Metaphor Analysis as an Approach for Exploring Theoretical Concepts: The Case of Social Capital

Daniel Andriessen and Claire Gubbins

Daniel Andriessen
INHolland University
of Applied Sciences,
Hoofddorp,
The Netherlands

Claire Gubbins
University of
Limerick, Ireland

Abstract

In many fields within management and organizational literature there is considerable debate and controversy about key theoretical concepts and their definitions and meanings. Systematic metaphor analysis can be a useful approach to study the underlying conceptualizations that give rise to these controversies and putting them in perspective. It can help identify the different ways a theoretical concept is structured and given meaning, provide insight into the way these different conceptualizations relate to each other, and show how these conceptualizations impact further theorization about the concept. This article describes the procedure for a systematic analysis of the metaphors used to conceptualize key theoretical concepts. To examine its usefulness, the authors apply the approach to the field of social capital, and in particular to the concept of 'relationships' in organizations. In the metaphor analysis of three seminal articles on social capital, the authors identify seven metaphoric concepts for relationships. The metaphors are illuminated as important for providing imagery that adds specific meaning in the process of authors theorizing about social capital like 'tie', 'path' and 'bridge'. They add dynamics and controllability to the concepts by attributing an array of verbs like 'to move between' or 'to use' relationships. In addition, the metaphors allow for the attribution of specific characteristics to the concept of relationships that can be used as variables in theory construction, such as the strength of a relationship or the 'distance' between people. These insights are useful in exploring and reconciling differences in social capital definitions.

Keywords: embodied realism, metaphor, organization theory, social capital, systematic metaphor analysis

Introduction

In many fields within management and organizational literature there is considerable debate and controversy about key theoretical concepts and their definitions and meanings. For example, the field of social capital abounds with definitions of the term – proponents of each definition arguing for different perspectives. Some criticize this lack of consensus (Robison et al. 2002; Castle 1998) and argue it dilutes the value and usefulness of the concept. However, Lyotard's (1984: 61) postmodernist perspective argues that 'consensus is a horizon that is never reached'. So, while those of the modernist perspective aim to

ground everyday actions and beliefs to make them seem logical, even natural, those of the postmodernist perspective focus on breaking free from 'outworn vocabularies and attitudes' (Rorty 1980) and exploring the extraordinary within the ordinary (Cooper and Burrell 1988). Schwarz et al. (2007) argue that there are no objective grounds from which to criticize any one genre of representation from another. They suggest that 'we need to abandon those oppositions that insist that on one hand the objective is privileged because it stands free of all phenomenology and exists as it is in its magnificent facticity and on the other hand the view that privileges subjectivity as the authentic and natural locus of real experience'. They argue that theorizing is 'nothing less, nothing more, and nothing other than its practices of representation'. They continue: 'Although we have no problem with recognizing the objectivity of organizations as phenomena that exist independently of those more or less theorized representations that we have of them, simultaneously, we know them only through such representations' (2007: 304).

Metaphors play an important role in these theorized representations of organizations (Grant and Oswick 1996; Morgan 1986). For example, in the case of social capital, capital is a used metaphorically and this metaphor offers a wide range of entailments (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) that can be useful in theorizing about relationships in organizations. Systematic metaphor analysis can be a useful approach to study the underlying metaphors that give rise to controversies about representations and put them in perspective. It can help identify the different ways a theoretical concept is structured and given meaning, provide insight into the way these different representations relate to each other, and show how these representations impact the further theorization about the concept.

Some authors argue that metaphors should be avoided in organizational theory (Bourgeois and Pinder 1983; Tinker 1986). Others see metaphors as valuable creative tools for developing new theories and insights (Weick 1989). Morgan (1997) displayed how many theories about organizations can be 'reordered' (Keenoy et al. 2003) into a particular metaphorical view of organizations, showing the metaphorical bases of organizational theorizing. Black (1962) has shown that metaphors are important generators of new meaning. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) argue that metaphors are not only unavoidable but are also the basis for many of our abstract concepts. In the same line of reasoning, Morgan (1980) adopts 'a view of scientific inquiry as a creative process in which scientists view the world metaphorically, through the language and concepts which filter and structure their perceptions of their subject of study and through the specific metaphors which they implicitly or explicitly choose to develop their framework for analysis' (p. 611).

If metaphors are the basis for abstract concepts, then a systematic analysis of the metaphors used in describing and defining theoretical constructs may help in explaining and even resolving some of the debates about definitions of key theoretical but abstract and subjectively defined concepts used in organization theory. Controversy about the essence and definition of theoretical concepts may be in part due to the differences in metaphors used. Revealing the underlying metaphors may help highlight the sources of these controversies. It may facilitate an exploration of the richness of the various meanings of theoretical concepts. In this regard, it

can help those concerned with finding 'definitions' for theoretical concepts to recognize the multiple meanings that can be attributed to a concept, given that there are a multitude of ways in which people can view the world and thus a multitude of ways in which people attempt to articulate this view through imagery portrayed in metaphors. It can enable such definition seekers to recognize the depth of abstract concepts and thus encourage them to not debate whether a definition is correct or incorrect but explore how it adds to their current perspective on a concept. In this paper we will explore this suggestion by asking whether a systematic metaphor analysis can be a useful approach for exploring theoretical concepts.

