

A Connected Framework: Social Capital and the Cooperative Identity

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Abstract: This research paper explores the connection between social capital and cooperatives through a narrative literature review, examining how social capital offers a unique advantage in a world increasingly in need of a more human-centred and balanced economy. The first research objective is to unveil the mystery of social capital by providing a preparatory introduction to the recognized definitions found within the ethos of social sciences. The second research objective utilizes case studies and cooperative features to examine the seemingly natural connections and interactions between social capital and the “Statement on the Cooperative Identity” by the International Cooperative Alliance (2015, p. 2). The research presents a ‘Connected Framework’ to highlight opportunities such as resilient trust, bolstered resiliency, improved quality performance, grounded local impact, increased member participation, and enhanced intellectual capital generation for cooperatives. These values, advantages, and benefits showcase the insights and outcomes of this research, illuminating the compelling connection between social capital and cooperatives.

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Introduction and Background

The concept of Social Capital has garnered increasing attention over the past several decades, evolving from an “emerging excitement phase” (Alder & Kwon, 2002) to being “routinized” (Woolcock, 2010) and a recognizable concept in today's discourse. While a significant amount of literature is available, social capital remains largely mysterious, misunderstood, and underutilized. In an examination to uncover and discover social capital harmony, this paper presents the principles and values of the “Cooperative Identity” by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (2015, p. 2) alongside social capital definitions and case studies to discover the connections throughout the literature and ultimately put forward a ‘Connected Framework’. The framework exhibits social capital advantages and benefits such as people-centeredness, enhanced resiliency, increased quality performance, local impact, member participation and intellectual knowledge exchange for cooperatives committed to the Cooperative Identity. At the same time, the paper aims to illustrate how social capital promotes collective action and common good economics — pressing elements required in a world torn apart by crises, divided by political conflicts, and compelled to adapt to worsening environmental challenges (United Nations, 2015, p. 5; Novkovic, 2019, p. 316).

Research Objectives

The first research objective is to explore and prepare an introduction to social capital. This paper reviews social capital definitions through the perspectives of prominent and recognized researchers and explores available explanations within the social sciences ethos.

The second research objective is to examine and argue the seemingly natural connection between social capital and cooperatives. This paper questions the interaction between social capital and the “Statement on the Cooperative Identity” by the ICA (2015, p. 2). The definition of a cooperative, as well as cooperative values and the seven principles, are explored to examine their relevance and connection to social capital. Case studies and cooperative features are utilized to assess values, benefits, and learning opportunities. This segment posits that social capital is embedded into a cooperative's purpose, grounded within its humanistic governance, and represents an ‘identity’ advantage through the principles and values of cooperation. The research culminates with the development of a ‘Connected Framework’. Here, the argued relationships between social capital, cooperatives, and the values, benefits, and advantages are displayed and summarized. Finally, this paper concludes with several important points: a discussion regarding the relationship between social capital and isomorphism, a consideration of potentially darker aspects, and a summarizing conclusion.

Methodology

This paper employs a narrative literature review research methodology. Snyder (2019) supports this approach as “an effective and well-conducted review as a research method [which] creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development” (p. 333). A narrative approach was selected for its ability to explore and outline extensive research areas encompassing multiple subjects for reinterpretation and interconnection. The primary aim is exploratory and explanatory, intending to examine causal relationships between social capital and cooperatives.

The research strategy was structured into four phases. *Phase 1* encompassed designing the research question, setting objectives, selecting search terms, and determining inclusion and exclusion criteria. Secondary data sources, such as research papers and case studies, were the desired form of information for the study. Search terms included ‘social capital’, ‘cooperatives’, and ‘cooperative identity’. These few terms yielded considerable results; selecting the relevant and most applicable sample was critical to ensure research remained on track. *Phase 2* reviewed and selected the resources, conducted the search effort, evaluated the literature sample, selected the applicable and reliable data sources, prioritized and documented the sample, published a final sample, and produced a preliminary journal article synthesis. Literature was prioritized based on applicability, relevance, and interconnection between social capital and cooperatives. *Phase three* involved a study of the selected data and literature, the abstraction of relevant information, and the documentation of key findings. *Phase four* consisted of writing the narrative literature review, with continuous evaluation of structure, research questions, objectives, and outputs.

Social Capital Primer: Definitions and Prominent Researchers

Social Capital (social capital) is not just a theoretical concept but a practical tool that empowers people to cooperate, succeed, and grow. It is built on the foundation of shared norms and values (Putnam, 1995) and the willingness to work collaboratively (Putnam, 1995; Coleman, 1988), and facilitates the achievement of collective goals (Putnam, 1995). While there are numerous definitions of social capital, a comprehensive, universally accepted, and approved definition is yet to be established. To truly grasp the essence of social capital, it is essential to delve into the work of the most prominent social capital researchers and theorists in order to advance towards social capital's applications and achieve the research objectives of this paper. The paper starts by exploring and progresses to an appreciation of social capital's social cohesion and tightly woven community fabric, which illustrates the connections among individuals and the essential spirit that fosters cooperation and effective networks.

One of the earliest definitions of social capital was presented by Bourdieu (1986). He posited that social capital is not uniformly available to members of a group or collective but to those who try to acquire it by achieving positions of power and status and developing goodwill (Bourdieu, 1986). He defined it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized

relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). An important element in this approach is Bourdieu's focus on differential access to the cultural capital linked to social class that facilitates and sustains class reproduction. For Bourdieu, social capital is a social force that enables collaboration with others to achieve personal and collective objectives.

For Coleman (1988), social capital is inherent in social structures and is a source of resources such as information, support and shared norms that are available through social connections. Coleman emphasizes the effectiveness of connections facilitating actions, particularly collective activities of mutual benefit. Other theorists continue to provide variants of these more pronounced definitions. Fukuyama (1995) states that "Social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in society or in certain parts of it" (p. 26). Arguing here that social capital is significant in facilitating collective action and extending social interaction beyond families and close circles of acquaintances, he lays the foundation for economic growth. Fukuyama adopts an economic approach to defining social capital, linking it closely to societal trust, which in turn fosters positive economic development.

