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Aim of this Chapter

This chapter illustrates the process of specifying sociological questions using the concept of social capital, drawing on the author's research experience. It will serve as a guide for beginners in sociology who are entering graduate school and for researchers who intend to conduct interdisciplinary research incorporating sociological perspectives, to formulate their own sociological questions using key sociological concepts such as social capital.

Intended Readers

You are considering developing a sociological perspective for the first time in your graduate research course. Since it concerns people's cooperative behavior, the concept of social capital can be used, but you are wondering how to use it.

1. Refinement of Questions Through Reviewing

Social capital is the subject of extensive research in a wide range of fields, not just sociology. When you are wondering how to use it, you may not know where to start. The only way out is to read papers but considering the time limit for obtaining a degree, which is several years away, it is difficult to exhaust all previous studies. You must know which papers to read first and which papers you cannot afford to miss. Regarding the concepts that have been studied, there are review articles and book chapters for reviewing previous studies. I recommend going through the existing reviews. It will give you an idea of the basic literature by following common references, and also the important literature on a particular subject. Then, by going through these papers and following the references, one can expand the list of important papers and narrow it down.

When I was a graduate student in the 1980s, I spent many days in the university library searching for literature. Since then, with the spread of the Internet, it has become much easier to search for

digital-based literature. The digitization of academic journals in sociology is progressing. Currently, it would be effective to utilize generative AI in the search process. However, one must not forget something important. A review should be conducted to grasp what original ideas can be added to previous research while considering how the review itself is based on previous research. If the foothold of your research is not sociology, it is important to understand how the concept of social capital can be incorporated to add original ideas to the field of research.

Occasionally, we encounter papers that list only previous studies in the review section. It may be good to show how much reading you have completed; however, this is not a meaningful review. Generative AI will not only provide a list of important references but will also make suggestions on how to formulate research questions. However, if you follow AI's suggestions as they are, you will not be able to conduct original research, as AI is not a magic tool that will tell something special only to you.

Even with the help of AI, this review process would be agonizing if the research question is not clear. It may seem unreasonable to say that a clear question is necessary for a valid review when the review is designed to clarify the question. However, the clarification of the question and expansion of the review are back-and-forth processes. The question may be slightly vague in the beginning. The reason you think that you need a sociological perspective, especially regarding the concept of social capital, is an important starting point. It is essential that you conduct reviews with constant attention given to clarify the starting question.

A review, at least when written out, should explain your own question and its originality in light of previous research. Therefore, the literature included in this review will be more or less selective. If, after reading 100 articles on previous research, ten articles can be used in your paper in a selective manner, the review should be worthwhile. Again, the purpose of the review is not to present an exhaustive list of the 100 books read; the process of selecting them is important. If there are references that are considered important but are not included or critically relied upon, then this must be explained. Doing so, in turn, explains the originality of your study.

Although I have used the term "question" somewhat ambiguously, there are several levels or stages to framing the question(s). Thus far, the implied "question" is the research question indicating the objective of the dissertation. Among the "questions," this one is particularly important, and is often asked in entrance exam interviews and seminar reports on research progress. Of course, it is necessary

to clearly show this in the paper as well, based on a review, as already mentioned.

In the past, students in social sciences were often asked, “What is your awareness of issues?” To this question, “Because I am personally interested in this phenomenon” is not an answer. What is expected, then, is an explanation of how the phenomenon is related to structural problems in society, and in what sense those structural problems are problems in the first place (as I understood it). Currently, the theoretical hypothesis behind a research question is not often traced back to such “issue consciousness.” However, when students from other disciplines study social sciences, at the very least, it is meaningful to consider the social significance of the research subject.

Regardless of how much you consider “awareness of issues,” it is desirable for a research question to specify theoretical hypotheses to some extent. For example, the question should not remain at a vague level such as “What is the meaning of event A?” Instead, it should be specified in terms of a theoretical hypothesis, such as “From the perspective α , which has been overlooked so far, a new meaning of event A emerges.” If the “new meaning” is further specified and described, the originality of the research (new things not revealed by previous research) can be more directly communicated.