To answer this question, we utilize social capital theory as a case example, as the diversity and number of definitions of social capital evokes criticism (Robison et al. 2002). Such a plethora of definitions poses difficulties for those who wish to define it and measure it. At the core of social capital theory is the concept of 'relationships'. We utilize systematic metaphor analysis (Schmitt 2005) as a method for identifying the metaphors used to conceptualize the concept of 'relationships'. We look at the verbs, nouns and adjectives related to the concept of 'relationships' used in three texts on social capital. By analysing the metaphorical content of these texts and identifying the verbs, nouns and adjectives used, we will identify the author's metaphors-in-use (Morgan 1996) and thus be in a position to analyse their perspective and role in social capital theorizing.

For systematic metaphor analysis to be a useful approach for exploring theoretical concepts it must (1) help to identify the different ways a theoretical concept is structured and given meaning, (2) provide insight into the way these different conceptualizations relate to each other, and (3) show how these conceptualizations impact the further theorization about the concept. This way, systematic metaphor analysis can help explain why there are different conceptualizations and definitions of a particular theoretical concept and how they complement each other.

In this paper we firstly briefly explore the debate about how metaphor works, highlighting Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) idea of conceptual metaphor. We describe our approach for systematic exploratory metaphor analysis. We then introduce the literature on social capital as a case example on which to examine the usefulness of this approach. Then we present the results of the metaphor analysis. Finally, we discuss the results of the examination of the systematic metaphor analysis and the implications for organizational theorizing.

Systematic Metaphor Analysis

There is much debate about the way metaphor works (Black 1993; Cornelissen 2005, 2006; Heracleous 2003; Keenoy et al. 2003; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003; Marshak 2003; Oswick and Jones 2006; Oswick et al. 2002; Tsoukas 1991; Cornelissen 2004), especially about whether metaphor is simply a matter of comparison, highlighting the analogies in the source and target domain of the metaphor, or whether a metaphor does more than that. Some authors (Oswick et al. 2002; Oswick and Jones 2006) promote a correspondence theory of metaphor,

arguing that when using metaphor, individuals pick a source domain that fits the characteristics of the target domain they want to highlight, resulting in a metaphor. As Oswick and Jones (2006: 484) describe it:

'Put another way, we often know the characteristics of the phenomenon that we wish to describe, and the metaphor is simply a vehicle for articulating what is already known (albeit, on occasions, it is only known either implicitly or partially).'

Cornelissen (2004, 2005, 2006) presents the domains-interaction model as an alternative for the correspondence theory of metaphor to highlight the fact that metaphors can produce new meaning that goes beyond similarity. According to this model, the process of metaphor application is not just the transfer of selected meaning from a source to a target. The process is a two-way process in which the target and the source concepts are aligned, and correspondence is constructed and created, rather than deciphered. As a result, the metaphor can produce new meaning in both the target and the source domain.

Both the correspondence and the domains-interaction model assume that the characteristics and the structure of the target domain exist independently of the metaphors used to describe them. Even in the domains-interaction model the first step is the identification of correspondence between the structure of the target domain and the source domain. Lakoff and Johnson (1980,1999) and Lakoff (1987) question the assumption that the characteristics and the structure of the target domain exist independently of the metaphors. When it comes to abstract concepts such as 'time', 'knowledge' or 'relationships', conceptual metaphors play a role in conceptualizing, in providing structure and in assigning properties and characteristics. The target domain gets its structure from the metaphor used to describe it.

In their Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Lakoff and Johnson introduce the idea of *primary metaphors*. These are metaphors that help to conceptualize subjective experiences using mental imagery from the sensor and motor functions of our body. For example, we use the sensorimotor experience of affection as warmth (the warm body of our affectionate mother or father in our childhood) as the source domain when we conceptualize the subjective experience of a relationship (the target domain) as a 'warm' relationship. Lakoff and Johnson claim that we do not first decide what characteristic of a phenomenon to highlight and then pick our metaphor, but that the metaphor allows us to bracket (Weick 1995), or highlight, certain characteristics that would not be possible without that particular metaphor. According to CMT, individual metaphors do not occur by chance but can be traced back to underlying primary metaphors. Individual metaphors that share the same source and target domains are part of a more common metaphoric concept (Schmitt 2005). These metaphoric concepts are used to conceptualize abstract phenomena.

