

Net Social Capital Processes

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Abstract

In this paper we attempt to articulate the concept of 'net social capital', that is the social capital that is external to but influences the actions in a dyad. We distinguish between dyadic and net social capital, internal and external net alter actors, dyadic and net action / processes and the dimensions of social capital. The nature of these categories is illustrated by means of a case study of the nets that a single focal individual actor, Richard, a Canadian entrepreneur, is a member of. In particular, we focus upon his membership of the Groupement Quebécoise, a voluntary association of elite business owners and presidents that provides a forum for discussion and action in a close-knit supportive context.

Introduction

Much of the work of IMP group of researchers has been focused upon buyer – seller relationships. However, there exist in organisational markets, other kinds of nets that are not primarily of this kind. While these are clearly rarer than traditional buyer-seller nets they offer the opportunity to research phenomena that may also be at work more generally, yet less obvious in those settings.

In this paper we explore such nets through the lens of a particular focal actor, Richard. Of particular interest is his membership of the Groupement Quebecoise (GQ). The GQ is a voluntary association of elite business owners and presidents that provides a forum for discussion and action in a close-knit supportive context resembling an exclusive club. Its members are constantly available to help each other, often openly discussing critical problems. The GQ organises social events including luncheons and dinner meetings that allow members to keep in touch and offer an opportunity for both social and business issues to be aired.

The central construct used to analyse the behaviour of this cooperative business net is that of social capital. It is clear that a great deal of social capital can be invested in nets of various kinds. The main question that this paper addresses is - *“how is net social capital created, maintained, drawn upon and destroyed?”*

The paper begins by setting out an analytical framework that attempts to articulate net social capital in terms of the locus of the actors concerned and the elements of social capital. It then proceeds to apply this framework using a focal actor and some of the nets that he is involved with, concentrating in particular upon the GQ. It ends with some conclusions about the ways in which net social capital mediates much of economic life.

Analytical framework

Social Capital

Social capital may be said to exist between actors in a social situation and is represented as a stock that influences, and is influenced by, social interaction. Such interactions not only draw upon social capital in order to achieve particular outcomes but also create, maintain and destroy social capital in the process. Thus the social capital concept helps to bridge the gap between the stocks and flows in social intercourse and provides a richer view of the nature of the processes involved.

The social capital construct has become an increasingly important as a useful explanation for various socio-economic activities. The elevation of social capital's status as a focal research phenomena is evident by the progress and intensity of of publications by renowned scholars such as Burt (1997, 1999, 2000, 2002); Cohen and Prusak (2001); Coleman (1988, 1990); Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998); Portes (1998); and Putnam (1995, 2000). An SSCI search on social capital revealed that between 1986 and 1996 there were 97 references as against 674 references between 1997 and March 2002. As Hardin (1998, p4) claimed, '*despite the variations, the recent wave of work on social capital may be one of the most interesting and potentially most important moves in recent social history*'.

For the purposes of this paper, the term social capital reflects the following definition adapted by Bowey (2002, p92) from Coleman (1990),

Although somewhat incalculable and often unlocalisable, social capital is a productive, dynamic resource and medium because of its variegated mixture of resilient social trust, reliable norms of reciprocity, unspecified obligations and diffuse forms of commitment. Social capital is often manifested in a stock of credibility and/or goodwill that may be drawn upon by those network actors who directly and indirectly contributed to its creation.

Net Social Capital

'*Net social capital*' as a relationship driving force means those components of social capital that exist through relations external to the focal dyad involved. Net social capital is any form of social capital such as status, reputation, credibility and/or integrity that might have an effect upon the focal relationship even without the knowledge and/or intervention of one of the actors. Status refers to a perceived social rank or position. Reputation refers to the belief, often a net generalised belief, about an actor's character. Credibility refers to the state of being endowed with some form of credit, believability and/or competence. Credibility, like status and reputation, can move up or down depending upon behaviour. Integrity refers to an actor's moral behaviour (i.e. honesty or trustworthiness). In all of these cases, it is assumed that the actor may be an individual or a group and it is the latter case that we concentrate on in this paper.