Putnam (2000) conceptualized and popularized the concept by proclaiming alarm at the decline of social capital in America, which could threaten the integrity and strength of democratic institutions. He leverages data to intercept and make sense of America's growing disconnectedness from one another, its communities, and social structures as evidenced by decreases in memberships in civic associations and volunteer organizations, as well as an increase in social isolation referred to as "bowling alone" (Putnam, 1995). His definition is a cornerstone in the understanding of social capital: "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). For Putnam, social capital underscores "the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense, social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). While Putnam's work is most foundational, an ultimate and agreed-upon universal definition for social capital is still lacking. Bianchi and Vieta (2000, p. 1603), argue that Putnam's approach "is not able to fully explain from where the [social] networks originate nor does it explain how other forms of capital are involved in them"; his concepts also lack nuance for power dynamics, like social hierarchy and the inequalities that are persistent amongst groups and communities (Bianchi & Vieta, 2000, p. 1604).

A related and overarching perspective is offered by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) who highlight the market advantage facilitated when firms develop social capital, which enables the growth of intellectual capital by affecting the conditions necessary for information exchange. They adopted the definition of social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual of the social unit" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243). This view contends that assets are mobilized through social networks, establishing intellectual capital for firms. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) group their research into three interrelated subdivisions of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive dimensions (p. 243). Their literature concludes with two outcomes. Firstly, social capital increases the efficiency of action through information diffusion and high levels of trust, which reduces transaction costs through collective approaches and avoids costly monitoring processes (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 245). The second theme indicates social capital's implications for adaptive efficiency, creativity, and learning: "researchers have found social capital to encourage cooperative behaviour, thereby facilitating the development of new forms of association in an innovative organization" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 245).

Adler and Kwon (2002) argue that the sources of an individual's social relations give rise to social capital through Opportunities, Motivation and Ability (OMA). Their literature argues that social capital grew out of the concept of 'goodwill' as the substance of social capital, and that social capital's "effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 18). They evaluate leading definitions while examining social capital dimensions through market, hierarchical and social relations. For Adler and Kwon (2002), the important emphasis of networks thus becomes clear while their definition also appreciates norms and values, similar to Putnam and others. Here, network structures present the Opportunity for social capital development: "an actor's network of social ties creates opportunities for social capital transactions" (2002, p. 24). External network structures create avenues of opportunity that can be leveraged to access the resources of outside contacts. Internal connections "create opportunity to work together" (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 25). These connections are initiated by

the individuals participating in the opportunities of the network. The same literature follows with Motivation as a direct source of social capital and reinforces, like Putnam, norms and trust as foundational components to the integrity and effectiveness of social capital. Similarly, Adler and Kwon (2002) discuss the concept of generalized reciprocity as a fuel/motivation towards collective action and a part of binding communities; “it transforms individuals from self-seeking and egocentric... into members of a community with shared interests, a common identity, and a commitment to the common good” (p. 25). Finally, the OMA acronym is rounded out with Ability—the competencies and resources throughout the network—as the final source of social capital. Abilities enable the opportunities and motivations of social capital to come to fruition for individuals, and social capital may struggle to meet every challenge without the capability to implement these aspects.

Reflecting on the outline of these definitions, it becomes clear that social capital is not an individual characteristic or a personality trait but a resource that resides in the networks and groups in which people participate. A core notion consistently expressed is that groups and networks have value and represent an opportunity for investment and a more nuanced appreciation than currently granted in today’s outlook. It is also important to illuminate that these characterizations reveal distinctive contextual presentations of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) asserts social capital as social exchanges (p. 241), and somewhat similarly, Coleman (1988) contextualizes social capital as a structure and function that facilitate actions among actors. Fukuyama (1995) also adopts an economic context with social capital as the prevalence of trust across society, and Putnam (1995) reinforces that it is features of social capital (networks, norms and trust) that facilitate coordination and cooperation. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggest social capital as a resource embedded in and derived from networks of relationships. Adler and Kwon (2002) present a contextual view of social capital as goodwill derived from social relationships. This summary provides multiple contextualizations of social capital (i.e., resources, exchanges, features) and an opportunity to appreciate the definitions’ variation and their contextual differences and similarities.

The Cooperative Identity and Social Capital

This section examines the seemingly natural connection between cooperatives and social capital, considering social capital one of cooperatives’ primary attributes. As Saz-Gil et al. (2021) state, “Cooperatives are social enterprises in which trust and cooperation are basic pillars” (p. 5). They propose this notion while examining the relatedness of social capital and the “Statement of the Cooperative Identity” by the ICA (2015, p. 2), charting the definition, principles, and values and linking each to social capital. The Cooperative Identity is the foundational commitment of all cooperatives worldwide, a system and network that creates a common union to enhance cooperation and create economic opportunity. Cooperatives are guided by their principles, operationalizing how their value systems and structures are implemented. By incorporating case study research that expresses social capital advantages and cooperative connections, a rationalized Connected Framework is presented to advance the research outcomes of the interrelationship between the Cooperative Identity and social capital and the intrinsic benefit of their association and exchange.

A cooperative is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ICA, 2015, p. 2). Embarking on an appreciation of social capital, it becomes apparent that a cooperative may cease to exist without social capital. Uniting voluntarily suggests coming together through trust to create a network of people, a strong nod to Adler and Kwon’s (2002) social capital definition, which emphasizes the goodwill of groups and individuals coming together, and similar to Fukuyama’s (1995) outline of social capital stemming from trust throughout society. Meeting common economic, social, and cultural needs suggests mutual grounds of norms, generosity, and reciprocity; all elements expressed throughout social capital definitions. Joint ownership indeed declares and demands trust and networks, alongside strengthened democracy as a standardized norm and expectation within the humanistic governance of cooperative organizations.