Systematic metaphor analysis is based on CMT and aims to reveal the underlying primary metaphors in texts. The approach is used to analyse the metaphors that are used in relation to a specific target area or topic in a text, for the purposes of creating a better insight into the metaphoric concepts that an author uses to assign properties and characteristics to concepts. Systematic metaphor analysis is an inductive approach that seeks to discover those underlying

metaphors that are already in use, as opposed to a deductive approach, which involves taking a metaphor and imposing it on a particular organizational phenomenon (Grant and Oswick 1996; Palmer and Dunford 1996). Our procedure for systematic metaphor analysis is based on the work of Schmitt (2005) and Andriessen (2006) and consists of six steps. Step one is the identification of the target area for metaphor analysis.

Metaphor analysis requires that a topic be selected in advance. This will be the concept under investigation in a particular field. Andriessen (2006) and Moser (2004), for example, have studied the concept of 'knowledge' in the field of knowledge management. In this article we will study the concept of 'relationships' in the field of social capital. The second step is sampling a selection of text from the particular field. If the purpose of the analysis is to identify the most common metaphors in a particular field, then this selection should be a random sample. If, as in our case, the purpose is to help in resolving some of the debates about key theoretical concepts in a particular field, then a stratified sample can be used in which several important views on the topic are represented. The third step is highlighting all phrases related to the target area. In the text, all phrases related to the target area are highlighted. This will include verbs, nouns and adjectives. The underlying metaphors are identified. A word or phrase is identified as a metaphor if (a) it can be understood beyond the literal meaning in the context; (b) the literal meaning stems from a source domain of sensoric or cultural experience; and (c) this literal meaning is transferred to the abstract target area (Schmitt 2005). The next step in the analysis is to group together all words and phrases that use the same source domain and identify the underlying metaphorical concept. It is often possible to create a taxonomy of source domains in which one source domain is part of a larger domain (Andriessen 2006). Sometimes it is difficult to identify the metaphorical concept of an individual word. However, by looking at the other individual metaphors surrounding the word, in most cases the source domain becomes clear. The final step is to count the number of words or phrases for each metaphorical concept and divide this by the total number or words and phrases. The hypothesis is that the number of words or phrases is related to the importance of a particular metaphor in a text. This allows for a comparison between texts and between authors. The result of a systematic metaphor analysis can be presented as a list of metaphors used to conceptualize the concept under investigation or as an overview of the frequency of use of each metaphor using, for example, a pie chart diagram. We will use the case example of social capital to illustrate the application of this approach.

Theorizing about Social Capital

Social capital theory is an interesting case example in which to explore the role of metaphor in organizational theorizing because this body of knowledge has one abstract concept that lies at the core of all theories in the field, which is the concept of 'relationships'. This is convenient, as we can concentrate the systematic metaphor analysis on this one concept. Social capital is concerned with

the structure and influence of relationships with and between individuals, organizations and societies. Furthermore, the field is relatively young with a few highly influential writers. It is a field that attracts increasing interest and consequently research, which results in more and better theory, but also in an overabundance of definitions.

The numerous definitions of social capital can be categorized in a number of ways. Definitions focus on the characteristics of relations an actor maintains with other actors (Coleman 1990; Granovetter 1973, 1985; Putnam 2000), the structure of relations among actors in a network (Burt 1992, 1997), the resources possessed by the actors in a network (Lin et al. 1981), or the resources, structure of relations and characteristics of a network of actors (Gubbins and Garavan 2005; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Seibert et al. 2001).

The definitions can be further categorized according to those that view social capital in terms of internal network relations or relations external to the network. Definitions that focus on the external relations have been referred to as 'bridging' (Adler and Kwon 2002) or 'communal' (Oh et al. 1999) forms of social capital and those that focus on internal relations are referred to as 'bonding' (Adler and Kwon 2002) or 'linking' (Oh et al. 1999) forms of social capital.

Still other definitions of social capital focus on the substance, the source or the effects of social capital. Putnam (2000) argues that trust is fundamental to all definitions of social capital as it would appear that, without trust, cooperation in relationships is limited to activities that are easy to monitor simultaneously and this trust is primary for further cooperation. Adler and Kwon (2002) suggest that goodwill, defined as the sympathy (Robison et al. 2002), trust (Adler 2001; Leana and Van Buren 1999) and forgiveness (Williamson 1985) offered to an individual through relationships with others, are the substance of social capital. A number of researchers have made references to the sources of social capital in their definitions such as motivation (Portes 1998), norms (Putnam 1993), trust (Leana and Van Buren 1999; Putnam 1993), associability and ability (Leana and Van Buren 1999). The effects of social capital are also still contested and thus definitions vary in this regard. Alder and Kwon (2002) propose that the effects of social capital flow from the information, influence and solidarity made available through social capital. Trust is also argued to be an asset resulting from social capital; construed as a relational asset (Lin 1999), as is motivation (Burt 1992; Uzzi 1999).