The theoretical proposition here is that *net social capital*, through these various components, is a relationship driving force. Net social capital, ultimately impacts changes in social capital as an additional testing mechanism which can be combined with other testing mechanisms such as ideology, relationship criteria and/or actors interests compatibility that are present in a dyadic situation.

In attempting to understand social processes in economic systems, which occur both within and between nets as groups of individual actors, it is useful to disaggregate both the nature of social capital and the processes that are involved. In what follows we distinguish between dyadic and net social capital, internal and external net alter actors, dyadic and net action / processes and dimensions of social capital.

Dyadic and net social capital

In a dyad it seems reasonable to argue that social capital resides within the actors. It is found in the focal actor's memories of, attitudes towards and beliefs concerning a particular alter actor. The nature of the social capital involved can therefore be discovered in two ways. Questioning a focal actor about the alter can help provide one measure. The nature of the social capital involved in a particular dyad can also be inferred from the interactions, behaviours and processes that can be observed to occur within it.

Moreover, it seems obvious that dyadic social capital is not necessarily entirely symmetrical; one actor may believe that there is more social capital in a relationship than another or that it has a different character. "*She seems to trust me more than I trust her*". Such asymmetries may tend to reduce over time since actors in constant contact will tend to test the nature of the social capital through their actions and get feedback as a result. However, this can still be misinterpreted and the asymmetry may remain. In addition, different actors may relate to and use their dyadic social capital in different ways.

Net social capital, by contrast, can exist across the totality of the group of actors concerned and is diffused across the net. It comprises the social capital that any member of the net can draw upon by virtue of being a member of that group. One example of net social capital is the reputation, for good or bad, that membership of a net confers upon any one of its members. Another is the ability to draw upon the net as a whole, acting in concert, as in obtaining group discounts by virtue of group membership. In both these cases the net social capital is used in relation to an alter, some actor outside the net.

The identification of the actor possessing the social capital is important since it allows the alter to evaluate its nature and ascribe to it useful descriptions. For example, meeting someone who is a friend of a friend allows an actor to make some assumptions about the nature of the social capital they may be able to draw upon.

Internal and external alter actors

In understanding the relationship between social capital and the processes with which it is involved, a distinction can be made between situations where the alter actor is a member of the focal net or not. In the former case, the interaction takes place within the context of a net, where there already exists net social capital. As a result, there are more resources ready and available to draw upon and so the interactions should be more “productive” than those with a non-net alter. In addition, such interactions may have as their objective the creation and maintenance of existing net social capital. Moreover, a focal actor may draw upon their net social capital in relationship to action with or towards alters outside of the net and this may be a highly valuable resource unless of course the social capital is a liability (membership of an illegal organisation) rather than an asset (membership of a prestigious business club).

The identity and assessment of the inherent social capital of a particular net may vary from external actor to external actor such that a core may be agreed (its name or how it is referred to for example) but the periphery may vary widely (depending on the experience and knowledge of the alter actor). In any case, assessment of the social capital of any particular net is likely to be heterogeneous and will vary from alter actor to alter actor. Assessment of social capital is a precursor to any action with or towards another actor since it is an important factor to take into account when predicting the results of that action.

The same vectors for action in relation to external alters occur as in the internal case but become more complicated. Thus the social capital that is mobilised in an action with or towards an alter actor by a single member of the group may be a function of both the social capital of the individual and the group to which they belong. When the personal social capital is non-existent because the actors are not known to one another then the social capital will be group based. Example; you are a member of X university; I have great respect for that institution so I will agree to meet you. However, in general, the social capital that exists in any particular net actor / alter actor dyad case is likely to be the result of rather complex mechanisms involving assessments by the alter of both dyadic and net social capital. For example, you have always been a good supplier but I am concerned that you belong to that particular industry association

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Actor or net action

Social capital is only interesting to the extent that it helps explain action, behaviour and processes. The locus of the action is, therefore, likely to be a contingency. Action by a member of a net will be affected by the fact that the actor is a member of a net drawing upon the net's diffuse social capital. However, net action occurs when the actors in a net act jointly as when they decide not to interact with certain non-net alters or to meet to maintain their own social capital. Joint action may not involve all members of the net and the identity of the subgroup will be important in determining the nature and strength of the social capital it enjoys.