In addition to new perspectives and concepts, originality in research can also stem from exploring new cases and subjects. In this case as well, a vague question such as “What is happening to event A in country X?” is insufficient. Even if there are no previous studies that focus on Event A in Country X, this alone cannot be the basis for originality. Once again, a theoretical hypothesis is necessary, which is the theoretical expectation that if Event A is found to be different in country X, it will provide a new perspective on the theory that explains Event A. If the “new perspective” can be further specified and described, the originality of the research can be conveyed more directly.

Incidentally, we often see a defense that the review could not be done sufficiently because there is no previous research focusing on Event A in Country X, but the point of the research should be the theory that explains Event A. Subsequently, previous research on Event A outside Country X must be reviewed.

There is no established standard for how specific a research question should be. If the field or concept is poorly researched or if the subject is a new or rare phenomenon, the research will be exploratory. In exploratory research, the research question often begins at a vague level. However, even in this case, the research question should be identified when conducting research. This also clarifies the theoretical hypotheses of the study. In the process of identifying research questions, it is

necessary to review recent studies each time. The review itself is a process of identifying (or developing) the research question, and although it is necessary to reach a point to write the paper, it is essentially never completed as long as the research continues.

(Stop and Think 1) In about 100 words, explain the research question you are considering. Is it an original and meaningful question in light of sociology (or your discipline), and in which area?

2. Encountering Social Capital: The Author's Own Experience

Since graduate school, I have been interested in social dilemmas, such as prisoner's dilemmas and free-rider problems regarding public goods, and have studied their resolution from a sociological perspective. A social dilemma refers to a phenomenon in which individuals accumulate rational choices to produce socially undesirable results. In other words, the process of interaction between individuals seeking to maximize their self-interest can produce not only positive emergence, such as market equilibrium, but also negative emergence. The solution to social dilemmas is, simply speaking, to elicit cooperative behavior from all actors in question.

If we consider only the solutions, we can find a variety of them by relaxing the assumptions underlying the problem, including the assumption of rationality. However, for all actors to cooperate voluntarily, there must be a rationale that the cooperation is based on self-interest. Theoretically, therefore, it is desirable to clarify the social mechanism by which the actors involved will naturally cooperate with each other, without compromising the assumption of individual rational behavior. I focused on social capital precisely because this concept would allow us to discuss such social mechanisms within the framework of rational choice theory in terms of social relations and social structure.

However, there was some hesitation regarding this. At the time, I was working on theorizing the adjustment process of the double contingency of actions due to social roles. However, it was unclear how social capital could be related to this theoretical issue. Before that, I was perplexed that social capital was merely a rewriting of what sociology had long been discussing.

As a sociological academic concept, social capital was pioneered and discussed in the 1980s by Pierre Bourdieu (1980, 1986) as a form of capital that reinforces class (its cultural reproduction), and by James Coleman (1987, 1988) in the theoretical framework of a mechanism of the social structure

that conditions rational cooperative behavior. However, as individual arguments, related studies have long been conducted (Misumi, 2013: chapters 1 and 2). While many sociological theories explain the composition and dynamics of society in terms of social action, there are also theoretical lineages that focus on social relations and structures: there is Georg Simmel's sociology that focuses on the forms of social relations, Peter Blau's social structure theory that developed from Simmel, ecological urban sociology that discusses social disintegration caused by urbanization, the personal network theory that developed there, and the graphical social network theory that developed from sociometry. What is the significance of this new conceptual framework of social capital in this context? Trust is trust, norms are norms, networks are networks. Was this not enough? That was my perplexity.

In fact, several major social capital theorists have made similar arguments within different conceptual frameworks. Nan Lin discussed the effects of using contact resources to achieve status as social resource theory (Lin, 1981a, 1981b). Ronald Burt discussed bridging by weak ties as structural holes in social networks (at the individual level, brokerage) (Burt, 1992). The term social capital does not appear in Mark Granovetter's papers (Granovetter, 1973, 1974), which supported the strength of the weak tie theory.

However, these debates, including the development of the debaters' research, were reorganized into a single conceptual framework of social capital as if there had been no signboard change. In other words, what had previously been discussed separately are now linked as different elements and aspects of the same mechanism of social capital. In the same way, with regard to the theoretical lineage focusing on social relations and social structure, we might be able to comprehensively reconsider construction and dynamics of the social structure within a single conceptual framework of social capital. This approach could allow us to address trust, norms, and networks more comprehensively, rather than in a disparate manner. Although comprehensive, there may be many issues left out; however, this can be seen as a potential avenue for sociologically developing the concept of social capital.

