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The Impact of Social Capital on Marital Stability

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Abstract

The impact of social networks on features of embedded couples, like, for instance, marital stability, has been discussed in sociology for about half a century. However, empirical findings are little cumulative and lack a theoretical integration. We present a framework for the analysis of couples, where their social embeddedness is conceptualized as social capital. Two aspects or dimensions of social capital are distinguished. On the one hand social capital can be seen as a property of a collective system of actors, which makes it a collective good, causing positive external effects (system capital). On the other hand it can be regarded as the pool of valuable resources or services controlled by others, that can be mobilized via social relations (relational capital). These two dimensions are roughly corresponding to the distinct views of social capital in literature. In our judgment, both aspects of social capital are important for marital stability. System capital facilitates co-operation between the spouses and hence fosters risky specific investments as an important precondition for a successful relationship. Relational capital, insofar as it is marital-specific, rises the costs of exiting the relationship, as it will lose its value if a disruption occurs.

Structural factors that are assumed to constitute system capital are the closeness and homogeneity of networks, where orientations are shared and social control can be exercised. However, closeness has been captured in different ways: as personal network density, as joint network density or as network overlap, respectively. As a matter of fact these are analytically distinct concepts, though. The spouses individual networks can be dense due to high joint network density or clustering. For matters of empirical clarification, these concepts should be measured simultaneously. Moreover, a stabilizing effect of network overlap is theoretically ambiguous. It can as well be seen as an indicator for the marital-specificity of existing relational capital. As the marriage disrupts, formerly common friends might discontinue the relationship to one or both partners.

We use event-history data on divorce (N=5020) to investigate the effect of closed networks on marital stability and test the assumption, that the overlap effect on marital stability is merely an effect of marital-specific relational capital. Non-specific relational capital, in contrast, is hypothesized to promote marital disruption. Further implications for the measurement of couples' social capital and the data required are discussed.

Introduction

Individuals are always embedded in a social context. Analyzing the consequences of different forms and arrangements of social relations, structural and normative features, has a long tradition in sociology. A classic example is Durkheim's work on suicide (Durkheim, 1963). More recent work deals with the connection of social embeddedness and well-being (Acock & Hurlbert, 1993), the acquisition of human capital (Coleman, 2000), social and economical status (De Graaf & Flap, 1988; Lin, 1999), or job access (Granovetter, 1982), for example. Furthermore, there are several studies dealing with the impact of social embeddedness on features of intimate relationships like, for instance, stability, which is also the concern of this paper. One basic empirical result of this body of work is that a high overlap of the partners' networks promotes the stability of the relationship (cf. Lee, 1979). Ackerman (1963) identifies a positive correlation between overlap and marital stability on the basis of anthropological findings. An additional effect of homogamy is put down to (unobserved) homogeneity in the networks. Komarovsky (1967) found that a joint network of friends strengthens marital solidarity. The most important reason for that, according to her, is the labeling of the couple as a unit and hence the strengthening of a joint identity. Following Milardo's (1982) findings, an unmarried couple's level of involvement is positively correlated to network overlap. And Booth, Edwards and Johnson (1991) find in a more recent study, that the percentage of shared friends leads to greater marital stability. In accordance with Komarovsky's surmise, there are other analyses investigating the effect of network consent to the relationship (Lewis, 1973; Parks, Stan & Eggert, 1983; Felmlee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990; Cox, Wexler & Rusbult, 1997). All show a stabilizing effect of a positive social reaction towards the couple. In addition to research on overlap, there is little work on network density. Already White (1957) reports that dense networks (of neighbors) foster marital stability. The reason why that should be the case is normative pressure. This reflects on Coleman's (2000) reasoning, that close networks are a precondition for norms and effective sanctioning.

Overall, the empirical literature confirms a positive overlap effect on marital stability. Yet, assumed theoretical mechanisms are not explicitly tested. The same is true for the density effect. Hence, measures of structural network features can only be seen as proxy variables for the actual theoretical concept: homogeneous normative pressure and labeling processes. Moreover, there is a competing hypothesis. Networks are important for individuals, as well as for couples, because they provide access to various kinds of resources and services, be they material, social or emotional (cf. Milardo 1988). If the network members of the partners are shared (i.e. the overlap is high), either of them is risking to lose at least some of them – and

hence the support associated with these relations – following a breakup of the partnership or marriage. Network overlap thus rises the exit costs from a relationship and for this reason should promote marital stability.

