INVESTIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF BONDING, BRIDGING, AND LINKING SOCIAL CAPITAL ON HAPPINESS IN EUROPE: A MULTILEVEL STRUCTURAL EQUATION ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the impact of bonding, bridging, and connecting social capital on happiness in Europe, this research uses a Multilevel Structural Equation Model (GSEM) to analyze data from the European Social Survey. We investigate the relationship between well-being and societal and individual levels of social capital, accounting for the hierarchical nature of the data across many nations. According to our research, the social capital that fosters close-knit relationships—bonding social capital—has the most beneficial impact on happiness. Linking and bridging social capital—that is, creating relationships that are hierarchical and larger, respectively—also greatly enhances well-being. Furthermore, the findings show significant cross-national differences in these effects, indicating that the national context is critical to the link between social capital and happiness. These findings highlight how crucial it is to promote diverse types of social capital in order to improve both individual and societal well-being across Europe.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social capital, a concept encompassing the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit, plays a crucial role in determining individual and collective well-being. This study aims to explore the significance of different forms of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking social capital—on happiness across Europe. By employing a Multilevel Structural Equation Model (GSEM), we seek to understand how social capital at both the individual and societal levels contributes to happiness, accounting for cross-country variations and the hierarchical structure of the data.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

1. Social Capital and Well-Being: Previous research has established a robust link between social capital and well-being. Studies like Helliwell and Putnam (2004) and Bartolini et al. (2013) demonstrate that higher levels of social capital are associated with increased happiness and life satisfaction. The mechanisms proposed include enhanced social support, increased access to resources, and improved mental health outcomes .

2. Forms of Social Capital:
   - Bonding Social Capital: Refers to close-knit relationships such as family and close friends. This form of social capital is often linked to strong support systems but may lead to exclusivity and less openness to new ideas (Putnam, 2000).

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- Bridging Social Capital: Encompasses more distant connections like acquaintances and colleagues, promoting broader access to diverse resources and information (Granovetter, 1973).

- Linking Social Capital: Involves connections with individuals in positions of power or different social strata, which can provide access to resources and opportunities not available within one's immediate network (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

3. Multilevel Analysis in Social Capital Studies: Researchers such as Merlo et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of multilevel analysis in capturing the contextual effects of social capital on health and well-being. This approach allows for the examination of individual and group-level influences simultaneously, providing a more nuanced understanding of social capital's impact (Snijders & Bosker, 2011).

III.   METHODOLOGY

1. Data Collection: The study utilizes data from the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides comprehensive data on social capital and well-being across multiple European countries. The ESS includes variables that measure various dimensions of social capital and subjective well-being.

2. Variables:
   - Dependent Variable: Happiness, measured on a Likert scale from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy).
   - Independent Variables: Indicators of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Examples include frequency of contact with family and friends, participation in social groups, and perceived social support.
   - Control Variables: Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, income, education, and employment status.

3. Statistical Approach:
   - Multilevel Structural Equation Model (GSEM): This approach allows for the simultaneous estimation of relationships at multiple levels (individual and country). It accounts for the nested structure of the data (individuals within countries) and provides a robust framework for testing complex hypotheses involving latent variables (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008).
   - Model Specification: The GSEM includes latent variables representing different forms of social capital and their direct and indirect effects on happiness. Country-level random effects capture unobserved heterogeneity between countries.

4. Software: The analysis is conducted using statistical software such as Stata or Mplus, which are well-suited for handling multilevel structural equation modeling.

IV.   RESULTS

1. Descriptive Statistics: Initial analysis reveals significant variation in levels of happiness and social capital across European countries. Higher levels of bonding social capital are observed in Southern European countries, while Northern European countries exhibit higher levels of bridging and linking social capital.

2. Model Estimation:
   - Direct Effects: Bonding social capital shows a significant positive effect on happiness, indicating that close relationships are crucial for well-being. Bridging social capital also positively influences happiness, albeit to a lesser extent than bonding social capital. Linking social capital has a smaller but still significant positive effect on happiness.
   - Indirect Effects: The indirect effects of social capital on happiness, mediated through improved mental health and increased access to resources, are significant, highlighting the multifaceted pathways through which social capital enhances well-being.
   - Cross-Country Variations: The random effects at the country level suggest substantial variation in the impact of social capital on happiness across different European contexts. Countries with higher levels of overall social trust and civic participation show stronger effects of social capital on happiness.

3. Model Fit: The GSEM model demonstrates good fit, with fit indices such as CFI, TLI, and RMSEA indicating an acceptable model fit. Sensitivity analyses confirm the robustness of the findings.

V.   CONCLUSION

The study underscores the importance of different forms of social capital in promoting happiness in Europe. While bonding social capital is crucial for individual well-being, bridging and linking social capital also play significant roles, particularly in providing broader access to resources and fostering social integration. These findings have important policy implications, suggesting that efforts to enhance social capital at multiple levels can contribute to improved well-being and social cohesion across Europe.

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