Cooperative values include “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity along with ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others” (ICA, 2015, p. 2). Social capital dimensions as advanced by Putnam (1995) shine through these values both explicitly and implicitly: Networks make these values possible, norms inspire and reinforce, and trust builds strength and inspiration through the

empowerment of honesty. Following the ICA (2015), the seven cooperative principles are ingrained in the cooperative values. In the following sections, each cooperative principle is linked explicitly to social capital.

A further connection between cooperative values and the initial building block of people-centeredness is described in the “Cooperative Enterprise Model” by Miner and Novkovic (2020, p. 8), which highlights the significance and relationship among cooperatives, social capital, and individuals. Though not explicitly declared, ‘people-centeredness’ is a cooperative characteristic that resonates throughout the ICA’s statement on the Cooperative Identity (2015, p. 2). It stands as incredibly important in determining how and why cooperatives are created: persons unite voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations. Through the definitions of social capital, people-centeredness can be connected to a critical understanding that “social capital is not an individual characteristic or a personality trait but a resource that resides in the networks and groups to which people belong” (Mouw, 2006, p. 79). People-centeredness, a fundamental and essential characteristic critical to the cooperative movement and the enterprise model, is a key factor in the formation of cooperatives, establishing a distinct connection across cooperative values and social capital.

Principle # 1 – Voluntary and Open Membership

Principle #1, “Voluntary and Open Membership,” is a central aspect of the cooperative movement since its inception in the first half of the 19th century (ICA, 2015, p. 5). Reaffirming the importance of people participating in and committing to their cooperative, it is voluntary to join and be involved with others to achieve shared economic, social, and cultural objectives. Open membership is a foundational principle, emphasizing inclusivity and anti-discrimination. The right to free association, which allows individuals to choose whether or not to join others in pursuing common goals, is a “fundamental right outlined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (ICA, 2015, p. 5).

Returning to a cornerstone definition of social capital by Putnam (1995), this principle is similar to the “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation” (p. 67). Voluntary and open membership expresses the right to freedom of association and is a fundamental human right. These norms of reaffirming choice and inclusivity form a foundational structure of a cooperative enterprise and exhibit a clear connection to social capital dimensions. Trust becomes embedded through the collective actions and pursuit of the common good for cooperators. The ‘openness’ of this first principle is also critical and relevant to the potential for perverse social capital (social capital that benefits an individual(s) but may not benefit the larger community).

Guttman (2023) examines the ICA’s (2015, p. 2) principles and values of cooperation in connection with ‘Ostrom’s design principles for commons’, which formed as a response to surmounting negative capitalistic impacts (Guttman, 2023, p. 35). His analysis found a correlation to Ostrom’s first principle of ‘Clear Boundaries’, which concerns who may use or access the commons, and was positively juxtaposed across cooperative Principle #1 for voluntary and open membership, describing “a similar responsibility... so that members can freely pursue their common, social, economic and/or cultural needs” (Guttman, 2023, p. 44). High standards of ethical behaviour are required of members of both the commons (Ostrom) and cooperatives; for example, norms of reciprocity, honesty, and responsibility adopt and connect a social capital viewpoint. Cooperative members may find it easier to meet higher ethical standards when they view the output of their collective effort as a commons itself (Guttman, 2023, p. 44).

Principle #2 – Democratic Member Control

Principle #2, ‘Democratic member control,’ distinguishes the valuable task of producing a voice for each person individually, ensuring that norms and values are well represented as a collective. Democracy is not just correlated to voting in general assemblies or elections; it has deep roots in the prominent characteristics of cooperatives, such as collaboration, consensus, and collective decision-making. Under this distinctive and important cooperative principle, power is distributed across cooperatives through equal voting rights of “one member, one vote” (ICA, 2015, p. 2) as an important ideal that aims to organize function and decisions democratically. This representative approach humanizes decision-making, reorganizing and distributing power dynamics among cooperative members, employees and groups. Across the Cooperative Enterprise Model, members jointly own and democratically govern

the cooperative, and this critical self-governance is described as the “underlying engine of autonomous cooperative enterprises” (Miner & Novkovic, 2020, p. 8).

According to Miner and Novkovic (2020), Democratic Governance is a fundamental building block adhering to Principle 2 in a cooperative enterprise (p. 8). Following democratic governance principles is central to the “minimum core” of a cooperative (Bouchard et al., 2020, p. 6) and represents the “underlying engine of autonomous cooperative enterprises” (Miner & Novkovic, 2020, p. 8). For smaller cooperatives, democratic practices may be more straightforward; however, as cooperatives grow, their provision of collective governance may become more challenging, particularly as their governance structure also becomes more complex (Birchall, 2017, p. 10). Social capital, united with democratic control, is likely to enhance the ability of individuals, teams, and organizations to resolve collective problems more efficiently through norms, networks, trust, and shared understandings, ultimately benefiting both the individual and the collective. This point is supported by Novkovic and Miner (2020), who state, “the more diverse voices are at the table, the better information sharing and processing capacity, and better governance” (p. 8). This is conveyed through the humanistic governance properties of cooperatives (see Novkovic et al., 2023).

Research by Friedel and Dufays (2023) examined the democratic governance practices of agricultural cooperatives in Flanders, Belgium to investigate how they bring social capital into practice. Their study concluded that there is a link between all three dimensions of social capital (networks, norms, and trust) and the principles of humanistic governance practices (p. 274). At the culmination of their work, they reinforced the importance of “a genuine interest in the well-being of the members” (p. 274), made possible through active engagement, transparent information sharing, and consultation. Finally, their study identified a high level of social capital when combined with lived and intentional cooperative principles (p. 275), such as democratic member control.