Dimensions of net social capital

As stated above, the most important forms of net social capital are credibility, reputation, status and integrity. Although credibility, reputation and integrity seem fairly similar in nature, they differ according to the proximity of the focal actor to the alter actors involved. Reputation tends to be associated with more distant alters while credibility and integrity are associated with more proximate alters such as economically active friends and family.

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The Case Study

The case is an embedded case, where the focal actor is an individual, Richard, the owner of a small IT company Unicate. The analysis uses the framework discussed above and concentrates upon the social capital involved in the GQ. The situations involving the focal actor's social capital situations external to the GQ are then described again in the order dyadic / net. The activities and behaviour form the main content of the analysis and the different dimensions of social capital are also used to explain particular behaviours. Figure 1 provides a graphic illustration of the case and the relationships among actors at various levels.

Internal dyadic social capital

In this section, we discuss in detail the ways in which Richard, as a member of Groupement Quebécoise, increased his dyadic social capital with other members of the group. At the level of dyadic relationships, members can call on other individual members for specific resources, against the background of the social capital existing within the group. The resources can vary from straightforward exchange of goods and services, through information and advice to affective support. Richard's relationship with Gilles, another member of GQ and a good friend, provides evidence of all of

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these kinds of resources being exchanged and provided. It is interesting that there does not appear to be a problem with the fact that strong dyadic relationships co-exist with strong overall group relationships.

From the outset, Richard embraced the GQ's philosophy by tapping into this pool of resources and diverse expertise. He also made available his knowledge and, for example, spent an inordinate amount of time providing free Internet services to his GQ friends on a one to one basis.

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G.Q. membership has led Richard to establish several close business and social relationships, especially with Gilles, even though their products have begun to overlap. Gilles' company, Phenix is also a product of the CRE incubator programme.

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Whereas Unicate focuses on the textile industry, Phenix provides sophisticated and general-purpose production control software (PCS). Phenix's PCS software sells for about five times the price of Unicate's PCS and is customisable to a variety of industry needs – including textiles. In fact, their relationship has resulted in several important collaborative projects without any formal contract.

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The relationship started by exchanging ideas and helping each other with small challenges. On one occasion, Richard worked through the night assessing Gilles website needs, eventually advising him to downsize the project, saving him thousands of dollars. Richard built a WWW site for Phenix, free of charge, while Gilles reciprocated by providing help with various clients.

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Gilles and Richard are in constant contact with each other, discussing various business issues such as new technology, product changes and partnership problems.

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They spend time socialising in each other's homes and have keys to each other's offices. As Richard explains, "*there is no mask between Gilles and me*". For example, Gilles had an opportunity to sell his PCS (production control system) to a textile

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client, yet he would only do so with Richard's blessing, as he was concerned about Richard's reaction. Richard not only agreed but also offered his assistance and textile experience, free of charge. There is an extraordinary amount of social capital between the two.

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An important episode in this relationship concerned a contractual dispute with a third party, in which Phenix acted as a subcontractor even putting itself in jeopardy by agreeing to a very tight debugging schedule. Gilles accepted the tight schedule because he knew Richard badly needed that contract. It seems that this primary relationship represents a benchmark that has had an influence on Richard's relationship criteria as well as his attitude towards contracts (ideology) and how relationships can evolve.