Thus, what I have become more convinced of through this review is, in a nutshell, the potential of social capital as a key concept for integrating relational sociological theories. Moreover, since it relies on the concept of "capital," it is based on a rational choice framework of investment in anticipation of return (Lin, 2001). To borrow the term from Granovetter (1985), it is a conceptual framework that captures the purposive actions embedded in the social structure. It can therefore be a

key concept, not only in terms of integrating relational sociological theory but also in terms of integrating it with action-oriented sociological theory.

I shaped this conviction in my own way in my book *Social Capital: A Challenge of Theoretical Integration* (Misumi, 2013), the subtitle of which indicates the purpose of the above research question. It took me more than 20 years since my first encounter with this concept because the challenge was to find out where and how to integrate it. For readers who aim to obtain a degree in the prescribed period, this is a bad example because it takes a long time if the research question is not well specified.

3. Forging the Social Capital Questions

The general research questions for introducing social capital into the author's research were discussed in the previous section; however, these questions are too abstract to be substantiated by data. They must be more specific to describe how the study makes an original contribution to social capital theory. If actions are embedded in the social structure and linked to the mechanism of social capital, what original questions do these perspectives lead to? Once the research question has been identified, empirical hypotheses can be further identified, and empirical procedures can be implemented by collecting data. The empirical hypothesis is something like "women will have more social capital than men." A hypothesis at this level has no theoretical meaning unless the reason for its predictability is explained in a research question above. While I have emphasized that there are various levels of specificity in research questions, they should not be disjointed.

Now, let us continue with the specification of the social capital question. From the viewpoint of action, the influence of the social structure on rational action raises specific questions. From this perspective, there is an accumulation of research from the perspective of social networks and exchange, and Nan Lin's status attainment approach is close to this as a social capital theory. As mentioned previously, the author considers the adjustment process of the double contingency of actions by role. I considered the following: Since the role system is the main element of social structure, how its normative function affects rational choice may highlight a new aspect of the social capital mechanism in relation to double contingency. In fact, there has been no theory of social capital that focuses on roles; therefore, there would be sufficient originality if I could reach a meaningful conclusion.

What I developed was a model study that considered the role dimension (role execution by role norms) and the action dimension (game-theoretic interaction by rational choice) (Misumi, 2004). For

example, when the action dimension is a prisoner's dilemma game over whether to "cooperate" or "betray," "betrayal" is indicated as the rational choice in the action dimension. However, if there is a role relationship between the players, the normatively expected action choice in the role dimension could be "cooperation." If players do not follow the action instructions in the role dimension, the role relationships among them will be disturbed, and the probability of the game being repeated will decrease. Using this model, I analyzed the conditions under which it is rational to follow the action or role dimension in the long run.

Adhering to rational choice theory, the influence of role norms may be seen as being absorbed into the action dimension (i.e., incorporated into the formation of the utility function). However, it is our common experience that there is a conflict between "I want to betray" in the action dimension and "I should cooperate" in the role dimension. If it is rational to follow the role dimension in such cases, this indicates the function of social capital, where cooperation is encouraged by role norms. In contrast, in the absence of roles, each individual would do as they pleased. Extending this perspective, we might capture the functioning of social capital in which actors approach social structures (e.g., asking friends for help) as a response to conflict to realize a more satisfactory outcome for both parties. In either case, social capital provides a conceptual framework that captures the two dimensions separately and simultaneously.

There have been some suggestive research developments on the relationship between social capital and roles (or rational choices and norms), such as Montgomery (1998) and Kroneberg et al. (2010). However, the author's own research has not yet been pursued. The aforementioned model study was positioned as one of the theories used to explain role dynamics in the author's doctoral dissertation (Misumi, 2007), which focused on roles rather than social capital. For disclosure, I may have forgotten to do my homework on rethinking this model in the context of social capital theory. There is no single theoretical context in which an idea makes sense and has important implications for theoretical integration. However, when an idea is discussed in any context, its integrative potential can easily be forgotten. I would like to consider this lesson for myself.

