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## **Perspectives on Social Capital**

**Definition, questions and some results from the European Social Survey**

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### **Abstract**

I address two questions: (1) How is social capital best to be defined? (2) Which questions pertaining to social capital are to be addressed first, which second? Finally (3), I present an example from my own research of the kind of questions which I consider first. As for (1), I argue that a definition of social capital must start on the micro-level of social relations, and can be aggregated to forms of “system capital” such as mean memberships. On the aggregate level, then, it becomes meaningful to generalize the concept from social relations to the *validity of norms* or a *climate of trust*; as micro-phenomena, however, the endorsement of norms or the attitude of trust cannot be meaningfully considered to be forms of social capital. As for (2), I propose that the key question to be researched on social capital is the capitalization of aggregate, or “system”, capital. From this it follows, that consequences of social capital have to be investigated before causes, and effects on correlations before effects on means, or, as I will say briefly, effect hypotheses before output hypotheses. As for (3), my example pertains to consequences, specifically, to what I call the transfer hypothesis of participation in civic associations. This output hypothesis is at the heart of social capital research which takes it for granted that citizens’ experiences in the civic society will ultimately transform into democratic stability. I apply the transfer hypothesis to the economic rather than the political sphere and examine whether experiences in the civic society will transform into empowerment at the work place and, ultimately, into economic stability. Moreover, I test the effect hypothesis that this transformation is conditioned by the political and economic order and the power structure between unions and employers.

Social capital has become increasingly popular in cross-national survey research at least since the 1990s (van Deth et al. 1999, Dekker / Uslaner 2001, Gabriel et al. 2002, Dekker / van den Broek 2006, Torcal / Montero 2006). Yet – as often has been stated (Portes 1998, Paldam 2000, Fine 2001, Lin 2001a, Adam / Roncevis 2003, Field 2003, Halpern 2005) – the increasing popularity went along with an increasing vagueness of the term. It has become more of a metaphor than a concept. In this lecture, I cannot pretend to organize the enormous research literature or to definitely clarify the concept. However, I will discuss some problems of the definition in order to draw some conclusions as for the research agenda and to give some examples from my own research. Accordingly, my lecture has three parts. First, I discuss how social capital is best to be defined. From this, second, I draw some conclusions which questions on social capital have to be researched first and second, and show that what I consider to be the first question has been indeed at the heart of social capital research, namely the transfer hypothesis. Finally, I will present an example from the European social survey in which the transfer hypothesis is applied in the economic sphere.

## **1 Defining social capital: Social relations as resources of actors in contexts**

### **1.1 Social Capital: Criteria**

Social capital means many things to many people. Some attribute it to persons, others to groups, organizations, networks, even to societies. Putnam's (1993: 167) – almost canonical – definition: social capital “refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks” combines a vague reference to some social process – “organization” – with an enumeration – “such as”. Of these two elements, I will analyze what can be “social” of the “features of organization” in order to understand how the enumeration has come up.

#### *Groups and persons*

Most often, “features of social organization” are understood as the collective good of organizations. Organizations can be distinguished by their social capital – just as by their constitution, their function, their structure, or their size. According to this understanding, the grammatical singular “organization” is accidental. Yet I do not think so. The singular has its own meaning: “organization” is a process sustained by persons. Members of a group establish relations in which they interact, “organize themselves”, so that some collective product results.

Thus, the productivity of a network, a climate of trust, and the validity of a norm will result from the interactions between persons. The *productivity* of a network will result from the flow of exchanges between persons with more or less a central position and more or less a benevolent intention. A *climate* of trust in a group is created, if a sufficient number of members reciprocate benevolent actions, keep promises, provide support for others, and are honest; if this number goes down, trust will become increasingly costly and risky, creating a vicious circle which will lead eventually to a climate of distrust. The *validity* of a norm in a group is established when a sufficient number of members adhere to the norm and a sufficient number of members sanction violations of other members; if this number goes down, a vicious circle of deviance and tolerance will be set into motion and the norm will break down (Weber 1980: 16; Axelrod 1984). In brief, the *productivity* of networks will develop from the behavior of its members, the *climate* of trust from trustworthy actions of its members, the *validity* of a norm in a group from the endorsement of the norm among its members. Features

of organization are established bottom up from the social positions, the actions and attitudes of its members. Therefore, the *genus proximum* of the definition are not the organizations, but the persons.

In sum, social capital is any property of a group member, which contributes to group outputs. However, this definition goes too far in the opposite direction and loses the “social” aspect by including every personal qualification that contributes to group outputs. If inventive or assiduous members contribute more than unimaginative or lethargic ones, one would attribute this surplus to their human or cultural, instead to their social capital. Therefore, the definition should be restricted to include only those outputs, which result from group membership. A group is defined by a common interest (Olson 1965). In pursuing this common interest, that is, in producing a group output, members form social relations with each other so that interactions are more densely knit amongst members than with non-members. Thus, not any attribute of a group member develops their social capital, but rather the features, which derive from group membership. The social capital of a group member, then, is the sum of their social relations *in the group*. A group member “possesses” a position and some relations in the group, and the characteristics of this position and these relations – the centrality and the prestige of the position, the directness and length of the relations, in brief: every dimension which a formal analysis of networks can attribute to positions and which “generators” of an ego-centered network may reveal as relations (Burt 2001) – are their social capital.

#### *Intimate and non-intimate relations*

However, this definition still seems too broad. For, it refers to any group, including to those formed from intimate relationships, which are commonly<sup>1</sup> not regarded as social capital.