The diversity and number of definitions of social capital evokes some criticism (Robison et al. 2002). Indeed, Castle (1998) comments that unless the social capital concept is used with some degree of precision and in a comparable manner, it will come to have little value as an analytical construct. Such a plethora of definitions poses difficulties for those who wish to define it. Also without agreement on what constitutes social capital, empirical measurement is difficult and varied (Marsden and Campbell 1984). Furthermore, Baron and Hannan (1994) complain about the indiscriminate and metaphoric importation of economic concepts into sociological literature. They refer to the social capital literature as an example of 'a plethora of capitals'. An analysis of the metaphors used to define and theorize about social capital might shed some light on the conceptual thinking behind the various definitions of social capital and

thus help to explain the existing diversity in definitions. Such analysis may thus further highlight to these critics of the numerous definitions of social capital, and those that disagree with the metaphoric importation of economic concepts to the social capital literature, that there is value in such metaphoric importation and indeed that it is unavoidable.

Findings

In the case of social capital theory, the common denominator is the phenomenon of relationships. We analysed three seminal articles in the literature on social capital. We selected the articles because they each represent the beginning of a new way of theorizing about social capital. There are three key theories on social capital: Granovetter (1973) proposed weak tie theory, Lin (1982) proposed social resource theory, also referred to as social capital theory, and Burt (1992) proposed structural hole theory. All of the authors of these articles theorize about social capital from different perspectives. Granovetter (1973) conceptualizes social capital by looking at relationships between people in terms of structure. He is particularly concerned with the strength of ties. Lin et al. (1981) conceptualize relationships as social resources and argue that it is the content of relationships and not the structure that is valuable. Burt (1997) conceptualizes relationships as social capital. However, he also focuses predominately on the structural elements of social networks, particularly the existence of ties rather than the strength of ties. These are thus key contributors to discussions on definitions of social capital and have had a major influence on subsequent theorizing about social capital.

In the three texts, we highlighted a total of 880 words and phrases related to relationships. We utilize the various phrases in the following quote from Burt (1997) so as to illustrate how this approach works.

'The structural *hole* argument defines *social capital* in terms of the information and control advantages of being the *broker* in *relations* between people otherwise *disconnected* in *social structure*'. (p. 340)

Each of the italicized words refers somehow to the idea of 'relationships'. In the quotation, relationships are conceptualized as a 'hole', as 'social capital', and as 'social structure'. 'Disconnected' refers to an attribute of a relationship, and a 'broker' refers to a role regarding relationships.

Ninety-nine percent of all 880 words and phrases were metaphorical in nature. Most of them use one out of seven source domains. Each of these metaphoric concepts highlights a certain characteristic of relationships. Each metaphor allows for a particular set of *nouns* to indicate relationships, *verbs* to indicate activities concerning relationships, and *adjectives* that depict attributes of relationships. These attributes can be described as dichotomies (for example, strong versus weak relationships). The metaphorical adjectives form the basis for theoretical variables that play an important role in the empirical testing of social capital theories. In the following overview we briefly describe each metaphor and the source domain that it uses. We discuss the elements the metaphor contributes to

the discourse about social capital so as to explore the role of the metaphor in social capital theorizing.

Relationships as Contacts

All three authors conceptualize *relationships as contacts*, as in the following example taken from Granovetter (1973):

'One point on which there is no general agreement is whether ego's network should be treated as composed only of those to whom he is tied directly, or should include the contacts of his contacts, and/or others.' (p. 1370)

The source domain of this metaphor is the sensorimotor function of touch. The idea of physical touch or contact is transferred to the target domain of relationships. This metaphor allows for the bracketing of an individual as a point of contact in a relationship. It adds to the discourse on social capital by contributing the idea of 'direct' and 'indirect' relationships. A direct relationship has two contacts, A and B, that make direct contact. In an indirect relationship there are other contacts between A and B.

Relationships as Links, Ties and Connections

The coupling of two points of contact into a relationship creates a link, tie or connection, as in the following quote from Granovetter (1973):

'The stronger the tie between A and B, the larger the proportion of individuals in S to whom they will both be tied, that is connected by a weak or strong tie.' (p. 1362)

The source domain of this metaphor is the sensorimotor experience that when two objects or people are tied together, they are physically close. This primary metaphor is then combined with the primary metaphor of *intimacy as closeness* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In the source domain of mechanical connections, a link, tie or connection can be weak or strong and the metaphor *relationships as links, ties and connections* transfers this attribute to the target, as when Granovetter (1973) discusses the strength of ties as being either weak or strong. The metaphor also adds to the discourse the dichotomy of 'connected' and 'disconnected' contacts.