Thus far, we have looked at studies that have taken action as a starting point. However, when we stand at the collective level (group, organization, region, country, etc.), rather than at the individual level, as in Coleman, Burt, and Putnam, the starting point is the social structure.

The ability to discuss both micro (individual) and macro (social structure) aspects is often a

source of confusion; however, it is basically what makes this concept interesting. Regardless of which approach is adopted, we would like to be explicit about the mechanism of social capital on which we are focusing. The empirical approach of using a multilevel analysis to link both levels is methodologically consistent and seems to be a well-established method for analyzing social capital. In this case, if it is unclear what kind of mechanism is assumed for social capital at the aggregate level, the discussion may become theoretically hollow.

One of the main issues of social capital is the network structural property of compatibility between bonding and bridging (Burt, 2001, 2005). This refers to the effectiveness of nonredundant ties (bridges) in connecting high-density bonding areas and facilitating the distribution of scarce resources and information. Network dynamics arising from competition over the construction of non-redundant bridging ties are also an interesting issue. This type of structural analysis is possible with sociometric network data, which are created by examining the relationships among all the people who make up an aggregate. It is not applicable to personal network data collected in a typical social survey. While there are survey innovations, such as Wellman (1979), who defined network density by asking about the relationships among respondents' friends, it is not possible to measure bridge-like structural characteristics.

Therefore, I devised a tentative measurement method. This idea was an inspiration, but it was conceived because social capital includes social networks. In a sense, this was a small attempt at a theoretical synthesis. One hint was the method of affiliation matrix (Breiger, 1974), which captures networks among groups based on individuals' group affiliations. When the affiliation matrix, which represents the group affiliation of an individual, is multiplied by its own transposed matrix from the left side, the matrix indicates the relationship between the groups and individual as a connector. It is important to note that, in this case, the relationship between groups is not based on ties between individuals but on the individual's membership in multiple groups. Therefore, to discuss bridging between groups, I introduced a new concept of "net-base" (Misumi, 2005, 2008, 2014).

Net-bases are attributes (including subjective meanings, such as identity) that form the basis for the formation of social networks, such as blood, hometown, school, workplace, hobbies, and identities regarding religion, ethnicity, and nation. An individual's involvement in multiple networks creates a nodal point between the social networks that work on those net-bases. The non-redundancy of these nodes is not due to the scarcity of ties but due to the scarcity of the dual affiliation of the individual,

or, in other words, to the uniqueness of the individual as a marginal person. More generally, the possibility of a bridging function of the social structure is captured by the intersection of the net-bases, and the possibility of a cohesive function is captured by layering. The intersection of the net-bases is similar to that of social circles, as discussed by Simmel and Blau. To capture the functioning of social capital in the social structure, it is necessary to take a viewpoint that overlaps both the social networks and social structure; however, the conventional discussion of bridging social capital lacks such a viewpoint.

Part II of my book (Misumi, 2013) presents an attempt to empirically approach social capital at the social structure level through the concept of net-base. The research question is, “What kind of distributional linkage is constituted by the active net-bases that work as the foundation of social network formation in the social structure in question?” Methodologically, what should be measured in a conventional social survey for the study of social capital starting from social structure is not personal networks but group and organization affiliations and consciousness of social identity. This study can be positioned as specifying the overarching research question of how the concept of social capital allows for the integration of relational sociological theories.

(Stop and Think 2) Reconsider the level of specificity of the question considered in Stop and Think 1. Does this require a higher-level question (an explanation of why the question in Stop and Think 1 is meaningful)? On the other hand, is this question sufficiently specific to generate a hypothesis that can be tested against the data?

4. Recommendation for Research on Social Capital

When the need for a sociological perspective is questioned in non-sociological research, it is often in consideration of the social environment surrounding the event in question or the influence of social factors involved in the introduction of some technology or institution. In sociology, there is no systematic theoretical development in which a new theory absorbs the previous ones, and it is recommended to return to the classics. It is not easy to fully grasp sociology in its entirety to develop a precise “sociological perspective” within a short period of time, nor do I think it is essential. If the “sociological perspective” that you think you need is related to human associations and connections, especially cooperation, I recommend that you sail into the ocean of sociology, using social capital as

a guide. The reason why this charting voyage seems to be efficient is because of the following “strengths” of social capital, although I am not saying that taking advantage of these strengths is unconditionally desirable.