From this perspective, a stabilizing overlap effect is not an explanation for differential marital stability, but merely a new explanandum. Controlling for adequate measures of the theoretical concepts should then reduce the effects of the structural network features. We present a theoretical framework where social embeddedness is conceptualized as social capital, deriving hypotheses how differential acquisitions with social capital influence marital stability. We then link the concepts with the structural measures and test for the hypothesis, that the overlap effect is (partially) a mere effect of specific social capital.

Theoretical Framework

Referring to social capital as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (Cote & Healy, 2001: 41), it seems natural to conceptualize the social embededdness of a couple as social capital. We distinguish two types of social capital which we term *relational capital* and *system capital* referring to distinct views of the concept in literature (Esser, 2000). By relational capital we mean the pool of valuable resources or services controlled by others, that can be mobilized via social relations. This general position is similar to the conceptions of social capital by Bourdieu (1983), Burt (1992), Lin (2001) and Flap (2002). It can be acquired and maintained through investments in relationships with others with the goal to assure the mobilization in case of need. The expected returns of relational capital are contingent on one's position in the network, one's trustworthiness and other's obligations. Although relational capital is inherent in relations, it can be treated as a quasi-individual resource. If so, the same arguments applying to other forms of capital are valid for relational capital as well. Extending Becker's argument on the impact of marital-specific capital on marital stability (Becker, Landes & Micheal, 1976; Becker 1981), relational capital should have a stabilizing effect, if it is marital-specific, i.e. if it loses (some of) its value in case of marital disruption. Relational capital mobilized via relations that are shared by the spouses should be of such quality, as the existence or strength of such relations or the trust met with should decrease at least for one of the spouses. This consequence follows from a restricted time budget, as well as from Balance Theory (Heider, 1958). In contrast, relational capital that is not marital-specific, i.e. results from exclusive relationships, can be transferred to single-hood and eventually used for

purposes of coping. Furthermore, it lessens the exit cost from marriage, as resource transfers from the partner can at least partially be compensated for by the network.

By system capital we mean a property of a collective system of actors, like social control, trust in the whole system and all-embracing morals. This view is similar to the conceptions of Coleman (2000) and Putnam (1993, 1995). System capital can be seen as a collective good that cannot be invested in intentionally. The capital aspect of system capital is that it causes positive external effects. Regarding couples, system capital facilitates co-operation between the partners and hence fosters risky specific investments as an important precondition for a successful relationship. The structural basis for system capital is a dense, closed, stable network as a precondition to system control. If in such a network there are shared moral standards towards family behavior, deviation can be observed and sanctioned. Besides, social influence is exercised in dense networks and orientations are interactively mediated. These orientations – especially those related to the couple as a unit – might act as a frame for family-oriented action. If the couple is labeled as a good match everything is fine and none of the spouses questions this.

The effects of network structure on marital stability can now be linked to our theoretical concepts.

Overlap should promote marital stability because:

(a) in overlapping networks relational capital is rather marital-specific and

(b) overlapping networks tend to be more homogeneous and labeling processes should be more consistent, thus providing system capital.

Network density or closeness should also promote marital stability because:

(c) dense networks tend to be more homogeneous and labeling processes should be more consistent thus providing system capital.

The possible effects of clustered networks are ambiguous. High clustering of networks here means that the spouses have dens separate networks, i.e. overlap and closeness are low.

As clustered networks are not overlapping,

(d) clustered networks (as compared to overlapping networks) should promote marital instability as they lack marital-specific relational capital.

As clustered networks mean dense networks for each of the spouses,

(e) clustered networks (as compared to low-density networks) provide system capital if both clusters share the same values and should then promote marital stability.

(f) Otherwise clustered networks (as compared to low-density networks) should rather promote marital instability.