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Similarly, Richard built a website for another GQ fraternity member at cost, at a time when he should have been building his Uinate business. Conversely, Richard did not hesitate to expose his problems to the group as a whole. He made himself vulnerable by disclosing such issues as Uinate's lack of profitability, lost government support opportunities and the firing of his brother. As a result, he increased his personal social capital vis a vis the group as a whole. Here was someone who trusted the group not to take advantage of him and thereby helped to reinforce group norms.

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On the other hand, he drew upon group social capital and regularly sought advice from his peers in respect of these and other problems that he faced ("everybody is everybody's Godfather"). Since all the members of GQ were small-scale entrepreneurs it was usually the case that they had met similar problems at one time or another. Early in his GQ membership Richard sought the assistance of a well-established member. According to Richard:

“Mr. Lacasse has helped tremendously. He comes over anytime and spends whatever time is necessary. He’s never too busy to help. There’s nothing Seminco will ever need from Unicate. Nothing we can do for them. He knows that I know [this], yet anytime that I need something and he may have a contact for a particular need I have, he’ll literally go out of his way to get this contact.”

One former GQ member continued to help Richard after losing his business. This particular friend spent time advising Richard on crucial marketing issues, cautioning him about the distribution problems that had actually led him into bankruptcy, so that Richard would not make the same mistakes.

Internal Net Social Capital

The GQ organises social events including luncheons and dinner meetings that serve the purpose of maintaining and increasing social capital among its members. These events are net based and offer the opportunity for members to reinforce their identification with the group per se, emphasising its social nature. However, there are clearly many dyadic interactions occurring at the same time. Richard not only actively participated in these events but also looked forward to them as a devoted member. There are clear norms of behaviour (“no masks”) and the group is exclusive in its membership.

The second type of resource is accessed at the group level, largely in face-to-face meetings. Here the group member obtains knowledge, advice, wisdom and affective support by listening and contributing, often vicariously through listening to the problems of others and discovering how they were resolved. The size of the group allows for high levels of creativity and innovation as well as considered help and advice through debate and discussion. Such discussions, which are quite frequent,

have the unanticipated effect of maintaining or even increasing the levels of social capital available within the group.

Trust is very strong within the group. It is clear that there are high rewards to remaining within the group and therefore sanctions are strong. In particular, the face-to-face meetings mean that there will be no hiding place for individuals who transgress and break trust. Most of the group are engaged in different spheres of activity or, at worst, provide complementary products or services so direct competition, as is the case between Richard and Gilles, is rare. Indeed, this was one of the criteria used in setting up the group in the first place. As a result, it is easier to trust someone who is not competing for the same resources.

The interests for remaining a member of the group are clearly a heady mixture of the economic and social. Even if the social element of the group were absent, it is likely that members would not leave simply because of the economic benefits. It is evident that the social and economic benefits are heavily interwoven in this context.

In terms of “intrinsic” social capital, one needs to ask the complementary question “*Would the group continue to exist if there were no economic benefits?*” Again the answer would probably be yes but a qualified yes. This particular group works well and this may, in part, be due to its composition and therefore is a matter of luck. Other similar groups may not be so fortunate and the negative social capital created by, for example, power struggles, secrecy and differing objectives, might even cancel out the economic benefits and lead to the demise of such groups.

What is crucial in all of these situations is to understand how the economic and social elements work together or against one another to create the particular outcomes in terms of overall capital configurations, and behaviour within the context of these forms of capital.

The actions by Richard that create social capital within a GQ dyad provide reasons why the other actor would want to stay in the group because it has economic benefits.

However, it isn't a market so how do you know you are not being exploited? Helping others solve their problems can be a win-win situation since both the recipient and the donor increases the capital in the bank.

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External dyadic social capital

Other relationships outside the GQ that Richard has established have proved more troublesome. Richard has been accessing the resources of the Université du Quebec, almost from the beginning of Unicate Networks. The origins of this relationship date back to a friendship with an Electrical Engineering Professor who belonged to his flying club. Since that time he has been working directly with three different Professors. One of the Professors is on Unicate's (Protex's) technical committee.