Cooperatives can illustrate social capital as the co-op ‘spirit’ or a ‘Cooperative Advantage.’ A cooperative enterprise is established on unique characteristics; it is *people-centered*, jointly owned, and democratically controlled by its members (Novkovic & Miner, 2020). Through its democratic governance system and emphasis on humanistic aims, cooperatives distribute an enhanced appreciation for social, economic, global, and local realities (Novkovic & Miner, 2015, p. 11). The “Needs Theory of Governance” by Sacchetti and Tortia (2021) links human psychology to economic institutions through governance structures. It reinforces cooperatives as purpose-driven organizations with “governance solutions consistent with needs theory in human psychology” (Sacchetti & Tortia, 2021, p. 1) and connects human needs as the driving force of governance choices (Sacchetti & Tortia, 2021, p. 23). Governance can therefore be understood as a functional solution designed to meet human needs, thereby contributing to self-actualization and well-being. A connection is established here through social capital and humanistic governance, where cooperatives genuinely care for the well-being of their members; this connection to social capital development is achieved by actively engaging members in daily practices, such as sharing transparent information, consulting with them, and implementing democratic decision-making processes. The humanistic aims and characteristics of cooperatives lead to the conclusion that their purpose is determined and accomplished through well-established social capital by means of human-centred democratic governance systems, aimed at meeting members’ social and economic needs. As people-centered and democratically controlled organizations, cooperatives are designed to recognize a broad spectrum of social needs and leverage their ‘Cooperative Advantage’ through deep-rooted social capital focuses and governance structures.

Principle #3 – Member Economic Participation

Principle #3, “Member Economic Participation,” of the Cooperative Identity establishes that “Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative” (ICA, 2015, p. 29). This principle outlines how members invest in their cooperatives by raising or generating capital and allocating surpluses. A cooperative’s purpose is to meet people’s needs, not to generate a speculative return on investment or to benefit the cooperative’s capital. The primary motive for people forming a cooperative is to become self-reliant as a collective and to meet the needs of the cooperative members. The key economic concept enshrined within this principle is that “in a cooperative, capital is the servant, not the master of the enterprise” (ICA, 2015, p. 2). This principle serves as the financial translation of the definition of a cooperative’s identity. As this notion is associated with social capital, the critical elements of norms and trust within a cooperative that focuses on meeting member needs is emphasized

rather than return on investment. It is easy to connect the norms of reciprocity, generosity, and value creation for members by meeting the needs of the people. This norm is outside of self-interested values of capital accumulation and capital speculation. The cooperative movement, enabled by this distinctive financial approach, makes business decisions in the name of what is best for people, members, communities, and the planet: “concern for social and environmental sustainability makes business sense and helps to sustain a co-operative’s economic success” (International Cooperative Alliance, 2015, p. 86). Cooperatives offer a breakthrough type of business model rich in social capital and trust and norms of shared values are plentiful.

To evaluate the effects of social capital on member participation, Cerya et al. (2020) investigated a student cooperative in West Sumatra. Across cooperatives, users, in this case, students, have the dual identity of being both members and owners of the cooperative, and the “active involvement of members determines the sustainability of the student cooperatives and the benefits that will be obtained by its members” (Cerya et al., 2020, p. 277). While this perspective takes a more qualitative view, the implications and exploration are directly comparable to Principle #3 for Member Economic Participation, as the cooperative’s primary goal is improving its members' welfare (Cerya, 2020, p. 278). Their review suggests that strong social capital will “increase the effectiveness of an effort to increase welfare; on the other hand, weak social capital will diminish the spirit of togetherness, exacerbate poverty and hinder any efforts to improve welfare” (Cerya, 2020, p. 276). This is a robust statement through the lens of both cooperation and social capital. Their view suggests that the social capital in this case was so poor that it greatly and negatively influenced participation (p. 278). Their review indicates that trust, social networks, and norms, all elements of social capital, significantly influence the participation levels of cooperative members, and, if they were strengthened, then member participation would also increase (Cerya, 2020, p. 283).

Principle # 4 – Autonomy and Independence

Principle #4, ‘Autonomy and Independence,’ focuses on the relationship between cooperatives and national governments, as well as international governmental organizations. However, it also has implications for the relationship between cooperatives and other commercial entities. Autonomy and independence are critical characteristics of a cooperative, existing as organizations that have the freedom to act independently to govern themselves, control their affairs, and set their own rules of operation (ICA, 2015). A cooperative is not autonomous and independent unless control rests internally with its members in accordance with sound, open, transparent, and accountable democratic practices. While the words autonomy and independence may signify notions of individuality, the essence of a cooperative and its connections to social capital as a critical strategic advantage should not be overlooked. Acting autonomously requires social capital elements to be activated, and the notion of social capital networks becomes increasingly apparent in how cooperatives function independently yet as a complete ecosystem with social motivations.

A compelling strategic advantage in the sphere of social capital becomes the ability of cooperatives to harness or expand their innate social capital resources towards amplifying their existing resilience (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009, p. 2). The notion of resiliency is particularly important, both academically, practically and in association with Autonomy and Independence in today’s world, due to the sheer intensity of rapid change, heightened crises, and mounting inequalities. Wulandhari et al. (2022) synthesized multiple fields of study to provide a bundled definition of cooperative resiliency as “the organization's ability to recover from disruptions, maintain dynamic integrity in the presence of ongoing stress, and exploit opportunities that pivot on achieving economic and social goals” (p. 376).

Wulandhari et al. (2022) also deliver a relevant case study that provides an empirically grounded framework of social capital mechanisms enabling cooperative resilience. Aiming to answer the question ‘*How can cooperatives strategically utilize social capital to build resilience?*’, their investigation of producer cooperative ‘Koperasi Kerta Semaya Samaniya’ (KSS) in Bali, Indonesia, highlighted its resilience amid regional and internal challenges and displayed how effective social capital mechanisms can support adaptation. Their work presents three dynamic and interrelated propositions.