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<sup>1</sup> The exclusion of intimate relationship is explicitly justified on theoretical grounds in Warren (2001: 56-59) and implicitly made in most empirical investigations of social capital, which refer to “trust, norms and networks” (Putnam 1993: 167). *Trust* refers to “people” (see the phrasing of question A8-A10s in the European Social Survey [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)), and is a problem only *beyond* the family (e.g. Uslaner 2002: 29). *Norms* of reciprocity (e.g. not cheating on taxes) proscribe not to exploit others beyond the family. Moreover, the family is – as already stated by Weber (1980: 214, household communism) – the social domain where reciprocation is stretched for a much longer time span than in everyday relations and in the society at large (if not totally suspended). *Networks* are mostly operationalized by memberships in associations. Even the “informal connections” investigated by van der Meer et al. (chapter 2) refer to “social meetings” which take place outside the nuclear family (or its substitute forms) (C2) – otherwise one need not “meet” – and to helping relations “not counting anything you do for your family, in your work, or within voluntary associations” (E20). Even more interestingly, the only question, which includes relations within the nuclear family “Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters”, produces a uniform response rate of about 90-95% in every country. Obviously, as nearly everybody can resort to the family (of origin or destination) for this purpose, there are no differences between countries – and most probably between persons as well. – Although Halpern (2005: 13-28) contends that “almost all researchers would agree that non-familial social networks... are clear examples of social capital”, he considers the family as a level of analysis for social capital. On the other hand, he analyzes the family as one of the main causes of social capital (248-250) – which it indeed is (for trust see Uslaner 2002: 76-83). The fact that the family is one of the most important causes of social capital is also a strong argument to exclude family relations from its definition. – The distinction between intimate and non-intimate relations is implicitly made also in economics when “marriage specific” capital is seen as a form of its own – neither human nor social capital (Becker 1976: 242-4). It is furthermore explicitly made in Becker’s distinction between the fixed “fundamental” relations a person is embedded in as a

Intimate relationships are sexual and generational relations. As they rest on biologically defined qualities, there are only a few of them; moreover, everybody can, and most will enter into them. They are practiced in the nuclear family and its more recent substitute forms, as partnerships or patchwork families – in what has been termed “private living arrangements”. “Private” is what Parsons (Parsons / Shils 1951) has called “particularistic”: the person is essential for the relation. There are many mothers in the world, but only my mother is “my mother”; I cannot choose amongst mothers for the one who suits me the best. Social capital, however, consists of “universalistic” relations in “public” realms, that is, of relations, which persist with interchangeable persons. Each member of my tennis club is, in principle, equally welcome as a partner on the tennis court or in the club bar, and even beyond the club. Therefore, I can choose amongst them those, which suit me the best.

In brief, as social capital characterizes the departure of persons from their private living arrangements, it seems reasonable to exclude intimate relationships from the definition and to introduce a new *differentia specifica* with reference to kinds of groups. *Social capital, then, is the sum of social relations a person holds beyond intimate living arrangements.*<sup>2</sup> Yet social capital does not “capitalize” by itself. In order to not decay, it must be, as every sort of capital, utilized by its owner. What can actors gain from their relations when they pursue goals within their group?

## 1.2 Relational capital and system capital: Concept and measurement

Due to its relational nature, the possession of social capital becomes more useful when there are more relations in the group within which they are established. Therefore, the “relational capital” of persons has been distinguished from the “system capital” of their group (Esser 2000: 235-268, Gabriel et al. 2002: 27). This distinction, however, makes sense only if the system capital is *conceived* of independently of persons as the sum of their relations. While a person may aim to manipulate and to improve their relational capital, the system capital of a group, although created by the members, exists independently of each member’s will. This emerging quality is visible in at least two ways. Firstly, relations between all group members are regarded. Then the system capital is the *network* of the relations knitted between members in pursuance of the group goal; it is the social structure of the group. Thus, the sum of ownership relations between firms of an economy is the system capital of that economy. Secondly, some of the relations are bundled in *civic associations*. Then the system capital is the sum of civic associations acting within the group. Thus, the sum of civic associations in a society at large, often designated as its “third” or “voluntary sector” (Anheier / Salamon 2001), constitutes its system capital. If one wants to measure these two kinds of system capital in population surveys, two problems arise.

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member of an intimate group and the variables investments a person puts into building up social relations beyond these fundamental relations (Esser 2000: 243-246).

<sup>2</sup> The definition refers to relations while other definitions (Esser 2000: 236, 243, 260; Lin (2001a: 25, 2001b: 17; Yang 2007) refer to resources available through or features of relations. Alter may be accessible to Ego, yet refuse to share resources with Ego (Lin 2001b: 21). Although to use the resources is the ultimate goal of social capital, therefore, it seems appropriate not to include the accessibility of resources in the definition. How well partners provide access to resources is an empirical question.

Firstly, system capital is the aggregation of the many decisions made by persons to establish their relational capital. In this process, there inevitably is some *interdependency*; some are eager to and some detest emulating other people. In the measurement procedure, this interdependency should be, in principle, followed up over time until a system capital is established. Yet the measurement practice in population surveys is to neglect interdependency and time and to compute means within groups at a single point in time. This abbreviation of the measurement procedure cannot be justified by its practicability alone (van Deth 2002: 87). Fortunately, there are substantive reasons as well. Often people make decisions, without looking at others, according to their interests and values. For example, one joins a tennis club because one wants to play tennis, and one supports Amnesty International because one is a convinced liberal – irrespective of what others like and believe. If the interdependency in the aggregation process can be neglected for substantive reasons, the formation need not be followed up over time and can be measured as the result of the formation at a single point in time. The most straightforward, though theoretically demanding, way to measure the system capital of a group, then, is to compute the mean relational capital of its members.

Yet, secondly, this bears the danger of circularity, namely identifying system capital with relational capital. The sum of the relations of all persons does not necessarily amount to the system capital of the group. If two persons are related to each other, there is only one relation and it is, strictly speaking, not correct to total the relation each one has to become two relations. Yet in population surveys with *random samplings* it is highly improbable that two persons are drawn which hold a direct relation such that there will not be much wrong with totaling the relations. Similarly, if two persons join the same association it is strictly not correct to count a system capital of two associations. Yet again, random sampling seems to keep the problem within limits. More importantly, multiple memberships reflect the size of the association so that the addition of all personal memberships can be regarded as the system capital of the associations of a society, weighted by its importance.

In sum, social capital consists of the relations of persons, it basically is *relational capital*. Yet relations may add up within a group to create a *system capital*, which either consists of the network or the civic associations in that group. Although the system capital is conceived of as independent of the relational capital, the measurement of system capital through mean values of relational capital can be theoretically – if there is little interdependency – and empirically – if there is random sampling – justified. Thus, the mean values of relational capital can be taken as *indicators* of properties of the system capital. Which properties of the system capital can become fruitful for a group member in pursuance of their goals?

### **1.3 System capital: From social relations to social trust and the validity of norms**

#### *Density of social relations*

The first property of system capital, which might become useful for an actor, is the density of the relations from which it is built up. A person with relations in a network of high mean personal relationships is more able to move from their position to any other person in the network than is possible for a person holding the same number of relations in a network with low mean personal relationships. For, each partner in the denser network is likely to have a greater number of relations than each partner in the less dense one, thereby increasing the ways to attain a goal aimed at. The value of relational capital increases with the system capital.

