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Writing 101-28

February 25, 2020

## Self-awareness of Social Capital Across Socioeconomic Status and Culture

### I. Introduction

The dependency of one's success in contemporary Western society is unfortunately unclear—one may suggest hard work and skill, the founding presumptions of a meritocratic belief system, while another, possibly weary and demystified from this illusion, may suggest privilege. A distinctively powerful form of privilege, as they may propose, is that of social capital—connections, favors, opportunities that arise solely due to one's neighboring nodes in a graph of social networks. In extremity, in an increasingly dependent and interconnected world, social capital may be the single requirement for success, while all other means of acquiring wealth, power, or acclaim, may lie within reach of another.

Family is inherently the deepest of all connections. As an unrecognized form of total institution, it governs not only the value systems, interests, and thus future potential and career prospects of an individual, but also provides direct assets that help realize such potential at barely any cost. Yet it is one especially hard social network to demystify as they are so familiar and thus invisible—parental privilege, especially when there is no deficiency of it, is difficult to perceive. In the process of meritocratic demystification we encounter another odd conflict: many are able to contain both social capital and effort into their formula for success, acknowledging the

importance of increased potential through others, while also buying into the individualistic power of hard work. Which one of these concepts one buys into more, appear closely linked to the degree of communal or individualistic emphasis in one's culture, and differs due to the cultural value systems exposed during upbringing.

These perspectives regarding the self-perception of privilege in American society is investigated in this paper through a ethnographical study, incorporating direct interviews from five individuals ranging from relatively low to high on the socioeconomic ladder, and identifying from fully Asian, to Asian-American, to fully American. Self-perception of social capital increasingly lacks the better off one is, and is more defined and prominent in Asian culture, evidenced by contrasting responses of interviewees from different socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. It is the goal of this paper to uncover and correlate the influence of privilege on one's recognition of their social capital, along the two axes of socioeconomic class and cultural upbringing.

## II. Methodology

All but one interview were conducted face-to-face, and was recorded with agreement from the interviewee. One interview with a Korean student was done through skype video call, with all questions/information identical, while others were performed in a private room where conversation could not be heard from the outside. Names of interviewees in this paper are pseudonyms, and minor personal details that do not affect analysis are altered for privacy.

Five Individuals all of whom are Duke University students and one in Seoul National University, respectively identify as:

1. Hilbert—Korean, lived in Korea for entire life
2. Diana—Chinese, moved to the U.S. in elementary school
3. Sophia—Korean, moved to the U.S. in high school
4. Maggie—Second-generation Chinese-American, lived in U.S. for entire life
5. Richard—American, lived in the U.S. for their entire life

Individuals were chosen based on openness in personality with regards to talking about private topics with the interviewer, as well as cultural identification and self-reported socioeconomic class which was later verified through survey questions and wealth identification questions.

### III. Family Connections

Family is an overlooked source of powerful connection and capital, and provides an invisible barrier into recognizing one's existing privilege. Correlated conversely to one's privilege was the propensity to recognize social capital from parents. Diana, relatively wealthy within the interviewee group and whose father works at a pharmaceutical company, built the majority of her high-school career—internships in journalism with state magazines, publication of books, and volunteering in research projects—through her father's connections. She appears not to find her parent's provision of such opportunities peculiar or above average, saying that they were "average Asian-American parents [...] like others. I believe that my childhood has been very standardized and normal." Contrast this dynamic with that of Hilbert—one who did

not have the means to acquire such achievements in high school. Despite preparation since his Korean public middle school for a college in Japan he lacked both the opportunity and financial backing to achieve such a goal: “The only way I knew we [our family] could afford it was through this program, like a national grant, which is really hard to get in.” Hilbert shows clear recognition of the lack of his family’s abilities in supporting his plans, and tries to offset this disadvantage.

Both interviewees were asked about their childhood upbringing and relationship with their parents; Diana, while describing that she “call my mom every day, multiple times a day actually,” and in her survey questions spending more than average per week without personal income, repeats that “I think we’re really just average.” Hilbert, on the other hand, suggests that: “it’s not like I was born with a gold spoon in my mouth. My parents can’t really do much about it, and it’s just like that.” He shows more awareness of his lack of privilege given from family, and also awareness that there exists those with the “golden spoon”—that his situation is relatively worse off, and that he must prepare for barriers that exist.

A similar, yet slightly subtler evidence of self-awareness of their family’s social capital can be found from Sophia’s description of her parents—completing a summer program in New Zealand and disappointed in Korean public education, worked to find a path to higher education in America. As it was evident that such a route was expensive, she looked for domestic options: “[I was] researching something like international schools, or other schools that could give me that route.” This work was luckily unnecessary: “my parents said, you might as well, like, actually go into the U.S. [for high school] to gain some experience [...] and that’s how I came over here.” She was unaware of her parent’s abilities to send her to an American boarding school,

but upon this privilege being revealed, accepted this fact and moved on. Being asked how she came to Duke—a school that does not offer need-blind financial aid to international students—, she mentions only that “I applied to a bunch of schools and I got in so ... I guess I’m here.” Compared to her previous efforts in researching opportunities that would cost less, she simply accepts that her family is capable of funding her attendance. This further evidences the fact that one may lose self-awareness of their family’s social capital when privilege removes the concern of future barriers to their goals.