If the effects of social embeddedness on marital stability are in fact effects of social capital, the following hypotheses should hold:

1. The risk of divorce varies negatively with the overlap between the partners' networks.
2. The risk of divorce varies negatively with the closeness of the joint network.
3. The risk of divorce varies negatively with the amount of marital-specific relational capital.
4. The risk of divorce varies positively with the amount of individual relational capital.
5. The overlap effect decreases when controlling for relational capital.
6. The risk of divorce varies negatively with the amount of system capital.
7. The overlap effect decreases when controlling for system capital.
8. The closeness effect decreases when controlling for system capital.

Data and Method

The "Mannheim Divorce Study" is a cross-sectional study of a disproportionally stratified sample of the (previously) married German population. 5020 Interviews were realized during the first half of 1996. Due to the stratification, about one half of the sample has been divorced with respect to their first marriage (n=2516) and the other half (n=2504) is still married or widowed. Design weights for the sub-samples were computed on the basis of previous screening interviews. The study was designed to analyze determinants of divorce in Germany with a rather large number of observations. One aim was to avoid lack of information by considering different theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, as a consequence of financial and practical restrictions, important measures have been captured retrospectively and partially through proxy-interviews. With respect to the social embeddedness of the respondents, network data is only available for parents and best friends of either spouse. Relations were not measured as time-varying variables and partners and network members were not interviewed. Despite this disadvantages the "Mannheim Divorce Study" is the only dataset for Germany that is suitable for the analysis of divorce rates and as well allows to compute network density and overlap, though only for the core networks of parents and best friends.

Central Measures

Our central measures for the analyses include measures for both marital-specific and individual relational capital and measures for different structural features of the network.

Marital-specific relational capital is measured as the amount of help (by channel) that the spouses can mobilize via shared friends or via parents with a better connection to their children in law than to their own. The reason for this is the assumption that ascribed family relations tend to be stable even after marital disruption, but that parents, who believed the best about their child was their spouse could withhold support after a divorce. The variable varies between 0 and 4. It is minimal if either none of the spouses can mobilize any help or all potential help comes from exclusive friends or parents. It is maximal if both spouses receive help from friends and family and all relations are shared.

Individual relational capital is measured separately for husbands and wives. It captures the amount of help that is mobilized via exclusive relations. It is minimal if the spouse cannot mobilize any help or all help is marital-specific. It is maximal if the spouse receives help from friends and family and all relations are exclusive.

Overlap is measured straightforward as share of common network relations.

Density is measured straightforward as number of realized relations per number of possible relations between all network members excluding the two spouses.

Alternatively, a measure of overall *closeness* is included, only considering the realization of relations between the individual networks (i.e. is there a relation between the husband's best friend and the wife's mother, e.g.).

Additionally, the densities of the individual networks of husbands and wives were considered, serving as a measure of clustering.

Other Variables

A number of other variables were included in the analyses. A global measure for the existence of common friends (in addition to the computed overlap measure) as well as a variable for joint social participation was included in some analyses. Furthermore a rough measure for social prescription was included, indicating whether or not there was any interference from the network. In addition to this set of variables, a list of variables common in the study of divorce was also included, although not displayed here. Those variables include marriage cohort, duration of knowing before regularly dating, duration of relationship until cohabitation, duration of cohabitation until marriage, previous divorce of partner, existence of a marriage-contract, religiosity, educational homogamy, time spent in labor market (husband), time spent in labor market (wife), birth of first (second, third) child, real property, degree of urbanization, differences in marriage market opportunities and the rating of their sex life (husband and wife). Besides, measures were included to control for possible artifacts due to

the coding of the density measures. Cases with a network size ≤ 1 were coded 0 on density measures instead of being dropped, since a calculation of a fraction is impossible here. To control for this artifacts, dummies where included.