While the sheer quantity of relations within a group increases the number of ways an actor can attain a goal aimed at, the quality of the relations affects the probability of the attainment on each of these ways. In particular, the “niceness” of relations eases the goal attainment process of both partners.<sup>3</sup> “Nice” people at first sight accept each other. They approach others openly and optimistically and treat others friendly unless taught otherwise – they even try to teach friendliness to the unfriendly. They start interactions with a cooperative move, and they end up with a higher common product than for people starting with a non-cooperative move (Axelrod 1984: 33-54). “Nice” relations form between people when each partner is prepared to start with a cooperative move. More specifically, “nice” relations result from two “nice” tendencies of the partners: to trust each other and to endorse norms of cooperation.

*“Niceness” of social relations: climate of trust*

Trust<sup>4</sup> is the “excess propensity to cooperate” which overrides the suspicion that a purely egoistic partner will not give back (Paldam 2002, see also Halpern 2005: 246-250, Kiyonari et al. 2006). It is a general world-view, which does not reflect, but moulds experience; it is “moralistic” rather than “strategic” (Uslaner 2002: 15-26). I will give you an advance of whatever currency – money, advice, or help – without expecting an immediate return from you. Yet I hope to get something in return eventually from someone else, and I am even prepared to get nothing back at all. The more members of the group think likewise, the longer the chain of reciprocation can be, and the stronger is the climate<sup>5</sup> of trust in the group. Thus, trust can be generalized from the present interaction partner to the anonymous group member.

Trust is learned in relations where the probability of disappointment is low, in the “particularistic” relations of the family (Uslaner 2002: 76-77). Yet it is reinforced reciprocally in “universalistic” interactions beyond the family. I trust in others who have repeatedly not disappointed me, and others trust in me if I have repeatedly not disappointed them. My trust in others, therefore, indicates the trust others have in me. Trust eases cooperation and reduces transaction costs (Paldam 2000: 635-6). Someone who trusts in others will most probably be embedded in a climate of trust. Trust, therefore, must not be seen as a personal attitude alone, but as an indicator of trustful relations.<sup>6</sup> In brief, if trust is understood as an indicator of the

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<sup>3</sup> A formal classification of the features of social relation, which possibly build up social, is given in Yang (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Commonly, social trust in my everyday partners is distinguished from political trust in institutions such as parliament and the police (Neller 2008). Here, trust means social trust only.

<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of a “climate” captures the fact that relations are aggregated; therefore, I prefer it to the term often used term “culture of trust” which suggests a global quality (e.g. Bornschier / Volken 2005: 5)

<sup>6</sup> Social trust is distinguishable from trust in political institutions by the possibility of reciprocation on the same level of interactions partners. My trust in others is confirmed by the trust others have in me and vice versa so that my trust in others can be taken as an indicator of *my* social capital. However, my trust in political institutions is, due to the fact that there is no everyday interaction between citizen and institutions, as a rule not responded to by the institutions. It is not an indicator of *my* social capital, but, if anything, an indicator of the social capital of the *institutions*. The argument to justify trust as an indicator of the social capital of the trusting person holds for interpersonal relations, but not for the relation of citizens to their political institutions. Nevertheless, trust in institutions is

“niceness” of relations, a climate of trust can be seen – just as the density of social relations – as a system capital useful for persons. A climate of trust helps each group member to pursue his or her goals.

*“Niceness” of social relations: validity of norms of cooperation*

Just as social trust, the endorsement of norms of cooperation can be more or less strongly reciprocated in everyday interaction. Norms of cooperation, such as the proscription not to steal or not to claim benefits one is not entitled to, are justified by the norm of reciprocity<sup>7</sup> alone which ultimately appeals to personal interest – in contrast to norms of institutions, such as marital fidelity or the obligation to care for one’s children, which are additionally justified by values the person believes in, such as “the family” or “life” (Knack / Keefer 1997: 1265, Meulemann 1998: 412-415, Portes 1998: 7-9). If enough people follow norms of cooperation and enough people sanction their violation, the norm becomes valid. Translated from behavior to attitudes governing the behavior, this argument runs as follows: if enough people endorse a norm, it becomes valid. Consequently, the more a norm is held among someone’s interaction partners, the more one can uphold this norm oneself. Just as social trust, then, the endorsement of norms of cooperation may be seen as an indicator of a positive attitude among the person and their partners. In brief, if the endorsement of norms is understood as an indicator of “nice” relations, the validity of norms of cooperation can be – just as the density of social relations – seen as a system capital useful for persons. The validity of norms helps each group member to pursue their goals.

In sum, the distinction between the density and the “niceness” of social relation allows to classify system capital into the triad of dimensions which in Putnam’s – and other writers’ (e.g. Newton 1999, Paxton 1999, 2002: 256, Paldam 2000, Esser 2000: 257, van Deth 2002: 82-84) – definition is not more than an enumeration: “such as trust, norms and networks”.<sup>8</sup> Yet if the definition of social capital as a person’s possession of social relations is taken seriously, only the density of networks can be justified directly as a dimension of system capital, while a further argument is required in order to classify a climate of social trust and the validity of norms of cooperation as dimensions of system capital – namely in how far they stand for the “niceness” of social relations. A climate of social trust and the validity of norms

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often considered as a dimension of social capital beyond social trust – as e.g. in Paxton (1999: 105) and in the contribution of Gabriel / Walter-Rogg in this volume. – Empirically, social trust is not related to trust in government (Uslaner 2002: 148-154, 190-216, Halpern 2005: 180).

<sup>7</sup> For that reason, norms of cooperation are sometimes termed “norms of reciprocity” (e.g. Hooghe / Stolle 2003:2). In my opinion, the plural is inappropriate here. “The norm of reciprocity” (Gouldner 1960) is a meta-norm which justifies many norms most of which regulate the cooperation among citizens.

