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Measuring the Bridging Nature of Voluntary Organizations

The Importance of Association Size

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ABSTRACT

Recently, a distinction between bridging and bonding networks has been made in the social capital literature. Bridging groups are often expected to have greater effects on democratic norm development and to generate more positive externalities on society than bonding networks. To allow application of these theoretical constructs in practice, however, an adequate measurement of bridging versus bonding networks is crucial. One approach builds on connections between voluntary associations through individuals with multiple memberships. However, simply counting the number of members' additional memberships in other associations, as in previous work, is inappropriate. Indeed, we illustrate that this is biased towards finding that large associations are more bonding. We then propose a technique to alleviate this bias and illustrate that the proposed correction is crucial to avoid erroneous conclusions in tests of the hypothesis that membership in bridging or bonding associations is differently related to individuals' civic attitudes.

KEY WORDS

bridging and bonding / social capital / voluntary associations

Introduction

Various literatures have stressed the importance of building bridges across social networks. In social network formation theory, it is argued that such bridges allow for a wider dissemination of knowledge and information

than would be feasible without them (Calvó-Armengol and Jackson, 2004; Weimann, 1982). In sociology, theories of 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) and 'structural holes' (Burt, 1992) similarly suggest that relationships that span holes in a social structure provide an important advantage for those involved. In social psychology, strong inward-looking social relations are argued to generate high levels of trust and commitment among group members, but are also said to create avoidance or distrust towards members from other groups (Abrams et al., 2005; Münster, 2007; Portes, 1998). A failure to build bridges between groups may thus strengthen us-versus-them thinking.

Recently, the importance of building bridges has also been recognized in the social capital literature, where a distinction is made between bridging and bonding networks (Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Bridging networks are defined as those cross-cutting social boundaries. Members of such networks are more likely to come into contact with diverse others, thus preventing 'the creation of pockets of isolated trust and networks' (Paxton, 2002: 259). In contrast, bonding networks attract people with a similar background, may enforce social isolation and 'could intensify inward-focused behaviour, reduce exposure to new ideas, and exacerbate existing social cleavages' (Paxton, 2002: 259). Bridging networks are generally thought to represent a 'bright' side of social capital and to have positive effects on the wider society. Bonding associations, conversely, have been related to a 'darker' side and lacking beneficial externalities (Marshall and Stolle, 2004; Putnam and Goss, 2002). Putnam (2000) mentions urban gangs, local 'Not in my Backyard' (NIMBY) neighbourhood and community movements, and the Ku Klux Klan as extreme examples of bonding groups with strong internal connections but which do not broaden the sense of interdependence with a wider community.

One implication of the fact that different types of social capital exist is that government policies designed to affect social capital in society may not generate the desired economic, political and social outcomes. That is, the government – often regarded as 'a crucial player in facilitating or inhibiting the emergence of social capital' (Leonard, 2004: 941) – might need to introduce distinct policies towards different types of networks. Taking as given the assumption that bridging social capital outperforms its bonding counterpart, numerous scholars have thus stated that policy interventions – whether instigated from a bottom-up or top-down approach – should mainly target the creation of bridging social capital (e.g. Beyerlein and Hipp, 2005; Turner and Nguyen, 2005; Vidal, 2004; Woodhouse, 2006; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

However, before adequate policy measures concerning the development or retraction of specific types of social capital can be proposed, it is important to accurately delineate the 'dark' versus 'bright' sides of social capital and empirically measure which types of social capital are bridging rather than bonding. Indeed, differentiating strategy with respect to the type of social capital requires an ability to distinguish accurately, measure and target each of these types. Moreover, the desire to concentrate policy measures supporting bridging social capital rests on the proposition that bridging networks do indeed outperform

bonding ones. A test of this assumption – which is clearly crucial to ensure the adequacy of any ensuing policy recommendation (i.e. focus on supporting bridging networks) – likewise requires an adequate delineation of bridging versus bonding networks.

Empirically differentiating between the two types of networks is challenging and, at present, underdeveloped. One empirical approach builds on associations' interconnections.¹ Specifically, one counts the number of members' additional memberships in other associations and thereby forms bridges or ties between organizations (Paxton, 2002). Such multiple affiliations are argued to 'generate organizational embeddedness' and represent a 'field of potential social capital for organizations' and their members (Cornwell and Harrison, 2004: 863). However, simply counting the number of members' additional memberships to gauge the association's interconnectedness is inaccurate as it biases the results towards designation of large associations as more bonding because all links between groups are necessarily symmetric. Under that condition, 'the size of the groups distinguished by a given parameter is inversely related to the extent of their intergroup relations' (Blau, 1977: 24).