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There have been occasions when his University friends have been extremely helpful to Richard, such as the time when his computer crashed and they spent eighteen hours to get it up and running again. Richard maintains a constant flow of communication with his University friends by trading ideas and technological information with them.

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He believes that by doing so he is not only getting their knowledge but honest and objective opinions that he values highly. These are mostly dyadic relationships.

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Richard knows and trusts these alters, primarily as individuals who work at the university not representatives of the university as a form of net with its own social capital.

External net social capital

Richard has relationships with a number of external corporate actors and the specific net social capital involved helps to determine his relational behaviour.

The University of Quebec provides a useful and important example. It is a large organisation compared with Unicate and members of the GQ. As such, it has its own stock of social and economic capital and this will be true of any large organisation.

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When organisations deal with each other they do so on the basis of individual relationships. There is no space here to discuss the issue of the nature and forms of social capital that organisations create and which they use in such relationships.

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However, issues like corporate culture and implicit knowledge could clearly be dealt with under the social capital umbrella. In the case of a University, the independence of the staff and their belief in their social role in society suggests that social capital may have a different role in this kind of institution.

As mentioned previously, Richard regularly contracts various projects to the University as a cost saving measure, viewing the university as a relatively cheap

source of knowledge and expertise. There have also been incidents where Richard felt let down. Richard had contracted with the BLEU (Bureau de Liaison Entreprise-

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Université) to design a low-cost bar-coding instrument that would interface with his PCS. Unfortunately, Richard had promised several customers a certain delivery date of his system (including the bar-coder). The University, in the guise of the actor

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BLEU, was nearly one year behind schedule. This caused Richard not only lost revenues but also nearly destroyed one particular customer relationship. As Richard

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explained it, *“the primary problem was a question of their priorities and sense of business”*. Richard believes that there is no question that a private company would

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have delivered “on time” but at a much higher price. He used one person as an example, explaining, *“that all he knows is the University world, not what it is like in the jungle and that he has no clue about relationships”*.

Although, the University is an important supportive resource, he has decided not to trust or rely on them in future. It is not a question of their intentions or competence, but a lack of trust, in the sense of predictability, in their capacity to deliver on those good intentions and to empathise with Richard's constraints and commitments. He will continue to “hang in tight” with his University friends in order to access their knowledge but unlikely that he will expose himself to another important project with them.

Clearly Richard's net social capital with the university is not as valuable to him as that with GQ. However it is not a liability. Its nature is more heterogeneous. While Richard may not trust the university because its culture is not aligned with the needs of the commercial world, nevertheless he will use their resources selectively and instrumentally when it suits his needs. It is interesting to note that several of his fellow G.Q.'s friends are also involved with the University on a project basis. The fact that some close and useful friends are members of the university does not mean that this reduces the social capital in the relationships.

Richard has become very effective at using his communication and presentation skills (learned through his government relationships) by applying them to his banking relationship, which at times has allowed him supplemental credit limits. Certainly, continued bank support has come as a direct result of his ability to obtain government assistance. Richard has benefited from his government relationships by applying his relationship maintenance and development skills to his University network where ‘market forces’ have made less of an impact on their relationship.

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Conversely G.Q. membership has provided Richard with some additional credibility within the high-tech community of Quebec, as well as with various government agencies, especially those at the provincial level. He does not hesitate to leverage his affiliation with the G.Q. in order to gain access to other's resources or commitment from any organisation or individual.