First, the concept of social capital covers many sociological issues that have been discussed in terms of social relations and structures as an accumulation of these relationships. If you study this concept well and extend it to its background, you will be able to create a nautical chart of relational sociology that goes back to the classics. As discussed previously, social capital has its own conceptual breadth and overlaps with several different backgrounds. Therefore, it is better to keep in mind which argumentative genealogy to focus on. To put it more bluntly, it is useful when responding quickly to a research need, for “sociological perspective is also necessary,” because it bears many of the issues of relational sociology in a single concept. If not a synonym for “sociological perspective,” it could be a representative player.

Second, because this is a relatively new concept pioneered in the 1980s and used only in earnest in the 21st century, it is easy to delimit the chronological scope of the review. There are several conceptual genealogies, such as the “old names,” as referred in this paper. It would be good to know them; however, because the authors have absorbed and developed them conceptually on their own, we can move forward without knowing them.

Third, there is an advantage of interdisciplinary research backgrounds. Since it straddles sociology and economics as “capital,” interdisciplinary research has flourished. In development economics, the World Bank began focusing on this issue in the 1990s as a requirement for promoting the sustainable establishment of technical development assistance, which had become a major point of contention (Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000; Sato, 2001). In political science, Robert Putnam published a series of studies (Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000) starting in the 1990s. His arguments, especially those that called for the crisis of American democracy from the decline of social capital (directly, the deactivation of voluntary associations), attracted so much public attention that he appeared on the cover of *TIMES*. In the 21st century, it has become an established issue in disaster research (Aldrich, 2012), and together with the development of multilevel analysis, a number of empirical studies have been conducted in the fields of health, education, and welfare. Therefore, it is easy to conduct reviews in diverse fields. If you really want a specific “sociological perspective,” you may be able to define your research question by reviewing social capital research in a closer field

without going into original sociology. (On the other hand, it would be a challenge if you tried to cover all areas.)

Fourth, there is measurability. The major studies presented in this paper are empirical, except for those by a few theorists, such as Bourdieu. As previously mentioned, the network information obtained from a typical social survey is limited. However, some measurement methods have been devised to capture the structural distribution of ties such as the position generator (Lin et al., 2001), which asks respondents about the existence of friends and acquaintances by indicating their representative occupations in advance. The author's theory of the net-base also attempts to capture the network distribution in the social structure.

In interdisciplinary studies, in particular, discussions often begin with Putnam's definition, which also seems to be related to measurability. Putnam's definition specifically identifies social networks, trust, and norms as the principal elements of social capital, making it easy to measure any or all of them and apply them as explanatory factors in statistical models that explain cooperative behavior, happiness, health status, and socioeconomic disparities. Since data support is indispensable in the scientific field of study, the fact that social capital is a highly measurable concept is a great advantage.

The importance of this review and the need to specify the questions are not limited to social capital. In this sense, this paper should have general applicability as a guideline for research methodology with an emphasis on question specification. Nevertheless, I expect readers who are interested in social capital, as well as those who are concerned about social capital but have yet to take the plunge, to start (or advance) their research. To enable such readers to understand this concept better, I have structured this chapter as an accessible text on social capital. As the purpose of this book is to help readers proceed with research, I have included things that are difficult to capture in a text. I hope that this paper encourages students and researchers to enter the field of sociology, particularly in the study of social capital.

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COLUMN

When reading the literature and making notes, keep the following in mind:

- # Distinguish between the written text and its summary and your own comments and ideas.
- # If you are summarizing something written by yourself (including summarizing by translating a foreign language), make it clear that it is your own summary, and indicate the page of the text that is summarized.
- # If you are quoting directly from a written text, add parentheses to identify the direct quotation, and indicate the page number of the quoted text. If the quotation spans multiple pages, mark the page so that it is clear where the page changes.
- # Don't think that you can add the detailed bibliographic information, citation pages, and so on in the bibliography after you finish your paper. You will regret it.
- # The above points require special attention with regard to digital documents that can be easily copied.