In this article we present a means to alleviate this bias, using survey data on membership in voluntary associations in Flanders as an illustration of the technique. Our findings have important implications for understanding social capital and communities (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2005; Hill and Matsubayashi, 2005; Paxton, 2002) and for political stances towards voluntary organizations in society. Indeed, while political leaders in different western democracies (e.g. Tony Blair in the UK, Gerhard Schroeder in Germany, Bill Clinton in the USA) have put significant emphasis on the construction of social capital, their aim to establish a flourishing associational life with positive external consequences requires correct information about the effects that different associations are most likely to generate and an adequate measurement and designation of the various existing social networks.

Multiple Memberships as a Measure of Bridging/Bonding

One way to define the bridging or bonding nature of a voluntary organization is to look at overlapping memberships (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003; Paxton, 2002).² By being a member of multiple organizations, an individual acts as a bridge between these groups and thereby embeds them into the broader organizational structure of society. Hence, associations of which the members have a high average number of additional memberships can be classified as connected to the wider community and designated as bridging associations (Paxton, 2002). When members have few additional memberships, associations are designated as isolated and thus as bonding associations.

This definition has been translated empirically in a simple count of multiple memberships. Yet, while being a very intuitive measure, this method is problematic in a situation where the number of members differs over the associations. To see this,

imagine associations A, B and C having 1500, 500 and 250 members respectively. As membership is by definition symmetric, the number of additional memberships of any association's members is limited to the total number of members in other associations. Due to this constraint, the maximum value that the average number of additional memberships can attain for association A is 0.5 (i.e. 750/1500). For associations B and C, this upper bound equals 1.5 (i.e. 750/500) and 2 (i.e. 500/250) respectively. 'Although this does not preclude that some small groups have lower rates of intergroup relations than some large ones, it does imply *the probability* that any small group has higher rates of intergroup relations (...) than does any larger one' (Blau, 1977: 23–4, italics added). Moreover, the upper limit imposed on A becomes more stringent when its membership increases relative to that of other associations. Simply counting interconnections therefore implies that (a) larger associations are more likely to be deemed isolated (or bonding) than smaller ones and (b) this bias increases with the size inequality between associations.

This mathematical regularity is illustrated using data from five surveys conducted between 1999 and 2004 by the Administration Planning and Statistics (APS) of the Flemish government (total sample = 7276 individuals). The APS-surveys ask, among other things, whether respondents are members in different types of voluntary associations. This provides information on the number of individuals claiming membership of an association of a given type and the average number of additional memberships claimed by members of 20 types of associations.³ The results are presented in columns 2 and 3 of Table 1. Figures in brackets denote the position of each association type on a scale from most bridging (1) to most bonding (20) based on the average number of members' additional memberships.

Before discussing these results, one caveat should be mentioned. While similar data based on the World Values Studies are used in the study originally proposing this method (Paxton, 2002), they are less than ideal since they concern association *types*, and not individual organizations. The reliability of inferences drawn from aggregated data with respect to the bridging or bonding nature of individual associations rather than association types is likely to be impaired. Nevertheless, though this aggregation problem should induce caution in interpreting the results using this type of data, it does not invalidate the methodology proposed (nor our correction thereof in the next section). For the purpose of illustrating the method, we feel justified in assuming that each association type represents one group of unified individuals. The caveat mentioned should, however, be kept in mind when considering our results (and those of the original study by Paxton, 2002).⁴

From columns 2 and 3 of Table 1, it can be seen that the correlation between the number of members in a given association and the average number of additional memberships they claim is strongly negative ($r = -0.68$; $p < 0.01$). The larger the association, the lower its connectedness to other associations tends to be. Removing the two largest (i.e. unions and sports organizations) and two smallest (i.e. fan clubs and self-help groups) association types from the sample reduces the correlation to -0.44 . The reduced and insignificant correla-