Relationships as Paths

Because we metaphorically map closeness to intimacy, it becomes useful to have a way to distinguish between various degrees of closeness. The spatial metaphor of *relationships as paths* allows us to do so. If relationships are like paths with people as the destinations, then the length of the path is an indicator of the closeness of the relationship and to relate is to move along the path, as in (Granovetter 1973):

'The significance of weak ties, then, would be that those, which are local bridges, create more, and shorter, paths.' (p. 1365)

The literature on social capital points out that there may be a distance (length of path) beyond which it is not feasible for an actor to communicate with another actor

because of costs or distortions entailed in each act or transaction (Harary et al. 1965). Understanding social capital utilizing the *relationships as paths* metaphor facilitates greater understanding of the actor's ability to act on (in this case communicate) or control in long or short paths of relationships. When relationships are conceptualized as paths, it is meaningful in the target domain to use other, related nouns from the same source domain of paths, like a bridge or a crossroad. Granovetter (1973) refers to a specific type of weak tie – a bridge – defined as a line in a network, which provides the only path between two points or a tie that links two networks with each other that otherwise would not be connected. Utilizing the relationships as paths metaphor and its source domain of movement makes it possible to illuminate how the 'bridge' enables actors to 'act' in cases where 'paths' are otherwise too long for action to occur. In addition, the *relationships as paths* metaphor is very rich as it opens up the source domain of movement and allows us to start acting on and controlling relationships. We found references to movement activities concerning relationships, like *to move between*, *to bring together*, *to traverse*, *to follow along*, *to reach* (a destination), *to trace* and *to cross* (a bridge).

Relationships as Networks

A complex set of paths constitutes a network. The metaphor of *relationships as a network* was the most used metaphor in the articles analysed. A network is in itself an abstract concept used to organize elements, which can be conceptualized as spatial, two-dimensional patterns or structures with points, positions and locations, as well as lines, lines with holes in them, patterns, circles, groups, clusters and sectors. All of these nouns were found in the texts with reference to relationships. The network metaphor is based on the primary metaphor of *organization is physical structure* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). The network metaphor adds a number of important distinctions to the discourse: *central* versus *marginal* relationships, *small* and *large* social networks, *sparse* and *dense* patterns of relationships, *close-knit* and *loose-knit*, *cohesive* and *fragmented*, and *hierarchical* versus *non-hierarchical* patterns. The following quote from Lin et al. (1981) illustrates how the metaphor is used:

'Social networks link persons of different statuses in the social structure both directly and indirectly.' (p. 1165)

Relationships as Channels

So far the metaphors did not allow for bracketing anything about the quality of the relationship. All metaphors thus far were about the structure of social relations. The *relationships as channels* metaphor makes it possible to think about the 'content' and the 'channel' through which content flows within the network – content which is often portrayed as information, ideas and power, as in Granovetter (1973):

'Indirect contacts are thus typically reached through the ties in this sector, such ties are then of importance not only in ego's manipulation of networks, but also in that they are the channels through which ideas, influences, or information socially distant from ego may reach him.' (p. 1370)

This is a complex conceptual metaphor that is built from several other metaphors including the *ideas are resources*, *information is content* and the *change is movement* metaphor. The *relationships as channels* metaphor allows the bracketing of 'transfer of content' in relationships, whereas relationships without channels but with ties only facilitates 'access' to the content but not the transfer. The channelling of content gives access to even more verbs for exercising control, including *to filter*, *to transmit*, *to direct* and *to concentrate*. It also allows for the distinction between high-quality and low-quality relationships, because the quality depends on the ability to transfer content.

Relationships as Resources

So far we have structure and we have transfer of content, and we have some verbs to bracket ways to control both the structure and the content flow. The next metaphor we found adds more content to the picture and allows for the use of the structure and the content flow as a means to an end. The *relationships as resources* metaphor is based on the source domain of physical resources for survival. The metaphor makes relationships instrumental and places them in a taxonomy of organizational resources that also includes financial resources, human resources and physical resources. It allows us to include relationships in the well-known conceptualization of organizations as input-throughput-output systems (Morgan 1997). Through this metaphor, relationships are conceptualized as 'substance'. This metaphor gives us access to more control verbs, like *to use*, *to benefit from* and *to measure* (an amount). It also adds to the discourse the attribute dichotomy of 'more' versus 'less' of this particular resource.

The instrumental nature of relationships in this metaphor is illustrated by the following quote from Lin et al. (1981):

'The wealth, status, and power, as well as the social ties, of these persons who are directly or indirectly linked to the individual and who, therefore comprise his social network, are considered potential social resources for the individual.' (p. 1165)

A synonym for resource is the word *asset*. Assets have a specific meaning in the accounting community. Therefore, the metaphor of *relationships as assets* makes it possible to include relationships in the accounting discourse on organizations.

Relationships as Capital

Capital is a special type of 'substance' that has in part the same characteristics as other resources, but also shows additional characteristics. In economic theory, the concept of capital is part of a wider theoretical structure that includes capital as an investment with a rate of return, the ability of the investor to appropriate the returns, associated opportunity costs, the issue of the funding of the investment, and the availability of a market for capital (Baron and Hannan 1994). The *relationships as capital* metaphor selectively transports some of these attributes of capital to the target domain of relationships. An example of the use of this metaphor can be found in the quote from Burt (1997: 340) earlier in this article. Because of the many positive connotations of capital in the source

domain, the metaphor seems to indicate that relationships are important, valuable and an asset instead of expenditure. While we also recognize that social capital can be a liability (Adler and Kwon 2000), it is outside the scope of this paper to explore it further.