<sup>8</sup> Often trust and norms are termed the “cultural” (van Deth 2002: 80) or “attitudinal aspects of social capital” – in contrast to the “structural (networks)” aspect (e.g. Hooghe / Stolle 2003: 2). If this triad really would refer to a single concept, the correlations should be at least moderately high. In fact, they are low to nil (Whitely 1999: 41, Newton 2006, Stolle 2003: 30-34, Halman / Pettersson 2001: 76, Halman / Luijkx 2006: 77). Given their different distances to the core of the concept, namely social relations, this is not surprising. – Halpern (2005: 9-13, 32-35, 71) distinguishes “three basic components of social”: networks, norms and sanctions, but takes trust as an indicator, or even as a part, of norms. Yet trust is an attitude, so that Halpern’s triad is the same as the common one.

of cooperation are indicators of a benevolent aspect of social relations prevailing in a group, which has not been measured directly with reference to relations, but indirectly as a mean value of attitudes. This difference becomes evident if one switches back from system capital to relational capital. Just as the density of the relations in a group constitutes its system capital, so are the relations of a person its “relational” capital. However, whereas a climate of trust and the validity of a norm of cooperation in a group are easily understood as system capital, it makes no sense to regard trust or norm endorsement as the social capital of a person. While pursuing my goals, I do not profit from my trust or from my norm endorsement, but from the climate of trust or the validity of norms in my group.

#### **1.4 System capital as a context: Social order and opportunity structure**

If the relational capital of persons can be built up to the system capital of a group of which they are members, which kinds of groups can be considered as the bearer of system capital? In principle any kind can be considered: neighborhoods, precincts, communities, regions, countries, continents, even world societies if there were another globe, in brief: any aggregation level or “context” one may think of. At first glance, then, this seems to be a trivial question. However, it is not. For, in order to explain system capital one does not refer to groups individually with their proper names but to analytical properties of groups. If this is the case, the question changes somewhat: Which kinds of analytical properties can be attributed to which groups in order to explain their system capital? I think there are two general properties of contexts which differently apply to different aggregation levels. On the one hand, contexts may have a name and a border, a constitution and laws, a folklore and customs. Thus, they eventually become “social facts” governing the citizens’ actions (Durkheim 1895). This will be called the *social order*. On the other hand, contexts develop resources of action such as money, educational degrees and bureaucratic power which circulate among its citizens and make up different “life chances” (Weber 1980: 531). This will be called the *opportunity structure*.

The social order consists of *norms directly* guiding a person’s actions. These, in turn, are valid because most people endorse them and because, in large parts, they are written down in the legal form of a constitution. Thus, a concept of equality is defined in the constitution of many countries while achievement – equality’s twin value – remains a representation in the minds of the population of a country from which many different concepts may be derived and formulated. Typical variables of the country’s constitution are an index for federal or unitary constitution or the percentage of Protestants, which indicates the strength of a tradition of self-determination in religious matters. The *social order* guides actions in just the same way a person’s endorsement of a norm does – the only difference being that it binds every citizen alike while the *endorsement* varies between citizens. But in order to do so it must be there, it must be symbolically identified by kings or presidents, laws and customs, flags and hymns, border stones and national football teams. And in most cases the higher aggregation level is the more important one. Thus a nation state has a social order, a city precinct has not.

The opportunity structure sets *de facto* a range of options for every citizen over and above the citizen’s personal resources and thus *indirectly* affects a person’s actions. It results from the actions of all citizens and all organizations within a country. Thus, the interactions between people of different capabilities, efforts and qualifications result in social inequality which restricts social trust or the disposition to social change. Or, a long established democracy facilitates the establishment of associations. Typical variables of the opportunity structure are the Gini index of income inequality or the availability of infrastructural supplies. The

*opportunity structure* of a context provides options and sets restrictions in just the same way as the *opportunity profile* of a person, the combination of their resources, does – the only difference being that it is given for every citizen alike while the opportunity profile varies between citizens. Thus, an opportunity structure need not to be symbolically identified, it only needs to impinge upon the option range of some intended action. A nation state may constitute an opportunity structure as well as a city precinct. And in many cases the lower aggregation level is the more important level. In order to practice swimming, I need a public swimming pool in my neighborhood, not in my city.

Social order and opportunity structure can be cross-classified with institutional sectors of a society, in particular, economy and polity. Thus, economic freedom (Gwartney et al. 2003) is an aspect of the social order while the wealth of a country (GDPpc) is an effect of the opportunity structure. Similarly, good governance (Kaufman et al. 2006) is an aspect of the social order while the year since a democracy has been established is an aspect of the opportunity structure.

In brief, “which context?” is not a trivial question. It can be discussed with reference to classes of group properties relevant for the attainment of action goals.

## **2 Classifying and evaluating research questions on social capital**

### *Dimensions of the research agenda*

In order to classify and evaluate research questions on social capital, I will take “capital” as a theoretical term, not as a mere metaphor. I see two general qualities of a capital which apply to social capital as well.

First, every capital is a means for ends to be attained in purposive action. Thus, money can be exchanged against goods and services. Similarly, prestige can be used to attain goods and services from others. Again similarly, social capital can be used as a channel to goods and services. Each of these means contributes to the goals to be attained in action, to its “success”. Yet there is a difference between the three kinds. Money buys everything of its worth; one has a right to get its worth. “Success” is no problem. However, prestige and social capital must be worked upon at least a little bit in order to be a successful means for some end. One has no right to get employed in an occupation similarly prestigious as one’s education. One has no rights over the actions and the knowledge of even one’s best friends. “Success” is a problem. It may be easily attained, but it is not granted.

If social capital thus can contribute to the success of some action, its consequences should be researched before its causes. Does it really do so? If it does not or only poorly, it is of reduced importance to examine its causes. Consequently, the consequences of the distribution of social capital have priority over its causes on the research agenda. In this respect, social capital contrasts to money. Because money is a “success” for everyone who holds it, it is of primary importance to know how he has got it and of secondary importance to know what he does with it. Consequently, the causes of the distribution of money have priority over its consequences on the research agenda,