Table 1 Interconnectedness of voluntary associations in Flanders

Association type	Number of members	Average number of additional memberships	Size-corrected measure of interconnection
Youth associations	332	2.166 (15)	-0.502 (18)
Environmental and nature associations	396	2.667 (9)	0.042 (11)
Organizations providing aid to elderly, handicapped or deprived people	466	2.796 (6)	0.219 (6)
Arts activities (literature, dance, theatre, music)	488	2.713 (8)	0.151 (7)
Women's groups	573	2.101 (16)	-0.403 (17)
Socio-cultural associations	560	3.038 (3)	0.524 (2)
Sports associations	1766	1.620 (19)	-0.075 (12)
Neighbourhood committee	323	2.731 (7)	0.056 (10)
Third world development and international peace	282	3.521 (1)	0.819 (1)
Local community advisory and school council	335	3.101 (2)	0.435 (3)
Family organizations	898	2.343 (14)	0.059 (9)
Associations linked to local pub	453	1.960 (17)	-0.626 (19)
Humanitarian organizations	585	2.345 (13)	-0.151 (14)
Associations for retired people	510	1.861 (18)	-0.686 (20)
Fan club	112	2.589 (11)	-0.228 (16)
Hobby club	492	2.461 (12)	-0.098 (13)
Unions	2221	1.488 (20)	0.101 (8)
Religious groups	308	2.971 (4)	0.286 (4)
Political parties	368	2.897 (5)	0.253 (5)
Self-help groups	80	2.663 (10)	-0.177 (15)

tion when excluding these 'outliers' is suggestive that the observed negative relation at least partly derives from the mathematical regularity noted above.

Note that this result does not depend on the use of the Flemish dataset. Indeed, Paxton (2002), analysing 15 association types surveyed in the 1980 and 1990 waves of the World Values Studies, finds that trade unions, religious groups and sports associations are the most bonding groups. Peace, human

rights and environmental organizations are the most bridging groups. While the number of memberships in the various association types is not reported, trade unions and sports groups are likely to be larger than human rights and peace organizations, suggesting a similar bias as that found in the Flemish data.

A Correction

One straightforward way of controlling for the effect of unequal membership sizes from the above results is to run an OLS regression model with the observed number of interconnections as the dependent variable and the membership level of the associations as the explanatory variable. The parameter for membership in this estimation gauges the relation between association size and interconnectedness and is – as expected given the bias mentioned above – significantly negative. That is (with subscript i referring to associations):

$$\text{Interconnection}_i = 2.89 - 0.00068 \text{ Membership}_i + e_i$$

The negative sign and statistical significance of the Membership parameter (t -statistic = -3.93 ; $p < 0.01$) indicate that members of larger associations tend to have a significantly lower average number of additional memberships. More importantly, and by definition of the OLS procedure, the residuals of this estimation (e_i – the difference between the observed value of interconnections and the level predicted by the model) denote the relative bridging or bonding nature of each association *net of the membership size effect*. Essentially, running the above OLS regression purges the size-effect from the interconnection data such that the residuals provide a size-corrected measure of an association's bridging or bonding nature. Higher residuals thereby indicate that an association is more bridging (and lower residuals indicate more bonding) – *given the differences in membership size*. Though the absolute value of the residuals admittedly has little substantive meaning, their relative size effectively indicates the ranking from most bridging to most bonding after size differentials have been accounted for. Note that this 'relative' outcome is in line with the theoretical idea that 'bonding and bridging are not either-or categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but more or less dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital' (Putnam, 2000: 23).

The results of employing this procedure on the Flemish data presented above are given in column 4 of Table 1. The ranking of associations from most bridging (1) to most bonding (20) is given in brackets.

Comparing the average number of additional memberships (column 3) with the outcome of the regression analysis (column 4), one observes that large associations such as unions, sports and family associations tend to be ranked as more bridging after the correction for unequal association sizes. Smaller associations such as self-help groups and fan clubs are ranked as more bonding. These changes indicate that correcting for inequality in membership size is important to make adequate inferences concerning the *relative* bridging or bonding nature

of associations, particularly regarding the bridging potential of large associations (in line with the arguments raised above).

Implications for Social Capital Research and Voluntary Sector Policies

Studies assessing the potentially different effects of bridging and bonding associations on, for example, democracy, economic growth or members' civic attitudes have recently become a popular topic of research (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2005; Hill and Matsubayashi, 2005; Paxton, 2002; Stolle and Rochon, 1998). Our findings have important implications for such analyses. Our results suggest that using the number of interconnections between associations as an indication of their relative bridging nature and *not* correcting for unequal association sizes can lead to a significant bias. For example, designating the three types of associations at the lower end of the scale as bonding and the others as bridging (as proposed by Paxton, 2002), entails that *only* associations for retired people are bonding before and after the correction for unequal membership levels (see Table 1). Such changes are likely, if disregarded, to engender erroneous conclusions. This is illustrated in Table 2. There, we test the hypothesis that experiences in cross-cutting or bridging associations have greater effects on democratic and social attitudes than memberships in closed or bonding associations (Marshall and Stolle, 2004). Using individual-level data from the 2002 wave of the APS survey, we estimate the following model using OLS (subscript i for individuals):⁵