The first proposition states that adversities concerning institutional, political, or market voids and deficiencies can motivate a cooperative to form and thus turn to social capital to establish alternative structural support and reinforce mutual objectives. This proposition emphasizes the connection to the cooperative principle of autonomy

and independence. KSS harnessed challenges as an opportunity and responded by pivoting, strengthening shared narratives, offering understanding/compassion, and making clear communication pathways to foster closeness by emphasizing shared values and building up the farmers' welfare within the region. Particularly inspiring, "the cooperative's ability to turn difficulties into opportunities also led to the formation of a cognitive explicit dimension of social capital, showcased by a sense of the spirit of '*modal berani*' or 'capital of braveness'" (Wulandhari et al., 2022, p. 380). The second proposition argues that cooperatives can channel and target social capital mechanisms, developing individual resilience (Wulandhari et al., 2022, p. 381). The third and final proposition outlines that cooperatives can utilize social capital to build process transparency, collaborative work, and widening of networks that will result in enhanced flexibility and velocity of the cooperative (Wulandhari et al., 2022, pp. 382-383).

The KSS cooperative experience and their explicit 'capital of braveness' likely sounds familiar to cooperators globally. Cooperatives are organizations often born out of a desire to meet needs where a void or deficiency exists (Birchall, 2009, p. 2). This human-based market response formalizes as a 'cooperative' and generates social cohesion towards mutual objectives to benefit the collective and community. These findings highlight the essential link to the cooperative principle of autonomy and independence, reminding us of the power and importance of self-governance and individual freedom. From this perspective, social cohesion binds together mutual interests and forms the strategic advantage of social capital through strengthened cooperative resilience, further reinforcing and perpetuating the communal foundations of cooperative organizations.

Principle # 5 – Education, Training and Information

Principle #5, 'Education, Training, and Information,' is the cooperative movement's long-standing and distinguished commitment to education (ICA, 2015, p. 2). The three components— 'education,' 'training,' and 'information'—each serve a different function in cooperative education. 'Education' involves understanding and applying cooperative principles and values in daily operations and providing members with broader development opportunities (ICA, 2015, p. 57). 'Training' focuses on building the practical skills required for managing a cooperative, whereas 'Information' refers to the responsibility of educating the public about the values and principles that underpin cooperative enterprises, as well as the broader benefits they contribute to society (ICA, 2015, p. 57). A social capital view of this principle suggests norms of reciprocity as cooperatives reinvest knowledge and information across members, individuals and the general public. This principle becomes critical to enlightenment and social progress, as education could undoubtedly be a 'norm' within the cooperative movement. Cooperatives educate their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so that they can re-contribute to the development of their cooperative. This invokes the norm of reciprocity, where investment today is a particular return on the cooperative longevity and long-term opportunity and possibility.

Applying Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998)'s examination of social capital as a lens to cooperative Principle #5 may reveal opportunities for enriching and empowering cooperative training, education and information exchange. Their view is that "the roots of intellectual capital are deeply embedded in social relations and the structure of these relations" (p. 260) and that firms with higher abilities to create and exploit social capital will also recognize a measurable difference in performance. Their work further contributes to a Principle #5 discussion by displaying that social capital increases the efficiency of action through information diffusion and high levels of trust and also positively affects adaptive efficiency, creativity, and learning: "researchers have found social capital to encourage cooperative behavior, thereby facilitating the development of new forms of association in an innovative organization" (p. 245). These perspectives support the importance of cooperative Principle #5 and that social capital offers advantages in aspects of training and education through access to intellectual capital exchange, value appreciation, and motivation to exchange intellectual capital within the cooperative and its ecosystem.

Singh et al. (2021) consider a social network approach to investigate a cooperative's success with information sharing and advice-seeking. Their work explores how co-educating and learning effectively functioned for active members of the Dairy Cooperative Society (DCS), a village-based and community-managed collective enterprise in India. Information sharing "allows members to acquire new opportunities and knowledge" (Singh et al., 2021, p. 2), while advice-seeking enables members to gain technical and strategic insights. Studying these two learning behaviors runs comparably to 'Combination' and 'Exchange' of information to generate intellectual capital, as postulated by Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) social capital framework. Singh et al.'s (2021) conclusion displayed an efficient

exchange of knowledge and learning among members, evidence of smooth transfers of leadership roles, and found an “inclusive, efficient information exchange network and balanced advice seeking network” (p. 10). There was an indication that information and advice exchange was not excessively centralized, leading to flatter hierarchies and high reciprocal relationships. These features together “contributed to the success of DCS” (Singh et al., 2021, p. 10). This case illustrates that the social capital and the network of the cooperative played an integrated and mutually reinforcing role in the learning systems of DCS’s members and their community. This relationship and positive outcome should be considered in appreciation of Principle #5 on Education, Training and Information for cooperatives.

Principle # 6 – Cooperation Among Cooperatives

Principle #6, “Cooperation among Cooperatives,” illustrates how cooperatives positively engage with one another in their business operations and contribute to the growth of the global cooperative movement. Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through networks and structures. This principle correlates to the cooperative networks and relationships that bridge, bond and link (Saz-Gil et al, 2021); and the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Networks link clusters, subgroups, and cooperatives together to create structures that may otherwise not be connected if not for the cooperative identity, common purposes, and commitment to Principle #6. These different types of networks can be crucial for leveraging resources, ideas, and information, which also play a role in social well-being and cooperative success. Working together as a cooperative movement establishes trust, while also developing norms of reciprocity and acts of generosity, both big and small, which become the underpinnings of the cooperative community and cooperation among cooperatives. These identifiable norms foster cooperation and collective action, sowing the seeds of social trust and helping to make social order possible. A commitment to cooperation is the hallmark of the business enterprise and the movement; it is the clearest expression of a shared desire to create a better, more sustainable, and equitable economic future for all humanity. The normative approach is for cooperatives to collaborate in competitive markets by forming cooperative groups, secondary cooperatives, and federations to harness the enterprise advantage and create a commonwealth for mutual benefit. The sixth principle signifies that cooperatives are enhanced by working together, and it is the foundations and inherent advantages of social capital that make this principle possible and endlessly reciprocal.