#### IV. Recognition of Social Capital in Asian and American culture

The varying view on social capital and its power among different classes are explicit across cultural lines—Asian societies, possibly due to its relatively communal and collectivist traditions—are more aware and accepting of connections as a means of opportunity, often justifying or even endorsing the use of social capital in pursuit of success.

A clear gap in such acceptance of social capital is most explicitly evidenced through the ease of which Hilbert and Sophia, the two individuals exposed to Asian culture the majority of their lives, reveal the source of their achievements to be through connections *without* being prompted: “I feel [my biggest achievement is] getting my job in physics [...] textbook developing. [...] One of the upperclassman from college introduced me to my current boss—that was the biggest thing.” (Hilbert); “An upperclassman introduced me to an international mathematics modeling [competition], she knew enough about me to offer [to be] on her team.” (Sophia) The two use passive descriptions for their achievements, that these opportunities was *given* rather than *achieved*. While all interviewees are able and willing to describe the social

capital involved, Sophia and Hilbert's acknowledgement of them without being prompted, indicates that these connections are at the forefront of their thoughts in describing their work.

On the other hand, Ryan and Maggie—both students born and raised in America—, focussed on a balance between the importance of *personal prowess* or *social capital* in describing their achievements. Their responses initially focussed on the details, Maggie outlining her work which was “military funded [where] they were trying to implement sensory functions into a prosthetic so that amputees could move.” When asked about her access to government funded projects, she suggested that her “dad's friend [offered] me the position [...] I learned it as I went along. It was hard, but I learned a lot.” Both equally value effort *and* connections, suggesting that being able to grab an opportunity is as important as connections that make them available: “I think of course I couldn't have gotten into [the newspaper publication] with just whatever I had [...] I was still, you know, at high school. But I did well [and got the award] because I had that [writing skills] and that, I should get credit for.”

Sophia, again, prompted with the same question regarding the balance of personal prowess and social capital, chose to re-emphasized her connection with her upperclassmen with whom she was able to win the math tournament: “There were some problems [in the math tournament] that none of us could do, and there was such limited time. [...] None of us could have done anything if we weren't working together.” Remembering that all student's individual prowess or skills are on roughly comparable as all were accepted into the same university, these differences in the treatment of opportunity and effort likely show correlation with upbringing and culture. Hilbert and Sophia's passive tone, focus on given opportunity, and offering credit to others align with Asian values of humility and self deprecation; while Ryan and Maggie's

confidence and pride in their abilities in being able to grab opportunities offered to them by connections, show a balanced view of meritocracy and the American ethos of opportunity and effort, and a more meritocratic view of society.

It can be suggested that the myth of meritocracy is relatively lacking in Asian cultures due to this fact; there was no effort to defend meritocracy at play by Hilbert and Sophia—which possibly is a source of prominent problems in Asian workplaces of seniority and connections defining success (年功序列) raised as a problem in Japan, or phrases like “golden spoons (금수저),” spitefully describing people born with privilege in Korea. Hilbert’s acceptance of his failure due to a lack of familial support, and Sophia’s acceptance of her success due to her parent’s wealth, are also indications of a lack of belief in opportunistic equality.

## V. Conclusion

Despite the reputation of homogeneity in privilege or wealth of in students of Duke, discrepancies still arise in each student’s self-perception of the extent of meritocracy at play. While family privilege is difficult to decipher, one is shown to have more awareness of this type of social capital the less of it they have. Of course, self-reported family privilege is subjective to bias in their bubble of socioeconomic status, and its variance is limited when interviewing most students from Duke university, and all students whose parents attended college—hindering the confidence in this correlation.

The issue of culture and self-perception of social capital is relatively clearer; interviewees from different cultural backgrounds show clear differences in ways they describe how they came to their achievements, with those from Asian heritages more accepting of social connections as a

means for success, while those who lived more in the U.S. suggest given opportunity is no more important than hard work. However, more evidence is left to be desired in suggesting that this is due to cultural value system differences—western values increasingly affect societies in East Asia, making an establishment of a clear cultural boundary between individualism and collectivism difficult.

These findings are significant in their suggestion of the susceptibility of people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds in the myth of meritocracy. One core issue of this opportunistically equal world view is that this is an idea one has to buy into—a society in which people are less susceptible to this bias will eventually be one that continuously tries to correct against this system, while more accepting societies perpetuate this myth. The comparison of perceptions from people from different societies also lend an insight into the degree (or the perception of the degree) of social capital's role in success, as they give perspective on the increasing ways meritocracy interacts with the cultural values of societies.