

COMMENTARY

Commentary on Widmalm: A Rebuttal

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We are grateful to Sten Widmalm's discussion of our article as it gives us a welcome opportunity to clarify some obvious misunderstandings. We hope this exchange of arguments will further contribute to a fruitful debate.

It is noteworthy that Widmalm's critique is not targeted against our empirical findings but against the way in which we conceptualize our variables, the strongest argument being that what we do is against the orthodoxy in social capital studies. We agree that what we do is unorthodox. But we do not agree that it is mistaken for just this reason. Let us examine Widmalm's reasoning in more detail.

The author criticizes repeatedly our use of elite-challenging action as a "proxy" of social capital, which he claims blurs major distinctions within the concept of social capital. At large, he argues against our attempt "of making" elite-challenging action "into social capital". The problem with this critique is that it beats a straw man. The reader might notice that whilst Widmalm uses time and on the term "proxy" to depict our argument, we ourselves never use this imprecise term. This is so for good reasons. The whole point of our article is to be precise in specifying in what exact aspect elite-challenging action can be considered as a 'manifestation' of social capital. This is not the same as saying that elite-challenging action 'is' social capital—a claim from which we deliberately refrained throughout the whole article. What we say instead is that elite-challenging action—like any other form of collective action—is a "product" of social capital. Put differently, it is a measure of social capital's 'productivity', whatever social capital itself might be. At least, this is true when social capital is seen in light of its function to overcome collective action problems, as Widmalm himself emphasizes. Thus, we still cannot see a justification to exclude from the study of social capital what

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social capital is meant to be there for: collective action, which undoubtedly also includes elite-challenging action or ‘contentious’ action as it is often termed.

The reason why we insist on the core function of social capital—the production of collective action—is exactly the epidemic imprecision when it comes to translate concepts into measurements of social capital. To overcome this imprecision, we operate along a clear distinction of *what social capital needs*, *what it is* and *what it does*. Elite-challenging action is the ‘what it does’ part. Widmalm’s critique is off base in postulating that we blur important distinctions in the concept of social capital when the whole point of our article is to propose a distinction between the sources, ingredients, and products of social capital. Figure 1 depicts this differentiation.

In defense of the established orthodoxy, Widmalm insists that membership in associations is “as close as you can get” to social capital, arguing that membership is most likely to be linked with shared values and trust in other people. The fact that this view is held by the orthodoxy does not make it automatically true. Whether involvement in associations or in elite-challenging activities is closer to shared norms and trust, cannot be decided on purely definitional grounds. It is an empirical question. Widmalm, however, discusses none of our empirical results in this regard. He sweepingly dismisses them as “undesirable”. This is probably because the *results* are undesirable, showing that involvement in elite-challenging actions is closer to trust and humanistic norms than membership in associations. The fact that this finding disconfirms orthodoxy does not make it untrue.

In one point we agree with Widmalm. We have overstated the scholarly ignorance towards elite-challenging action in social capital studies. We hold, however, that there is a remarkable imbalance between the readiness to include membership in associations and the hesitation to include elite-challenging action in social capital studies, although the latter is an essential indicator of social capital’s productivity. Even if one goes back to the initial definition of social capital in limiting it to networks, trust, and shared values, there is no evidence showing that membership in associations is more intimately related to these ingredients than is true for elite-challenging action. In fact we find the opposite pattern. And even a structural purist who restricts the definition of social capital to networks solely, has to acknowledge that activities such as demonstrations require networks, that people who participate in such activities do this because they are involved in networks and that shared values play a crucial role to stimulate people to

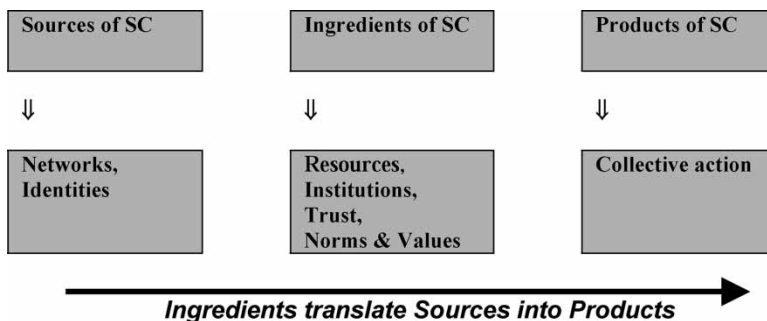


Figure 1. A concept of social capital. *Source:* Adapted from Welzel *et al.* 2005: 141

participate. All of this has been amply shown in social movement studies. That the same is true for membership in associations has more often been claimed than proven. Membership in associations is not closer to social capital than civic mass actions, neither conceptually nor empirically.

For clarification purposes, let us emphasize once more what the whole point of our article is. It is to bring more clarity into the concept of social capital by making a differentiation between its sources, its ingredients, and its products. On this basis, Figure 1 proposes to consider networks and identities as sources of social capital, providing the communal glue that social capital needs to operate. Second, we propose to define the ingredients of social capital (social capital in the narrow sense) as those factors helping to translate the source into a product. These ingredients include action capacities based on resources, action incentives and disincentives based on institutions, reduced transaction costs based on various forms of trust, and action motivations based on values. Third, social capital is also defined by what it is meant to produce: collective action. Thus, any measure of collective action is automatically a measure of social capital's productivity. A productivity measure of this kind is not entirely irrelevant to social capital, which is supposed to be a productive asset in exactly this sense. Widmalm's critique ignores these points. Its most important point seems to be an unease about our failure to follow orthodoxy. But this is sometimes the way to reach new insights.