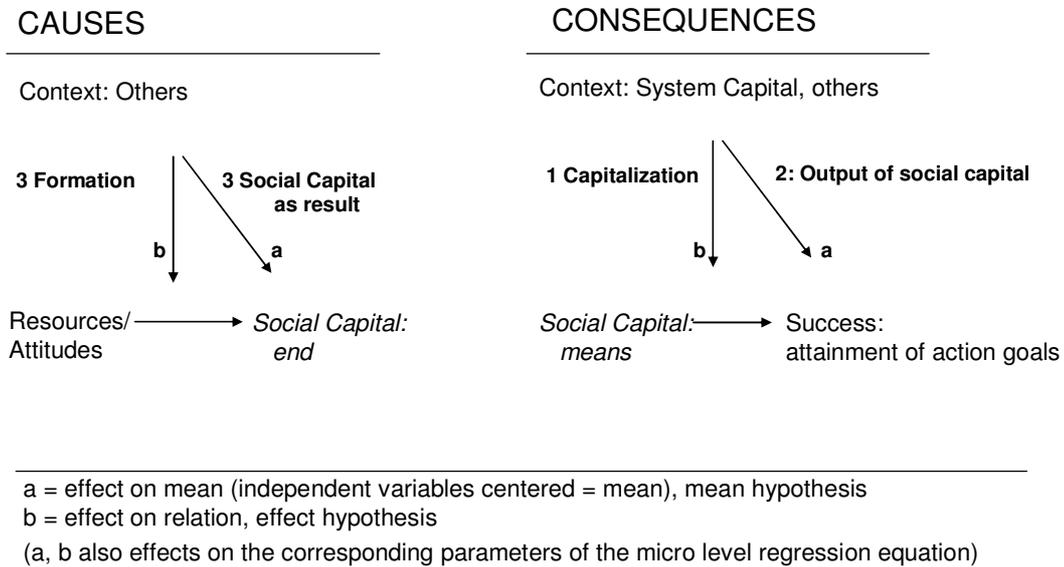
Second, every capital “capitalizes”, that is, it pays off in the same kind. Thus, money pays off in interest payments, that is, again money; and the prestige of educational degrees pays off in the prestige of occupations attained, that is, prestige again. This holds for social capital as well. Social capital consists of social relations, which pay off in social relations. The relational capital of an actor becomes the more useful the more it is embedded in a network of relations within a group, in other words, the more system capital there is around. A’s relation to B is of limited value if B knows nobody else, yet highly valuable if B is located at the core of a dense network of relations. Due to the very relational nature of social capital, its capitalization depends on the context a person lives in.

If relational capital thus capitalizes subject to system capital, the effect of system capital on a means end chain of some action should be analyzed before the effect of system capital on the ends themselves.

#### *A schema of the research agenda*

If one cross-classifies the research agenda according to these two dimensions – causes versus consequences, process versus output – one gets four, partially rank ordered, research questions. The two questions on consequences rank before the two questions on causes. Among the two questions on consequences, the question on the *capitalization* ranks before the one on the *output* because of the relational origin of the macro variable system capital. Among the two questions on causes no order emerges as there are many variables on the macro level so that the question of the *formation* ranks equal with the question of the *result*. The four questions are presented in figure 1 in the form of path diagrams on the macro level of contexts and the micro level of persons.

Figure 1: Causes *versus* consequences, processes *versus* outputs in social capital research: four questions ranked



The first question concerns the *capitalization* of social capital. How does system capital reinforce the effect of relational capital on “successes”, that is, on the attainment of action goals? For example, does a dense network between associations increase the effect of membership in associations on political participation? Questions such as these refer to an effect of a macro level variable on the effect of a micro level variable on another micro level variable – to what I call *effect hypotheses*. The corresponding multi-level regression model is a slope-model with a cross-level interaction effect.

The second question concerns the *output* of social capital. How does system capital increase “successes”, that is, the attainment of action goals? For example, does a dense network of association increase political participation? Questions such as these refer to an effect of a macro level variable on a micro level variable – to what I call *mean hypotheses*. The corresponding multi-level regression model is an intercept model in which the independent variables have been grand mean centered.

The third question concerns the *formation* of social capital. How do context variables reinforce – or reduce – the effect of means to gain social capital? For example, does an extensive social security system reduce the effect of income on establishing neighborhood relations? Questions such as these refer to an effect of a macro level variable on the effect of micro level variable on another micro level variable, that is, to *effect hypotheses* as in the first question. Yet the macro level variables are context variables in general rather than system capital. As in the first question, the corresponding multi-level regression model is a slope-model with a cross-level interaction effect.

The fourth question – ranked equally important with the foregoing one – concerns the *result* of social capital. How do context variables increase or decrease the social capital of persons? For example, does economic development increase membership in associations? Questions such as these refer to an effect of a macro level variable on micro level variable, that is, to *mean hypotheses* as in the second question. Again the macro level variables are context variables in general rather than system capital. As in the second question, the corresponding multi-level regression model is an intercept model with a grand mean centered independent variables.

Obviously, this hierarchy of research order reverses what one might consider as the “natural” agenda, namely, starting with causes rather than consequences and with main rather than interaction effects. Yet if one takes “capital” as a theoretical term rather than a metaphor the proposed order follows. To further illustrate this reasoning, a third quality of a “capital” – after the means and the capitalization quality – is applied to social capital. Economic theory derives from the marginal productivity of investments a “diminishing return” of capital. This implies a nonlinear, flattening relation between social capital and its outcomes on the micro level which is maybe difficult to test empirically given the measurement accuracy of the outcomes. Yet theoretically it should hold for social capital. If I have only one friend it is very fruitful for me to find four new friends. If I have five friends it is less fruitful for me to find another four new friends.

*The transfer hypothesis: a general hypothesis on consequences*

Up to now, social capital research has implicitly followed this hierarchy. Primarily, it was not interested in social capital per se, that is, its causes, but in its consequences for the social integration of some group, mostly understood as the democratic stability of a nation state. At the heart of social capital research was what one might call the *transfer hypothesis*.<sup>9</sup> “Good government ... is a by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs” (Putnam 1993: 176). Or more abstractly, the citizens’ involvement in associations grants social integration. Clearly, this is a hypothesis on consequences and implicitly postulates the priority of consequences over causes. But apart from that, it is not clear. I try to clarify the meaning by referring to the right half of figure 1.

In Putnam’s aphoristic form, the transfer hypothesis refers to the correlation of two aggregate measures over the universe of nation states: The higher the number of associations, the higher the quality of government. Looking at Coleman’s bath tub, however, this can be no more than a short-cut of a longer story on the involvement of citizens. The more citizens are involved in associations, the more they are able to articulate their interests effectively in democratic decision making. There is a learning transfer from civic life to organized social life. In terms of figure 1, this is an example for the effect of social capital on action success.

Yet, the effective articulation of citizens’ interests is not yet social integration. There must be a further causal link from the successes of persons to the integration of groups which testifies the ultimate impact of social capital research. This ultimate impact lies beyond figure 1 to the left. Mostly, it is taken for granted on theoretical grounds and not researched empirically.

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<sup>9</sup> This is often called the „Tocqueville hypothesis“ (van Deth 2003). Yet as it a hypothesis on the generalization of learning I prefer to name it in the terms of learning theory.