In addition, the metaphor gives access to the concept of value and valuation. In his text, Burt (1997) uses the idea of the value of relationships 75 times. The metaphor makes it possible to include relationships in the view of *organizations as financial flows*. The *relationships as capital* metaphor not only offers new means for control (to invest in relationships, relationships are invested in something else), but also adds the notion to the discourse that a proper return on relationships is to be expected and that the investor should be able to appropriate the return from the investment. This further emphasizes the instrumental use of social relationships.
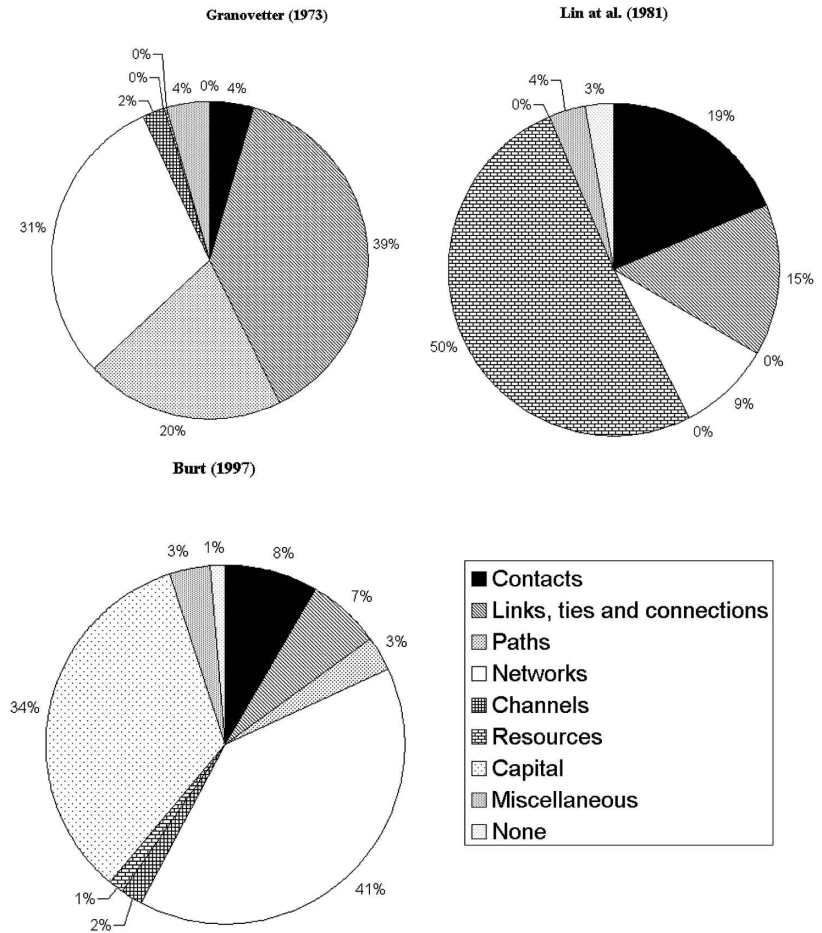
Differences between Authors

The relative importance of the seven metaphors in each of the three texts is illustrated in Figure 1. In the oldest text by Granovetter (1973), the structural metaphors of *relationships as links*, *ties and connections* and *relationships as networks* are dominant. Structural metaphors account for ninety-three percent of the metaphorical words and phrases in his text. This is consistent with his specified structural perspective on social capital. In Lin et al. (1981) the dominant metaphor utilized is *relationships as resources*. This text is the only one of the three in which content-related metaphors are dominant. However, structural metaphors still represented forty-three percent of the metaphorical words and phrases in the text. The use of content related metaphors is consistent with the fact that Lin et al. (1981) introduced the social resource perspective to the field of social capital. The use of structural metaphors in Lin's work is reflective of his recognition of the role of network structure for accessing social resources. *Relationships as networks* and *relationships as capital* are the dominant metaphors in Burt (1997). The balance between structural and content metaphors in this text is fifty-eight versus thirty-seven percent. Again, this finding is reflective of Burt's (1997) emphasis on social network structure, in his work. It is also reflective of the progression of the concept. Burt speaks of social networks (the structural element of social capital) but refers to the concept as social capital (which according to some definitions also encompasses social resources), thus utilizing all seven metaphorical concepts for relationships.

