same from the models in Table 1). Generally speaking, the models support our hypotheses regarding the impact of religion on bonding and bridging social capital. Mainline Protestants have a higher chance of producing bridging social capital, and Evangelical Protestants have a higher chance of producing bonding capital. All religious identities except Judaism have a higher chance of producing bonding social capital. This is unsurprising given the insular nature of religious community building. Judaism is unique among the religious traditions in RELTRAD, in that for many American Jews, it is a cultural identity as much as a religious one, so it may not possess the same insular bonding dimensions of other identities. In terms of control variables, the relationship between increased education and increased bridging social capital makes sense given the way that education tends to produce more networking. Age tends to decrease the odds of both bonding and bridging social capital; the exception is on the B/C ballot, where age increases bridging, perhaps due to increased dependence on non-family and friends for help and care.

**Conclusion**

This project is a pilot attempt to understand how different religious traditions affect the development of bonding and bridging social capital. Our intuitions regarding Evangelical and Mainline Protestants were supported, but there is more work to be done. Some of the GSS questions utilized are imperfect proxies for bonding and bridging capital because they do not allow us to identify if the capital building is with one’s ingroup or with other outgroups. In future research, we intend to deploy our own survey questions that break down the interactions to this level of granularity rather than making the simplifying assumptions applied here. Additionally, while our analytical focus was on two types of Protestantism, the impact of Catholicism and Judaism on bridging social capital indicates the need for more theorizing and research on the role of religions outside of Protestant Christianity on social capital building. At this early stage, it is encouraging to note what we suspected: different types of religion have different ministry emphases and thus play different roles in the formation of various types of social capital.

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