Market pressures, globalization and digitalization place fundamental pressures on all businesses worldwide (United Nations, 2015, p. 5). Cooperatives must remain strategically committed to their principles and goals, both social and economic. Bonner et al. (2021) present a research study on the contribution of social capital to organizational performance, explicitly exploring two separate architectures of social capital: entrepreneurial and cooperative social capital. This work helps to uncover the relationship between cooperative social capital and strengthened cooperation among cooperatives.

Entrepreneurial social capital is a work style that “seeks the advancement of the individual” (Kang & Kinnie, 2013, as cited in Bonner et al. 2021, p. 3855). Cooperative social capital emphasizes “teamwork and collective trust” (Wu, 2008, as cited in Bonner et al., 2021, p. 3855). From this introduction to Bonner et al.’s work, an alternative definition of ‘cooperative’ and ‘cooperation’ is being utilized, taking the words in their more literal sense of working together and collaborating, as opposed to the formalized business association structure of being a cooperative. The literature remains prevalent and insightful, helping to identify the underlying strategic social capital advantage that cooperation, or a cooperative approach, fundamentally represents and establishes at its core.

When discussing operational performance, Bonner et al. (2021) adopt a multidimensional, constructive approach, ultimately identifying several agreed-upon measures within the operations management discipline to assess four aspects of operational performance: quality, delivery, flexibility, and cost (p. 3856). They espouse and connect the idea here that “social capital can improve operation’s speed, flexibility and responsiveness through employee knowledge exchange” (Zhang et al., 2017, as cited in Bonner et al., 2021, p. 3856). Examining the outcomes of this work, leads to considering how operational performance may influence and strengthen the capacity of cooperatives to collaborate and excel together.

Bonner et al. (2021) found that *cooperative* social capital (as opposed to *entrepreneurial* social capital, which is more focused on individual benefits) significantly impacted quality performance. This finding was based on cooperative social capital, which upholds a higher level of cohesive knowledge sharing, team integration, and efficient cross-functional knowledge transfer, and promotes employee involvement and managerial commitment—all of which contribute to increased quality performance (p. 3859). How these advantages are linked to cooperative traits can be appreciated, particularly in how they may enhance internal and external collaboration within cooperatives.

Cooperative social capital also had a considerable impact on delivery performance compared to the results of entrepreneurial social capital. This corroborates that a cooperative approach fosters stronger buyer-supplier relationships, shared values, and more substantial connections across networks (as opposed to an individualistic culture), enhancing operational performance and outcomes. Cooperative social capital also impacted flexibility performance and costs; findings supporting a collective culture will foster communication across departments, potentially facilitating cost reductions (Bonner et al., 2021, p. 3861).

Ultimately, Bonner et al.'s (2021) analysis indicates that a cooperative structure, inclusive of social capital, enhanced all four dimensions of operational performance studied, whereas an entrepreneurial approach was not significant (p. 3861). Creating cooperative social capital improves organizational operations' quality, flexibility, delivery, and cost performance. Having a shared language, trust, and a willingness to exchange knowledge enables the exploitation of both tangible and intangible resources for the betterment of the organization. This conclusion underscores how cooperative social capital can enhance collaboration among cooperatives. It highlights that prioritizing a common language, building trust, and fostering a willingness to share knowledge provides a considerable advantage for advancement. A case study example of this collaborative ideal is offered by Etxezarreta et al. (2021), who examined how the non-profit cooperative Agintzari S. Coop activated ecosystem scaling processes that strengthened the cooperative and its surrounding entities without expanding the organization or compromising its commitment to the Cooperative Identity (ICA, 2015, p. 2). Their research revealed an "ecosystemic model over an organizational one" (Etxezarreta et al., 2021, p. 3), which also scaled the entity's social impact without expanding the organization. In this example, the cooperative was motivated by internal factors, such as reconnecting with its founding motives (p. 14), alongside external factors, including the threats and opportunities presented by the 2008 financial crisis (p. 15). These motivations resulted in a scaling strategy of either replication, utilizing Agintzari as an "ideological base" (Etxezarreta et al. 2021, p. 17), or scaling via structure in the formation of a cooperative group (p. 17). This study demonstrates that cooperatives can grow through these inter-cooperative growth strategies and deepen their social impact without expanding in size (Etxezarreta et al. 2021, p. 20). This concept from a social capital perspective is adopted here, as this case study highlights the importance of shared languages, commitments, and trust in fostering a willingness to collaborate. This example of inter-cooperation provides a healthy ecosystem approach to cooperation among cooperatives.

Principle # 7 – Concern for Community

Finally, Cooperative Principle #7, 'Concern for Community,' ultimately promotes and brings to life the values element of the cooperative identity: honesty, openness, social responsibility, and a caring approach towards others (ICA, 2015). Cooperatives emerge from and are rooted in the communities in which they conduct their business; their success is based on the ability of these communities and local networks to survive, thrive, and develop sustainably. Concern for the community is a fundamental principle guiding how cooperatives approach their work and business. It challenges cooperatives to demonstrate that it is possible to be a successful and sustainable enterprise that benefits its members, communities, and the environment. Cooperatives offer an alternative because they recognize the interconnected bottom lines of human, planet, and profit. 'Concern for Community' is embedded in the cooperative blueprint as the 7th Cooperative principle: "concern for social and environmental sustainability makes business sense and helps sustain a cooperative's economic success" (ICA, 2015, p. 86). This principle links cooperatives with economic development and positive impacts visible within their local territories, which has been illustrated through a well-researched social capital framework established by Bianchi and Vieta (2020). The seventh cooperative principle is therefore especially well-linked to social capital theory. Trust and common norms inspire cooperation and collective action towards a better future for all humankind. It reinforces group and collective interests in an enduring and sustainable future for people and the environment, expressing gratitude for the world we live in and promoting collective action towards its protection.