Moreover, the transfer hypothesis does not only refer to a micro relation but to its embeddedness in macro conditions. Thus, “the singing groups and soccer clubs” are a cipher for the system capital of the democracies analyzed. But how these affect the micro relation remains open. Yet there can be either one or both effects of figure 1, on means and on relations.

In sum, the original form of the transfer hypothesis comprises the right half of figure 1 as a whole and expands it to the right. To be tested, its elements must be specified of which there are four. First, a micro relation must be specified at any rate. To this two *top down* elements may be added: an effect hypothesis on the capitalization of system capital or a mean hypothesis on the output of system capital. Fourth, a new *bottom up* effect from action success to social integrations can be added when the ultimate transfer it is not taken for granted theoretically.

### **3 A transfer of the transfer hypothesis: From polity to economy**

#### **3.1 Question and design of research**

Most often, the transfer hypothesis refers to social integration in the polity. It is assumed that involvement in the civic society is a model for political action and it strengthens a democracy. Yet involvement in the civic society could be, as well, a model to articulate interests within labor relations and to strengthen a market economy. If the civic society is a school of democracy, it may also be a school of labor relations. To be sure, there are differences between political action and the articulation of interests in labor relations. Partners in political action are, in principle, on equal footing, whilst employers have more means of survival in the case of conflict, than employees do. Consequentially, political action is, in principle, geared toward the common good of the polity, as well as to personal interests, whilst employees aim to improve their lot, thereby improving the common interest of their industry and the economy.

Yet, these differences refer to the distinct constitutions of the polity and the economy, and cannot conceivably affect the process of how persons transfer their learning experiences between life domains. Involvement in associations of the private life, as opposed to large-scale organizations of politics, labor, and religion, may foster the capabilities to act in these very organizations. Being a youth trainer in a football club may not only help to raise one’s purpose vis-à-vis the representatives of the local community, but also vis-à-vis the management of one’s firm. In both cases, capabilities are needed to get along with people, to develop and to advocate new ideas, to assert one self, to lead others and to get their approval. In both cases, these capabilities may result in a better realization of one’s interests. In both cases, successful public action may also contribute to the common good, although this effect is indirect in the case of labor relations. The better workers feel at their workplace, the better their product can be. In the following I will test this *labor relations version* of the *transfer hypothesis*: *The more someone is involved in private associations the more he or she will attain empowerment at the workplace.*

That civic involvement transforms into empowerment at the workplace, is a bold hypothesis. Qualifications and workplace characteristics may have a more immediate impact on the level of persons, and institutions and opportunity structures may determine mean empowerment on the level of countries. Therefore, the hypothesis is examined, controlling for personal

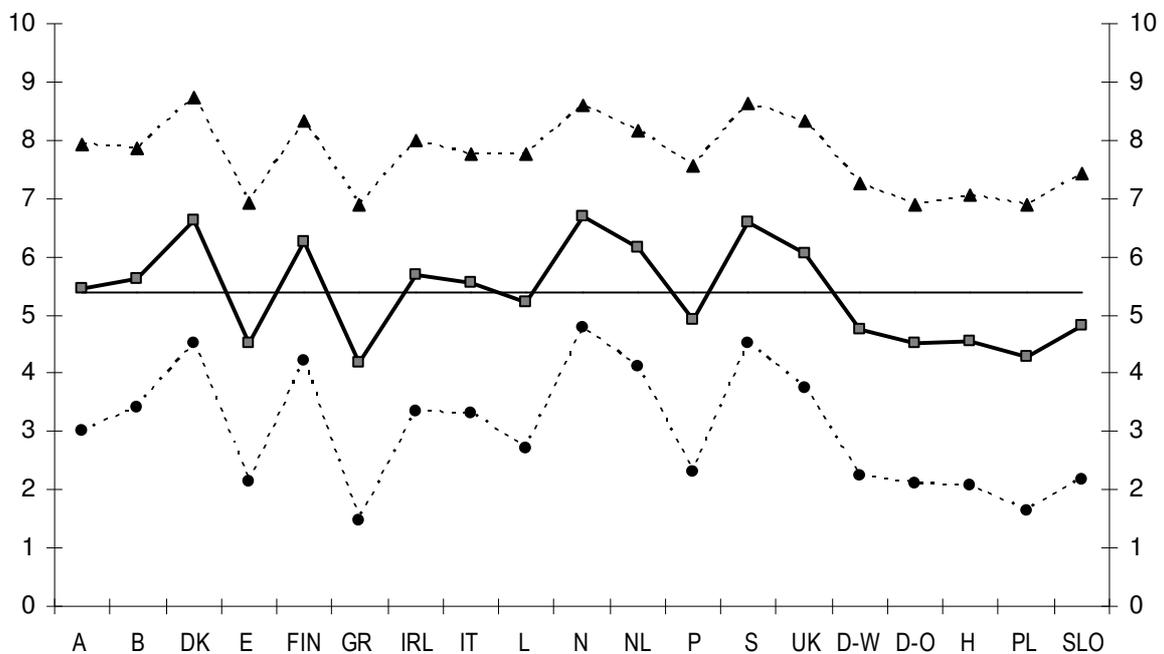
conditions, and in several countries, with differing labor relations (Meulemann 2008a). I will present the dependent variable, discuss the country level variables, derive the corresponding hypotheses and present the result of a multi-level regression.

### 3.2 Sample and dependent variable

Samples are taken from the European Social Survey 2002 and restricted to the *employed population*.

Empowerment at the workplace can be defined as the range of discretion a worker has, in order to make decisions about his or her work. It was measured by an inventory of five questions and by a single item. The inventory was phrased as follows: “I am going to read out a list of things about your working life. Using this card, please say how much the management at your work allows you: to be *flexible* in your working hours, to *decide* how your own daily work is organized, to influence your work *environment*, to influence decisions about the general *direction* of your work, to *change* your work tasks if you wish to?” For each of these questions, there were 11 response options, ranging from “0: I have no influence” to “10: I have complete control”; options in between were numbered and not named. The single question was: “To what extent can you *organize* your own work; to a large extent, to some extent, very little, or not at all?” An additive index was constructed of the six variables ranging from 0 to 10

Figure 1. Mean empowerment, one standard deviation above and below the means



The mean empowerment in all countries is 5.39 with a standard deviation of 2.49. Figure 1 shows, for each country, the means, together with the range of one standard deviation above and below the means and provides the overall mean for comparison. One can highlight three groups of countries. Empowerment is *high* in the four Scandinavian countries, and in the Netherlands; is *medium* in Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, and Luxemburg; and is *low* in

Spain, Greece, Portugal, the two parts of Germany and all the East European countries. Empowerment is high in countries with a “social-democratic regime”, while it is medium or low in countries with a “traditional-corporatist regime” (Janoski 1998: 23), and in the former Eastern bloc. The range between the highest (Norway, 6.69) and the lowest (Poland, 4.28) country stretches over almost a standard deviation of the total sample.