$$\text{Value}_i = a + b_1 \text{Membership}_i + \text{Controls}_i + e_i$$

Value_i represents a vector of three independent variables: i.e. individual-level measures of political powerlessness, utilitarian individualism and ethnocentrism. These attitudes have been shown to be negatively affected by association membership in previous research (e.g. Freitag, 2003; Hooghe, 2003). Indeed, these attitudes, which can be interpreted as 'antithetical to the notion of social cohesion and encompassing solidarity' (Hooghe, 2003: 51), are less probable among members of associations which are expected to induce trust and democracy. Details concerning these values, which derive from Principal Component Analyses, are presented in the Appendix. Membership_i is a vector of two variables measuring the number of an individual's memberships in either bonding (defined as the lowest three associations of the bridging–bonding scale; see Paxton, 2002) or bridging associations (i.e. the remaining associations). Crucially, the values of both these variables differ depending on whether the uncorrected measure of interconnectedness (column 3 in Table 1) is employed or the preferred size-corrected version (column 4 in Table 1). Comparing the coefficient of b_1 across both approaches (i.e. corrected and uncorrected) allows a test of whether the results depend on the approach employed. To avoid spurious inferences, we also include a number of control

Table 2 Bridging and bonding memberships and civic attitudes

	<i>Individualism</i>	<i>Ethnocentrism</i>	<i>Political powerlessness</i>
Uncorrected			
Bridging associations (number of memberships)	-0.122 *** (-7.00)	-0.073 *** (-4.19)	-0.061 *** (-3.00)
Bonding associations (number of memberships)	0.044 (1.17)	0.037 (1.00)	-0.033 (-0.83)
R ²	17.17	21.15	13.09
Size-corrected			
Bridging associations (number of memberships)	-0.115 *** (-6.54)	-0.067 *** (-3.94)	-0.075 *** (-3.71)
Bonding associations (number of memberships)	0.153 ** (2.29)	0.097 (1.48)	0.106 * (1.69)
R ²	17.24	21.12	13.48
F (uncorr. bridging = uncorr. bonding)	15.09 ***	6.64 ***	0.39
F (corr. bridging = corr. bonding)	13.29 ***	5.31 **	6.63 ***
F (corr. bonding = uncorr. bonding)	2.65 *	0.83	4.91 **
F (corr. bridging = uncorr. bridging)	0.20	0.16	0.46
N	1357	1291	1355

Note: *t*-values based on heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors between brackets; *** significant at 1%, ** at 5% and * at 10%. N differs over specifications due to missing observations. F-tests reflect significance of difference between the coefficients indicated.

variables taken from prior research (e.g. Freitag, 2003; Hooghe 2003; Putnam 2000): religious affiliation and practice, gender, age, educational level, marital status, number of children, and hours of television watching on weekdays.

The results are given in Table 2 (results for the control variables corroborate previous findings and are suppressed to preserve space). In general, our findings support the hypothesis that bonding associations are less likely to inculcate high levels of social and civic attitudes. In fact, members of bridging associations feel less politically powerless, are more tolerant towards immigrants and are less individualistic. Yet, important differences in the results, and consequently conclusions, exist when comparing both methods. This information can be derived from the F-tests at the bottom of Table 2. These show whether the coefficients of the various estimates are statistically significantly different from one another. From these tests, it is clear that not correcting for size inequalities leads one to conclude that in terms of political powerlessness there is no significant difference between bridging and bonding associations ($F = 0.39$; $p > 0.10$). Using size-corrected data we find that there is a significantly different relation between feelings of political powerlessness and membership in bridging or bonding associations ($F=6.63$; $p<0.01$). Moreover, for feelings

of political powerlessness as well as individualism, the uncorrected results would lead one to conclude the absence of a significant and positive effect of bonding association membership. The size-corrected membership variables on the contrary clearly indicate the presence of a significant effect (i.e. higher levels of political powerlessness and individualism in bonding groups). Note also that the difference in these estimates is statistically significant ($F = 2.65$ and 4.91 respectively; $p < 0.10$).