Analytical Strategy

We use conditional proportional hazard regression models for left-truncated data to test our hypotheses on the determinants of marital dissolution. Due to restrictions of the data at hand, we test only the first five of the hypotheses presented above. Episode time is measured as duration between the starting time of the relationship and the date of divorce, or censoring (death of spouse for widows, date of interview for married respondents), respectively. Yet, respondents enter the population at risk at time of marriage. Coefficients reported are proportional effects on the hazard rate.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the central variables. Note that the structural measures can take any value between 0 and 1, whereas the capital measures only contain integers. For the calculation of density measure statistics, cases where density was not computable were omitted.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR CENTRAL MEASURES

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
overlap	.70	.32	0	1
density	.58	.29	0	1
closeness	.40	.38	0	1
density (m)	.80	.35	0	1
density (f)	80	.35	0	1
m.s.r.c.	1.31	.97	0	4
i.r.c. (m)	.73	.64	0	2
i.r.c (f)	.85	.64	0	2

Note: Abbreviations are m.s.r.c. for marital specific relational capital, i.r.c (m) for husbands' individual relational capital and i.r.c. (f) for wives' individual relational capital.

Table 2 presents the results of a series of proportional hazard models including standard variables (not shown) and structural measures. Model 1 shows the overlap effect on the risk of divorce, if no other structural measures are included. Overlap significantly reduces the risk of breakup by 84 %. In other words, couples with exclusive networks face more than six times the risk of divorce compared to couples with completely overlapping networks. Model 2

shows the effect of joint network density, which also significantly reduces the divorce risk. The densities of the individual networks, as can be seen in Model 3, have no significant influence on the divorce risk. Models 4 and 5 include all structural measures. When controlling for density, the overlap effect holds, whereas the effect of joint network density disappears, when measures for personal network density are included. For this reason, the overall density measure is replaced by a measure of overall network closeness in the following models. This allows interpreting individual network densities as measures of clustering. In contrast to the density effect, the closeness effect is still significant in Model 5. Hypotheses one and two can thus be confirmed with our data. The destabilizing effects of personal networks (only significant for husbands' networks) might be interpreted in two different ways. Either dense personal networks are a source of individual relational capital or for individuals in our sample, clustered networks is associated with heterogeneous orientations.

TABLE 2: COEFFICIENTS FROM COX REGRESSION MODELS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION: STRUCTURAL MEASURES

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
overlap	.16*** (-18.01)			.14*** (-15.65)	.16*** (-13.79)
density		.32*** (-9.76)		.80 (-1.25)	
closeness					.67*** (-3.45)
density (m)			1.11 (.95)	1.36* (2.38)	1.34* (2.55)
density (f)			.87 (-1.27)	1.20 (1.39)	1.16 (1.34)
N	20806	20806	20806	20806	20806

Note: Numbers in parantheses are z values, not standard errors.
N gives the total number of splits.

***p≤.001; **p≤.01; *p≤.05

Table 3 presents the results of a series of models that include our social capital measures. Model 1 replicates the last model from table 2. Model 2 includes additional global measures for shared networks: the existence of common friends and the joint participation in organizational activities. Although the overlap effect slightly reduces, there is no substantial shift in the pattern of influence of the structural measures. Model 3 includes a simple measure

of the amount of help that the couple can mobilize from the network. The variable has no effect on the divorce risk, nor any impact on the overlap effect. This finding is not surprising, as the sheer existence of help does not specify, whether this help is specific or not. Model 4 instead includes our measures for relational capital. The obtained effects are as predicted. Marital-specific relational capital reduces the risk of divorce, whereas individual relational capital for husband or wife raises the risk. Moreover, the overlap effect reduces significantly to half of its strength, though the remaining effect is still rather large. Thus, hypotheses three to five can be confirmed. The results in model 4 also somewhat support our speculation that the destabilizing effect of clustering might be due to individual relational capital. Unfortunately we are not able to build an adequate measure for system capital with our data. But models 6 and 7 control for a proxy for labeling behaviour that should be related to the theoretical construct. The variable has a significant impact on marital stability reducing the risk of divorce by 40 %. Yet overlap and closeness remain unaltered.