Exploring the Concept of Relationships in Social Capital Theorizing

The systematic metaphor analysis shows that in the three articles analysed, seven metaphors contribute to the conceptualization of the concept of relationships. The authors give meaning to the idea of relationships in organizations by seeing them as contacts, links, paths, networks, channels, resources and/or capital. The first five of these metaphors are strongly related as each metaphor is based on the previous one, adding additional characteristics. The metaphor of *relationships as links, ties and connections* requires individual points of contacts that can

Figure 1.
Distribution of
metaphors used in
the texts

Granovetter (1973)

0%
0%
2%
4% 0% 4%
31%
39%
20%

Lin at al. (1981)

4% 3%
0%
19%
15%
50%
0%
9%
0%

Burt (1997)

3% 1% 8%
7%
3%
34%
1%
2%
41%

- ■ Contacts
- ▨ Links, ties and connections
- ▨ Paths
- □ Networks
- ▦ Channels
- ▨ Resources
- ▨ Capital
- ▨ Miscellaneous
- □ None

be connected. The *relationships as paths* metaphor refers to relationships as a sequence of links, ties or connections. A network is a complex pattern of paths, while a channel is something that allows the transfer of content through a network. The last two metaphors are of a different type as they don't focus so much on structure but more on the use of relationships. When there is instrumental use of relationships, they become resources. Capital can be seen as a special form of resource.

These metaphors have a strong impact on the theorization about the concept of relationships in organizations. First, the metaphors allow for the use of specific imagery to add specific meaning in the process of theorizing. This imagery shows itself in the text through nouns, such as bridge, channel and resource. This imagery gives structure to the abstract concept of relationships. Relationships become like bridges that can connect people, like channels that can transport information, and like resources that can be used for a particular purpose. Second, the metaphors add dynamics and controllability to the picture because each

Table 1.
Variables that
Become Available
by Metaphor

Metaphor	Variable
Relationships as contacts	Number (of contacts)
Relationships as links, ties or connections	Strength (of tie)
Relationships as paths	Length (of path)
Relationships as networks	Size (of network)
Relationships as channels	Volume, quality (of content transported)
Relationships as resources	amount, type, quality of resources available/transferred
Relationships as capital	Value

source domain comes with an array of verbs. The *relationship as paths* metaphor allows for movement activities to be added to the theorizing. The *relationships as resources* metaphor allows for control verbs such as *to use*, *to benefit from* or *to measure*. The more metaphors are used, the more verbs become available in social capital theorizing to discuss interdependencies, causal mechanisms, control and manipulation. Third, the metaphors allow for the attribution of specific characteristics taken from the source domain to the target domain. Relationships can be direct or indirect, weak or strong, distant or close, sparse or dense, filtered or non-filtered, more or less, and valuable or invaluable. In social capital theorizing, these attributes then become available as variables that can be linked in causal models and can (potentially) be measured and used for drawing social network maps. In the case of social capital, empirical measurement requires concrete constructs. Each of the seven metaphors maps several attributes from a source domain to the target domain of relationships, so there are many attributes to choose from when it comes to measurement. Table 1 gives an example of a variable for each metaphor identified in the texts.

The metaphors function so as to map inferences from the source domain into inferences about relationships, thus enriching the concept of relationships. If relationships are paths between two people, then to relate is to create a path or to move along the path. When the various paths of persons A and B never cross, then there is no relationship. When there is a bridge, in the form of a third person C who has a relationship with both A and B, then a relationship between A and B is 'constructed'. What we can see here is that the metaphor maps inferences about paths and bridges into inferences about relationships enriching the concept of relationships using metaphorical idioms from the source domain. In this example not only are inferences mapped (person C is a bridge) but also linguistic expressions, as in the word 'bridge' that comes from the source domain of paths gets to play an important role in the theories about relationships (see Burt 1992; Granovetter 1973).

There is more than one conceptual metaphor behind the concept of relationships. In the sample we found seven conceptual metaphors. The metaphors seem to have facilitated the evolution of the key concepts and the development of more complete theories and measures. The earliest theory by Granovetter primarily uses the link, path and network metaphors. Lin et al. use these too but add the channel metaphor. Burt uses all of these and adds the capital metaphor. This illuminates the role of metaphors for describing and defining abstract theoretical

constructs and helps explain the proliferation of definitions that occur in social capital theory. The abundance of definitions for social capital is in part the result of various authors trying to conceptualize relationships in a variety of ways, depending on which characteristics they prefer to bracket and highlight. Granovetter (1973) highlights the structural aspects of social capital by primarily using structural metaphors. Lin et al. (1981) emphasize the role of network structure for accessing other people as social resources by using a combination of structural and resource metaphors. Burt (1992) underlines the value and instrumentality of relationships by using the capital metaphor.

Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the case study of social capital, we conclude that a systematic metaphor analysis seems to be a useful approach for exploring the theoretical concepts. We acknowledge that this conclusion is based on only one case study and that further research is needed in other fields to substantiate this claim. The added value of the approach seems to be threefold.