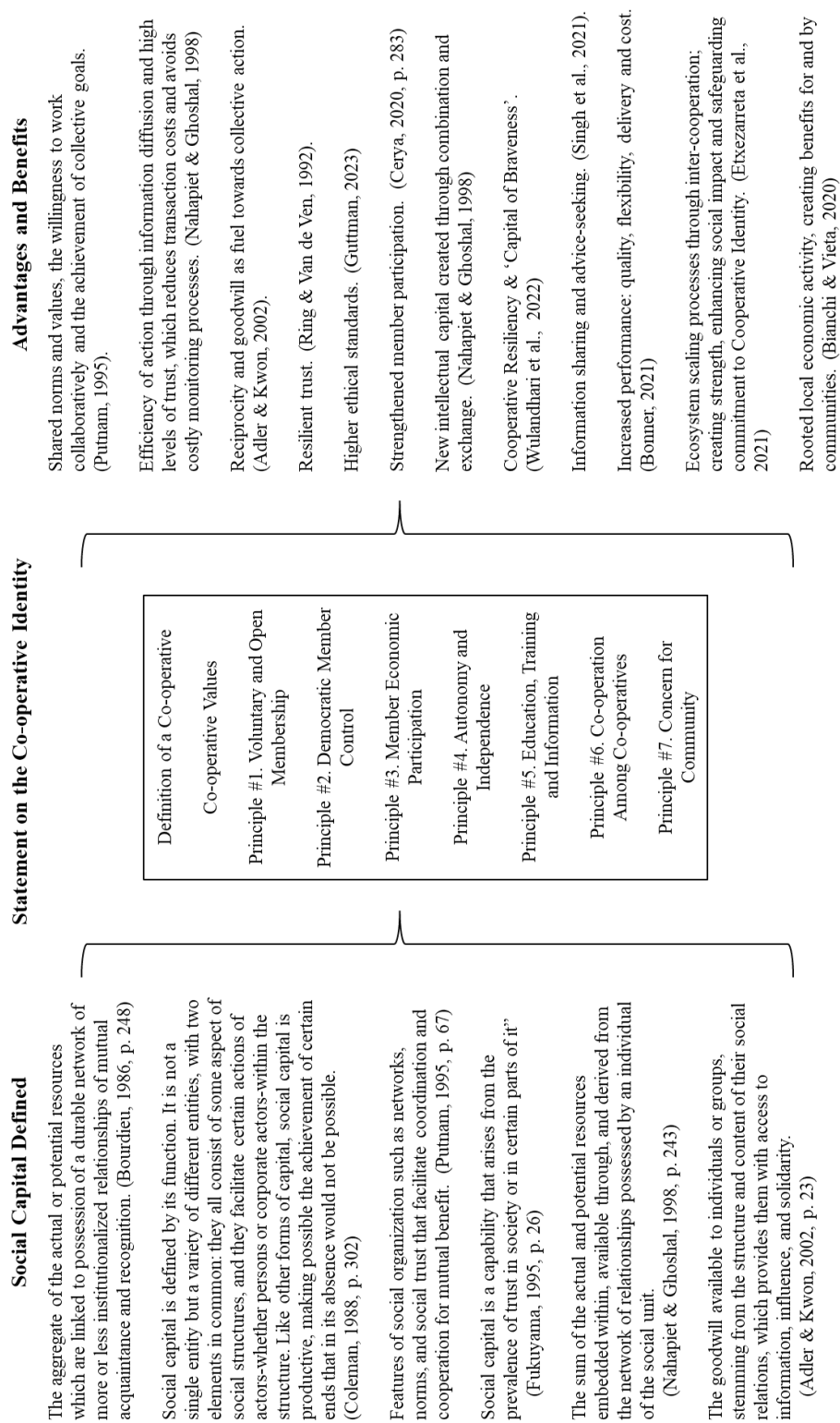
Bianchi and Vieta (2020) interrogate social capital to analyze the link between cooperatives and their resultant local community and territorial benefits. The analysis postulates cooperative business organizations are rooted in “local social, economic, cultural, and political dynamics, and are thus ideal for anchoring a territory’s economic activities in endogenous rather than exogenous interests” (Bianchi & Vieta, 2020, p. 1600). This work helps us to explore socioeconomic contexts and understand the advantages of cooperative business organizations as coordinators of local economic activity creating benefits for and by communities. The conclusion, via a compelling social capital framework, encourages community connections and cooperatives rooted in the local territory: “cooperatives can be seen to mobilize collective social capital as coalesced and guided by a co-op members’ habitus or members’ common dispositions and practices oriented toward meeting shared needs via collective actions and goals” (Bianchi & Vieta, 2020, p. 1612).

Connected Framework

The second objective of this research is to explore Cooperative Identity, which has led to establishing a ‘Connected Framework’, outlining the natural relationship and benefits of social capital to cooperatives. Social capital is demonstrated and strengthened through the principles and values of cooperatives, as networks empower them, norms support them, and trust enhances cooperative impacts. Through each of the cooperative principles, case studies and relevant literature were examined to highlight the available social capital advantages for cooperatives. The numerous linkages of the Cooperative Identity (ICA, 2015, p. 2) were reviewed to identify social capital definitions proposed by prominent sociological academics. The outputs of this correlation present a view of a Connected Framework to highlight the opportunity for strengthened people-centeredness, bolstered cooperative resilience, increased quality performance, grounded local impact, new intellectual capital generation and more. These values, advantages, and benefits reflect the powerful insights and positive outcomes derived from this research and connections to the Cooperative Identity.

Figure 1 presents the ‘Connected Framework’ which highlights the relationships between social capital and the cooperative identity, summarizing the current analysis and reiterating the uncovered social capital value, advantages and benefits.

Figure 1. Connected Framework



Critical Reflections

The Connected Framework highlights the linkages between social capital and cooperatives, alongside the benefits and potential advantages of their interconnectedness. It is essential, firstly, to explore the intricate relationship between isomorphic pressures and social capital, particularly in the context of how social capital engages the Cooperative Identity. Understanding this relationship involves examining how external as well as internal pressures influence the development of social capital within cooperative organizations, potentially leading to mission drift (Stoop et al., 2021; Bretos et al., 2023) or even cooperative degeneration (Côté, 2019, p. 28; Bretos et al., 2020). Secondly, the darker aspects of social capital are observed to raise awareness of the potential adverse effects that can arise from social capital (Baycan & Oner, 2022), particularly the potential formation of in-groups and out-groups and, therefore, exclusion.