### 3.3 Hypotheses and measurements: Level of persons

#### *Civic involvement*

Involvement in, altogether 11 kinds of associations, has been asked with the following question: “For each of the voluntary associations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last 12 months, and, if so, which. (Card) - A member of such an organization. - Participated in an activity arranged by such an organization. - Donated money to such an organization. - Done voluntary (unpaid) work for such an organization.” Of these four forms of involvement, membership and participation have been combined under the term *belonging*, and donation of money and voluntary work have been combined under the term *engagement*, for each kind of association. As the assumed transfer runs from the private to the professional domain, belonging and engagement in any of the five *private* associations – sports clubs, consumer associations, scientific/educational/teachers’ associations, social clubs, and cultural associations – is considered (Meulemann, 2008b). Thus, there are two variables: *private-belonging* and *private-engagement*. Both should, according to the transfer hypothesis, increase empowerment at the workplace.

#### *Further independent person level variables*

These comprise the *firm-specific human capital* measured by the people supervised and the Treiman prestige score; the *personal human capital*, measured by the feeling of political efficacy, education, and the exit option, and whether a partner was employed. Exit options were ascertained by two questions: “How difficult or easy would it be for you to get a similar or better job with another employer? ... and to start your own business?”, for which the same response options as for the empowerment questions were applied. Both questions were combined into an index of *exit options*.

Belonging to any of two *professional* associations – trade unions and business/professional/farmers associations – has been ascertained in the inventory on civic involvement mentioned above.

Finally, the *firm size*, the *sector* and *gender* and *age* have been controlled.

### 3.4 Hypotheses and measurements: Level of countries

#### *Mean differences*

The section of the social constitution of a country, which regulates labor relations, can be called the *labor relation system* (Ebbinghaus / Visser 2000). It can be understood in two dimensions. Relations are established either between *collectivities* – state, trade unions, and employer associations – or between *individuals* – employer and employee. In both cases, *normative* rules of the social order or *factual* opportunity structures may be more or less

favorable to the unions. Looking at collectivities, rules that widen the range of workers covered by the bargaining process and a high degree of organization and public support, may favor unions. Looking at individuals, rules that favor employment and restrict dismissal, and a labor market situation with high employment and many secure work contracts, may favor unions.

From this, the *union efficiency hypothesis* results: *the more collective or individual labor relations of a country favor normatively, or strengthen factually, the unions, the higher the mean empowerment.* It predicts a positive effect of a labor relation system favoring unions on mean empowerment.

*Slope differences*

Just as workers may substitute individual and collective strategies in their personal endeavour to secure empowerment, the personal endeavor of either sort may be substituted by the collective action of workers' representations. The labor relation system provides a rule set and a power structure, which may exonerate workers from the personal endeavor to attain empowerment at the workplace. If the labor relation system provides ample avenues to foster empowerment and if unions are successful in their processes, workers are much less dependent on their own initiative. Instead, they can rely on bargaining institutions. This substitution should hold, in particular, for exit options. The more the labor relation system grants opportunities to attain and maintain empowerment, the less the workers are driven to use their exit options outside the firm.

From this, the *substitution hypothesis* results: *the more the labor relation system of a country favors unions, the less important individual strategies become for the worker in order to attain empowerment.* It predicts a negative cross-level interaction effect between a labor relation system favorable to the unions and the persons' individual strategies to attain empowerment.

*Classification and selection*

Six variables of the labor relation system were taken partly from an updated version of the data presented in Ebbinghaus / Visser (2000), and partly from the ESS. Their position in the two above dimensions is given in Table 1.

Table 1 Variables of the labor relation system

	<i>Normative: Social order</i>	<i>Factual: Opportunity structure</i>
<i>Collective</i>	Bargaining Coverage	<b>Mean Union Membership</b> Union Presence at Work Place
<i>Individual</i>	Employment Protection Legislation	Percent Temporary Work Contracts Income Inequality

If mean empowerment was regressed on these variables, only *mean union membership* and *percentage temporary work contracts* showed steeper slopes (4.29, 2.94) and R<sup>2</sup> values beyond .20 (.64, .57). Moreover, *mean union membership* and *percent temporary work*

*contracts* correlated strongly ( $r=.77$ ). Therefore, only *mean union membership* could be taken as an indicator of a labor relations system favorable to empowerment at the workplace.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.5 Results

The multi-level regressions of empowerment on person and country variables are presented in Table 3;<sup>11</sup> the person-level variables are now centered around the grand mean so that the intercept is the value for a person with the total sample mean on each predictor variable, that is, for the “average European”.

The so-called empty model (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 45-47) *in the first column*, which estimates how much variance is due to persons and to countries without predictors on either level, serves as a base line. As its Intra-Class-Correlation – the quotient of the country-level variance over the sum of the person and country-level variance (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 16-21) – shows, 11% of the total variance is due to country differences, just more than the conventional limit of 10% to make the multi-level-analysis of country means worthwhile.

The so-called random intercept model (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 38-41) *in the second column* estimates how much variance remains on the person and on the country-level after controlling for the person variables and examines whether country can be ignored as a predictor. As the comparison of the variance components show and the corresponding  $R^2$ -values – computed as variance reduction relative to the empty model (Hox 2002: 63-71) – state explicitly, the person variables reduce the error variance on the person-level strongly. However, they even more strongly reduce the error variance of the countries – in other words, much of the country differences, more than half, is due to the different composition of the country populations. Ignoring countries is a misspecification: countries differ not only – as the empty model has shown – according to the mean of the dependent variable but also according to the mean of the independent variables, the effects of which are spuriously attributed to persons.

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<sup>10</sup> Other inventories did not provide data for the complete ESS countries. Kenworthy (2000) covers only 11 countries. As far as these countries are concerned, the indicators overlap with UM. Tangian (2005) provides indicators mainly for subjective assessments of the work situation and the EU-15 countries only.

<sup>11</sup> HLM2 6.0 was used for computation (Raudenbush et al. 2004).