Conclusions about the differential relation of bridging and bonding associations to civic attitudes are indeed flawed if the interconnectedness measures are not corrected for size inequalities. Our results demonstrate that bridging outperforms bonding and that not correcting for the size-related bias downplays this effect. In terms of voluntary sector public policies, this implies that developing a policy based on the uncorrected results would lead politicians to underemphasize the importance of bridging social capital. While such a conclusion does not imply that bridging social capital is a panacea it appears to have an important role to play in the social and economic life of communities. Thus our analysis supports a focus on action towards the voluntary sector, designed to support bridging networks (e.g. Beyerlein and Hipp, 2005; Turner and Nguyen, 2005; Vidal, 2004; Woodhouse, 2006; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

Conclusion and Discussion

A distinction has recently been made between bridging and bonding networks. It is argued that the external effects of bridging networks are likely to be positive, while bonding networks may be less positive or even invoke negative side effects (Putnam, 2000). Empirical tests of this hypothesis require a separation of bridging from bonding associations. One approach taken in the literature is to look at the number of links association members entertain with other associations. Associations of which members more extensively participate in other associations are deemed to be bridging, while those where this is less the case are designated as bonding (Paxton, 2002).

This article has shown that relying on counts of the number of members with additional memberships – as in previous work – leads to a bias towards designation of large associations as more bonding. We have proposed a straightforward econometric technique to alleviate this bias. We demonstrated, using Flemish data on associations, that this correction is crucial to assess accurately the relative effects of bridging and bonding associations on socio-economic outcomes. Future research on the effects of bridging or bonding voluntary associations in the broader society should clearly take this into account.

Finally, as well as allowing a more accurate assessment of the relationship between different types of associations and civic and social attitudes, our correction can inform public policy on social associations. For example, if bridging social capital is seen as politically desirable then an accurate designation of bridging versus bonding groups (e.g. corrected for network size) is required.

Appendix

The dependent variables in section 3 derive from a PCA including individuals' answers to a number of related statements. Answers were structured using a Likert-type scale from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5). We present the statements employed and their component weights in the PCA as well as the eigenvalue, the percentage of explained variance and the Cronbach alfa of the component.

Utilitarian individualism

0.79	In society, one better looks after himself/herself first.
0.79	In society, one has to fight for his/her own position, the rest follows automatically.
0.79	People should always pursue their personal pleasure and mustn't think about others.
0.78	It is important to strive pre-eminently for a prominent position for yourself.
0.75	Everybody has to take care of himself /herself first and defend his/her own interests.
0.69	What counts is money and power. The rest is hot air.
0.66	Well-informed people can use this primarily to improve their own position.
0.63	Striving for personal success is more important than having good relations with others.
Eigenvalue	4.3
Explained variance	54%
Cronbach Alfa	0.88

Ethnocentrism

0.85	Immigrants take advantage of our social welfare system.
0.82	If employment opportunities decrease, immigrants should be repatriated.
0.82	Muslims threaten our culture and traditions.
0.80	In general, immigrants cannot be trusted.
Eigenvalue	2.7
Explained variance	67%
Cronbach Alfa	0.84

Political powerlessness

0.81	Political parties are only interested in my vote, not my opinion.
0.78	Most politicians promise much, but do little.
0.73	There is no point in voting since parties do what they want.
0.72	Politicians never listen to ordinary people.
0.64	If Parliament has accepted an unjust law, there is little a citizen can do about that.
Eigenvalue	2.7
Explained variance	54%
Cronbach Alfa	0.78

Notes

- 1 An alternative approach based on the socio-economic heterogeneity of association membership is discussed in Coffé and Geys (2007), Putnam (2000), Stolle (2001) and Stolle and Rochon (1998). Their concept is that associations with a more heterogeneous membership constitute a platform for bridging across social groups within the association. While the present article also leaves this issue aside, the literature would clearly benefit from a theoretical discussion of the benefits and disadvantages of both approaches.
- 2 We follow previous work (Coffé and Geys, 2007; Paxton, 2002; Stolle, 2001; Stolle and Rochon, 1998) in concentrating on voluntary association membership. Clearly, however, individuals also engage in social interactions in other settings (e.g. schools or the workplace). While this implies we engage in a partial (empirical) analysis of bridging and bonding social capital, it does not affect the general nature of the methodology itself.
- 3 We exclude health care associations, because membership is obligatory in Belgium, and the white protest movement, which lacks sufficient members to allow reliable analysis.
- 4 Analysis of association membership based on data from the voluntary associations themselves would be needed for a more accurate assessment. Unfortunately, no such data are available (McPherson, 1983). Hence, for policy-makers, it would be essential to first amass additional and more comprehensive data on the composition of and interconnections between individual voluntary organizations.
- 5 The direction of the causal link between participation and attitudes is not self-evident. However, our main intention is to assess the possible difference in the conclusions from using the uncorrected or the corrected measure of bridging and bonding. The inability to pin-point causality is therefore not overly problematic for our research question.

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