Isomorphism, Mission Drift and Degeneration

Cooperatives can only tackle collective action dilemmas when sufficient organizational social capital is present; therefore, social capital has consistently been regarded as a particularly effective value or fuel for cooperatives in this paper. A deficiency in social capital can become a side effect of isomorphic pressures, as illustrated by research by Stoop et al. (2021) examining whether the cooperative structure, that is, the declaration of being a cooperative, inherently engages and maintains social capital. Their research was conducted with employees from local banks, which form a significant financial services cooperative in the Netherlands. The research displayed how a “seemingly stable cooperative structure hid the fact that the bank had gradually moved into a new organizational field, away from its social origins to a large extent adopting the practices and norms of its new peers, which were large commercial banks” (Stoop et al., 2021, p. 549). Scaling and integration with larger financial ecosystems weakened relationships with cooperative members and decreased member ratios, a process accelerated by the advancing digitalization of financial systems and the broader economic environment. Stoop et al.’s research concludes that the cooperative structure is “ultimately no safeguard against the erosion of organizational social capital” (p. 549) and instead recommends that “mission drift (from a social enterprise perspective) would need to be countered by active steps to ensure commitment to cooperative principles throughout the organization, and, thus, re-establish the primacy of the original mission” (Stoop et al., 2021, p. 560).

Stoop et al. (2021) and Bretos et al. (2020; 2023) help reinforce the notion that declaring cooperative status and commitment to a cooperative identity is an insufficient strategic advantage for sustaining long-term social capital. Ultimately, social capital is deeply embedded in the original mission of cooperative formation. However, the ongoing commitment to and application of the cooperative principles and values will ensure the longevity of the organization's original intended purpose, which will, in turn, support its strategic advantage in terms of social capital and ward off isomorphic tendencies. Cooperatives must balance economic objectives with social considerations; this dichotomy faces constant pressure, and the duality fundamentally embodies the tension between cooperative enterprises' economic and social values. Novkovic et al. (2022) suggest that “co-operatives have the strongest impact when they acknowledge and take advantage of their unique organizational values and characteristics” (p. 9).

The Dark Side of Social Capital

The potential negative aspects of social capital must also be given attention, to offer a gentle warning about its possible undesirable impacts and outcomes. While social capital is often celebrated for its benefits in fostering connections and building community, it is crucial to acknowledge that it also carries inherent risks (Saz-Gil et al., 2021; Baycan & Oner, 2022). Negative impacts might manifest in various forms, such as the reinforcement of inequality, the creation of exclusive networks that marginalize individuals, or even the potential for manipulation within social structures. Through awareness of these darker aspects, cooperators can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of social capital and appreciate the importance of a balanced perspective that encompasses both its positive and negative consequences.

Discussed in the critical review literature by Baycan and Oner (2022), Souza Briggs (1998) introduced the concept of “perverse social capital”, which elaborates that social capital may be beneficial for an individual but not always for the community or society as a whole. The premise also speaks to existing *faulty* lines in the nature of our world, such as race and ethnicity, social class, gender and culture. It is important to be aware of normative bias and

appreciate how collective and individual interests are not always equivalent. Baycan and Oner (2022) additionally conclude and highlight that social capital can be argued to be “spatially sticky” (p. 794), space and location-dependent. Brown (2019) discusses the exclusion and cohesion properties of social capital, noting that “insularity can put pressure on group outliers to conform to social norms, and it allows fringe groups to sustain a narrative of opposition to mainstream society” (para. 13).

Saz-Gil et al. (2021) apply the social capital dimensions model developed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) to outline the harmful effects of social capital on structural, relational and cognitive dimensions. Structurally, social capital “in closed networks can lead to discrimination, exploitation, corruption and domination.... within an organization and a region” (Saz-Gil et al., 2021, p. 4). From a relational and cognitive perspective, extreme trust and insufficient control can result in unnoticed opportunistic behaviours. This warning about trust and its relationship to the right amount of oversight and supervision highlights a delicate balance for cooperatives who might over- or underemphasize trust and people-centeredness.

Interacting with these alerts and concerns with cooperatives, and, more specifically, the Cooperative Identity, it is contemplated how the principles and values of cooperatives might mitigate some of the negative aspects of social capital. Principle #1 for Voluntary and Open Membership ensures that cooperatives are “open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination” (ICA, 2015, p. 2). This first principle serves as a valuable safeguard against the potential exclusionary consequences of social capital. To help balance trust and supervision, Principle #2 for Democratic Member Control may help retain a flatter hierarchy of cooperative control, thereby preserving regulation closer to the heart of the membership base and enacting a somewhat natural supervision mechanism. Cooperators should also note the values of equality, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others as explicitly described in the statement of the cooperative identity and enlist these positive norms as helpful defences against perverse social capital.

Conclusion

The research completed here is intended to act as a launching pad towards social capital discourse within the cooperative ethos. It could be suggested that social capital dimensions be incorporated into the study within cooperative education programs, incorporating sociology literature to ensure that it is used as an informed facet of cooperative organizations. Future research opportunities this paper hopes to inspire might include interviews, surveys, or analysis within cooperative organizations to measure social capital levels, raise awareness, and encourage the introduction of social capital measurements and metrics.

The culminating Connected Framework offers an overview of the research within the scope of this paper. It aims to inspire and enrich social capital benefits across the cooperative sector. With the correct amount of exploration and prudence, it can be confidently asserted that social capital provides an unparalleled strategic advantage in a world increasingly desperate for a more human-centred and balanced economy. Social capital is embedded in the overarching purpose of the cooperative sector, as it empowers the primary purpose of cooperation: meeting everyday economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a collectively owned and democratically controlled enterprise focused on the common good for everyone in the world.

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