TABLE 3: COEFFICIENTS FROM COX REGRESSION MODELS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION: CONTROLLING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
overlap	.16*** (-13.79)	.20*** (-10.99)	.20*** (-10.67)	.40*** (-5.45)	.23*** (-9.98)	.43*** (-4.84)
closeness	.67*** (-3.45)	.66*** (-3.53)	.65*** (-3.53)	.64*** (-3.76)	.69*** (-3.23)	.66*** (-3.46)
density (m)	1.34* (2.55)	1.32* (2.40)	1.33* (2.37)	1.10 (.77)	1.21 (1.72)	.99 (-.07)
density (f)	1.16 (1.34)	1.17 (1.38)	1.22 (1.74)	1.10 (.85)	1.24 (1.85)	1.17 (1.35)
help			1.05 (1.36)			
m.s.r.c.				.80*** (-4.82)		.82*** (-4.07)
i.r.c. (m)				1.14* (2.21)		1.16* (2.53)
i.r.c (f)				1.41*** (5.25)		1.43*** (5.40)
labeling					.59*** (-6.81)	.58*** (6.82)
N	20806	20770	19837	19837	20770	19837

***p≤.001; **p≤.01; *p≤.05

Finally, table 4 presents the results of competing risk models where the events are divorces either initiated by husband, wife, or both. Model 1 contains only the structural measures, whereas model two includes relational capital and labeling. Our hypotheses are also confirmed by these analyses, with the one exception that there is no significant closeness effect for husbands. Furthermore, as one might have expected, individual relational capital only raises the risk of divorce initiated by the one possessing it.

TABLE 4: COEFFICIENTS FROM COX REGRESSION MODELS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION: COMPETING RISKS OF INITIATIVE TO DIVORCE

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	Husband	Wife	Both	Husband	Wife	Both
overlap	.11*** (-14.54)	.29*** (-12.59)	.27*** (-9.12)	.21*** (-8.80)	.64*** (-3.81)	.40*** (-5.92)
closeness	.89 (-1.00)	.55*** (-7.03)	.70*** (-3.76)	.86 (-1.21)	.50*** (-8.46)	.67*** (-3.98)
density (m)	.55*** (-3.83)	1.62*** (5.95)	1.55*** (3.69	.56*** (-5.11)	1.22* (2.43)	1.70*** (3.82)
density (f)	1.03 (.16)	.87 (-1.71)	1.46*** (3.39)	1.24 (1.69)	.95 (.69)	1.36* (2.48)
m.s.r.c.				.67*** (-8.71)	.71*** (-9.87)	.96 (-.93)
i.r.c. (m)				1.24*** (3.77)	1.06 (1.35)	1.48*** (5.27)
i.r.c (f)				1.02 (.26)	1.48*** (9.11)	1.01 (.14)
labeling				.69*** (-4.64)	.59*** (-9.55)	.68*** (-4.34)
N		20770			19837	

***p≤.001; **p≤.01; *p≤.05

Conclusion and Discussion

Our analyses show the predicted effect of relational capital on marital stability, as well as a reduction of the overlap effect when controlling for it, thus confirming our main hypotheses. However, even after controlling, a rather large overlap effect remains. There are three explanations for this result. At first, as suggested by our theoretical framework, an effect remains due to the system capital that should be related to overlapping networks, as stated

above. In this case, controlling for an adequate measure of system capital should further lower the overlap effect to an insignificant level. Secondly, the relation between relational capital and overlap is possibly underestimated due to the construction of the variables on the basis of data that is restricted in this respect. For example, overlap is calculated only on the basis of a very small network consisting of parents and best friends of the two spouses, whereas information on support is only available as linked to either friends or relatives as a whole. Furthermore, we have no information on the kinds of support and their evaluation by the spouses and we have also no information on different tie strengths, trust or obligations. In this case, better data allowing to construct variables more closely linked to theory should improve the results. Finally, there is the possibility that structural features of networks reflect other effects that cannot be linked to social capital. In this case there should be a residual effect even after controlling for adequate measures of both, relational capital and system capital.

Anyway, to further test our theory, better data is required. This primarily includes the use of longitudinal data to rule out the possibility, that not network structure or social capital have an impact on marital stability, but that retrospectively gathered information on networks, support and orientations is biased, depending on whether the respondent is still happily married or divorced.

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