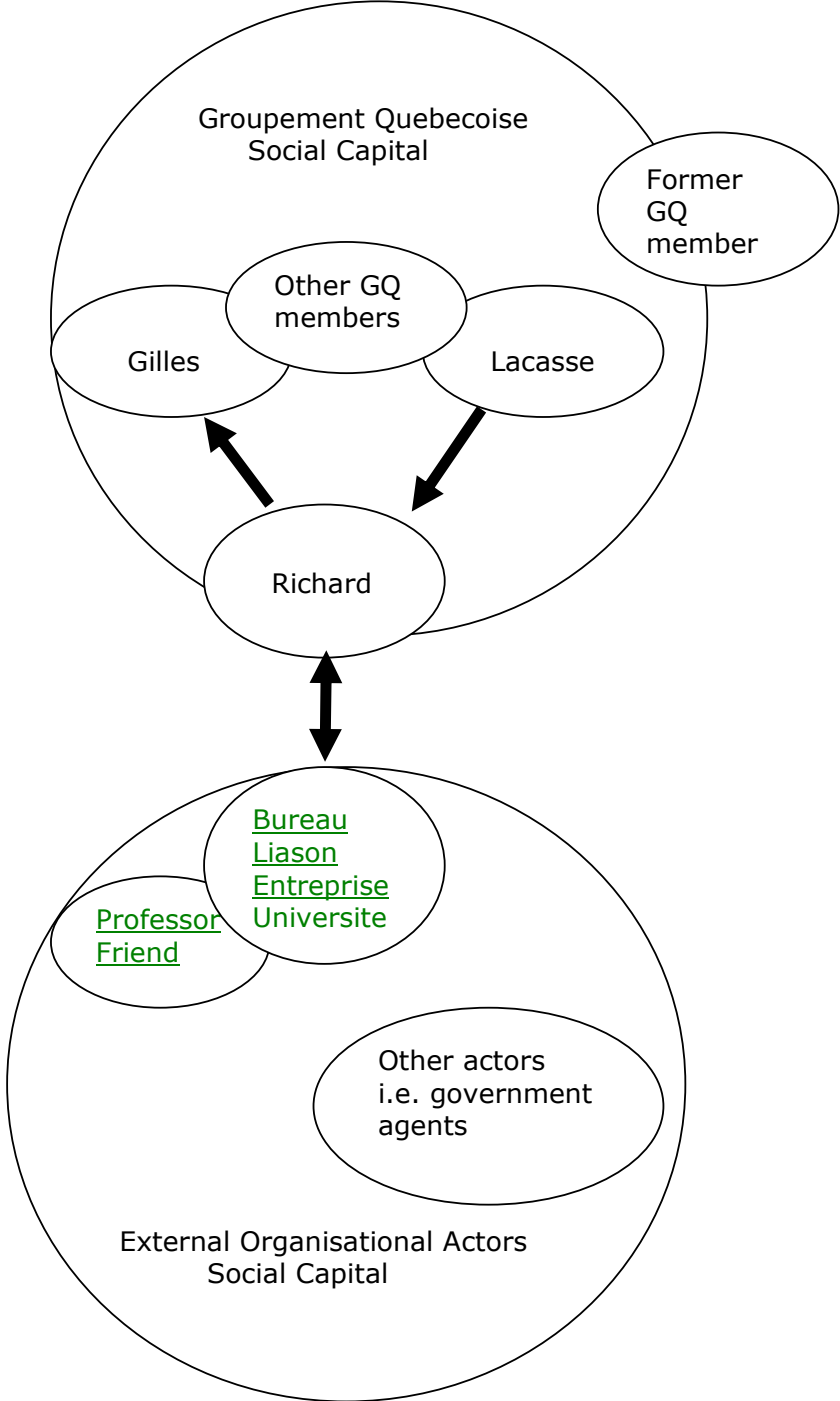
Conclusions

Net social capital is a more complex concept than it seems at first sight and needs to be dissected and articulated in relationship to the situation one is hoping to describe. A simple model that social capital exists as an easy to understand stock that exists among social actors is probably not helpful. Such a model needs to be modified to be related to the activities, the various resources, the nature of actors including their interests and their level of aggregation. In particular, in the latter case there is the problem of emergent properties (critical realism). The social capital of a group or net is not simply the aggregation of the social capital of the dyads it comprises. Equally the net social capital cannot be reduced to the dyadic social capital. The two entities exist at different levels of analysis and the relationships between these levels will be quite complex.

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Fig 1. Net Social Capital and Groupement Quebecoise



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