Table 3 Multi-Level-Regression of Empowerment on Person and Country Variables: Raw Coefficients

Variables (Categories)	Empty	Random Intercept	Intercept Outcome	Intercept+ 2 Slopes	Intercept+ 1 Slope
<i>Intercept</i>					
Mean Intercept	5.233	5.406	5.472	5.509	5.512
Union Membership mean			.019***	.019***	.019***
<i>Civic Involvement</i>					
Private-Belonging		.242	.240	.227	.233
Private-Engagement		.207	.205	.203	.203
<i>Firm-Specific Human Capital</i>					
People Supervised (5)		.445	.445	.456	.445
P Superv * UM mean (*100)				-.298*	
Prestige (*10)		.282	.284	.283	.283
<i>Individual Strategy: Personal Human Capital</i>					
Political Efficacy (5)		.143	.143	.144	.143
Education (7)		.139	.137	.132	.134
Exit Option (11)		.213	.213	.216	.217
Exit O. * UM mean (*100)				-.174*	-.198**
Partner Employed		.124	.123	.126	.124
<i>Collective Strategy</i>					
Professional-Belonging		-.203	-.210	-.207	-.205
<i>Workplace</i>					
Firm size (5)		-.191	-.191	-.192	-.189
Sector: Service		(.064)	(.065)	(.063)	(.063)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Male		(-.125)	(-.125)	(-.128)	(-.128)
Age (b for 10 years)		.160	.160	.160	.160
<i>Variance Components</i>					
Person-Level	5.047	3.809	3.810	3.774	3.784
Country-Level: Intercepts	.616	.285	.129	.111	.114
Slope1: P Supervised (*100)				.689	
Slope2: Exit Option (*100)				.331	.332
Intercept*Slope1-Correlation				-.760	
Intercept*Slope2-Correlation				-.383	-.416
Slope1*Slope2-Correlation				-.187	
Intra-Class-Correlation	.1094	.0696	0.033		
R <sup>2</sup> Persons		.245	.245	.252	.250
R <sup>2</sup> Countries		.538	.791	.819	.815
Deviance	69411	60383	60380	60295	60315
Df (Deviance)	2	2	2	7	4
N of persons	15333		14429		

Valid n=15336, 81,7% of the unweighted total sample. Weighted to equal number of employee in every country. RML estimation. All independent variables grand mean centered. - Significance Levels: *Person-level coefficients*: italics = not significant at 0,01% level, in bracket = not significant at 0,1% level. *Country-level coefficients*: \*\*\* p<.001, \*\* p>.01, \*p>.05. *Variance components*: all coefficients significant at 0,01% level.

In the random intercept model, there remains still a highly significant variance of the intercept over countries; also, the Intra-Class-Correlation is still substantive. Therefore, it is worthwhile to test the *union efficiency hypothesis* in a so-called intercept as outcome model (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 73). It predicts the intercept by *mean union membership*, which has a mean of 36.5% over all 19 countries, and ranges from 14.6% in Portugal to 84.4% in Denmark with a

standard deviation of 22.2%. The results presented *in the third column* confirm the union efficiency hypothesis. The coefficient for mean union membership of .019 is highly significant: A country 25 percentage points above the grand mean has a predicted intercept of  $5.472 + 0.019 \cdot 25 = 5.947$ ; the mean for this country is heightened half a point on the 11 point scale of empowerment. On the country-level, then, *mean union membership* has a fairly strong positive effect on empowerment, while within countries membership in professional associations goes together with low empowerment. Where professional organizations are strong, they are able to establish normative rules and to create a power balance in favor of higher empowerment at the workplace. Nevertheless, irrespective of how strong professional organizations are at the country-level, it is the less privileged who seek support of professional organization in order to improve their workplace conditions.

Just as the union efficiency hypothesis presupposes that intercepts vary significantly over countries, the *substitution hypothesis* presupposes that slopes of individual strategy variables vary significantly over countries. To examine this, so-called random slope models (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 67-72) were applied to *people supervised* and *exit option*. The results are not presented in the table but they showed that both slopes indeed vary significantly.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to test the substitution hypothesis with a so-called slope as outcome model (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 62-80), which predicts the slopes of *people supervised* and *exit option* by *mean union membership*. It is presented *in the fourth column*. The substitution hypothesis is confirmed. The predicted negative cross-level interaction effects are significant at a level below 5% and quite strong. If *mean union membership* is high, employees are less inclined to resort to the two individual strategies. In a country 25 percentage points above the mean, the slope for *people supervised* is  $.456 + (-.00298 \cdot 25) = .382$ ; and for *exit option*  $.216 + (-.00174 \cdot 25) = .172$ . In other words, the frame of collective empowerment granted by trade unions obliterates individual strategies to attain empowerment.

In this model, however, the slope for *people supervised* correlates strongly negatively ( $r = -.760$ ) with the intercept although all independent variables have been grand mean centered to prevent this (Snijders / Bosker 1999: 68-72). The indicators for our two country-level hypotheses, union efficiency and substitution, strongly overlap. In order to examine them more independently, a model without the interaction effect between *people supervised* and *mean union membership* is presented *in the fifth column*. It reduces the variance of the random slope by 31.8%. It fares only slightly less well than the model with two interactions, according to  $R^2$ -values and the deviance, and it uses less degrees of freedom. It has a stronger and more significant interaction effect: in a country 25 percentage points above the mean, the slope for exit option is  $.217 + (-.00198 \cdot 25) = .167$ .

In none of the three models with country-level predictors, person-level regression coefficients differ from the random intercept model without country-level predictors. Thus, the hypotheses are confirmed for the remaining person-level variables. In particular, the transfer hypothesis stands firm: civic involvement in private associations has a stronger *positive* impact on empowerment at the workplace than involvement in professional associations, even if more immediate person-level determinants are controlled for and the differences between countries in labor relation systems are taken account of.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Many political scientists have suggested a transfer from civic engagement to political action and, ultimately, the stability of democracy (e.g. Norris 2002: 153-167). We have examined

the transfer from civic engagement to empowerment at the workplace and, ultimately, the social integration of the market economy. As it has turned out, civic engagement does indeed increase empowerment at the workplace – net of the effects of the worker's human capital and workplace and the country's labor relation system. The transfer is not strong, as was to be expected taking its distance into account. However, it is stronger than the short distance transfer within the work sphere. Possibly, a transfer requires *some* distance in order to elicit the generalizations needed to make experiences fruitful in foreign surroundings.

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