First, a systematic metaphor analysis may help a researcher gain a better insight into the sources of debate about core concepts in a field. In the case of social capital, the analysis shows that the debate about the nature and definition of the social capital concept is in part about finding the most appropriate and complete metaphors for the concept of relationships. At least seven metaphors-in-use currently play a role in conceptualizing this concept. Some of these metaphors are strongly related as they build on each other, adding characteristics and complexities. Controversy about the essence and definition of social capital is in part due to the differences in metaphors used. Revealing the underlying metaphors helped highlight the sources of these controversies. Acknowledging this role of metaphors can prevent us from becoming too critical about the abundance of definitions in a particular field. When we assume that metaphors structure our conceptualization of reality, there is no objective reality that can referee which metaphorical conceptualization of a theoretical concept is right and which is wrong. In the case of social capital, the concept of relationships is not independent of the metaphor used for the concept. Critics who plead for a precise definition of the concept assume that social capital is something that is objectively 'out there', instead of a human construct created by metaphorical conceptualization. There is no single definition of social capital. As with any definition, authors define and redefine social capital to fit their goals (Lakoff 1987). Furthermore, each of the metaphors in a particular field may be useful in a certain theoretical framework, because it adds attributes and control potential to the theorizing, thus deepening our understanding of the core concepts and our ability to influence them. Therefore, the discussion should not be about what definition of a theoretical concept best reflects reality, but which metaphors are more apt than others, given the purpose of the theorizing. In the discussion about the aptness of certain metaphors, normative criteria can come into play. For example, what might be considered informative is that over the years the conceptualizations of relationships in publications on social capital seem to have

become more and more instrumental. With the *relationship as capital* metaphor, the utility of relationships is paramount, which is in great contrast to the warm, personal and humane idea of a relationship as a moment of contact between people, as pictured by the metaphor of *relationships as contacts*.

Second, a systematic metaphor analysis may provide better insight into the sources of theorizing. The three building blocks for theorizing come from metaphor. Metaphors allow for the use of specific imagery to add specific meaning in the process of theorizing. This imagery shows itself in the text through nouns. Metaphors add dynamics and controllability to the picture because each source domain comes with an array of verbs. The more metaphors are used, the more verbs become available in theorizing to discuss interdependencies, causal mechanisms, control and manipulation. And metaphors allow for the attribution of specific characteristics taken from the source domain to the target domain. These attributes then become available as variables that can be linked in causal models and (potentially) be measured. Analysing the metaphors that give rise to these nouns, verbs and attributes helps in understanding how the three building blocks for theorizing relate to each other and, in the case of social capital, the analysis even showed how the theorizing progressed over time.

Third, insight into the role of metaphor in theorizing may help signal possible misleading argumentation that results from metaphors being taken literally. Sometimes theorists overlook the fact that they use metaphorical mappings and reason as if the source and target domain are the same. In the case of social capital, the criticisms of Baron and Hannan (1994) regarding the inappropriate use of the term 'capital' can be used to illustrate this point. They point to social capital as an example of the 'plethora of capitals' in contemporary sociology. They state:

'Unless a characteristic is regarded as an investment for which there is a capital market and opportunity cost, we fail to see the value of calling it a type of capital.' (p. 1124)

Here, Barron and Hannan seem to imply that social capital should not be called capital because it is not literally 'capital'. Social capital does not have all the attributes that make capital in the source domain. However, as shown above, the concept of social capital gets its meaning from a metaphorical mapping based on the *relationships as capital* metaphor. The aptness of a metaphorical mapping does not depend on whether a whole cluster of attributes is mapped from the source to the target domain. Selective mappings can provide useful insights, as long as it is recognized that the mapping is metaphorical and not literal. It is perfectly legitimate for social capital to possess certain characteristics of capital (for example, that it is valuable and an investment for the future) and to not possess other characteristics (such as the existence of a social capital market). The work of Burt (1997) and others has shown that metaphorical entailments such as 'investments in social capital' and 'value of social capital' provide useful additional insight into the concept of social relationships.

Although the systematic metaphor analysis seems to be a useful approach, further improvements to both the procedure and its application in this paper can be made. First of all, the sample in our systematic metaphor analysis was limited. The three articles were chosen because of their particular influence to the field. However, the field is very rich and other authors may be less metaphorical

in their theorizing or use different metaphors. Thus, adding more literature to the analysis will strengthen the findings and provide further illumination. Second, the systematic metaphor analysis has helped to identify the metaphors used in the text in a systematic way. However, we are aware of the fact that the identification of metaphors behind certain phrases is always a product of the sense-making and analytical processes chosen and employed by the researcher. Other researchers may find different results, and future research should explore this interaction. We believe that further research is needed to improve the objectivity of the systematic metaphor analysis, especially when it comes to identifying whether a phrase is used metaphorically and to which source domain it refers. The Pragglejaz Group (2007) made some valuable progress in this direction. They developed a metaphor identification procedure (MIP) that contains a number of criteria for the metaphorical use of words.

Finally, this paper argued that social capital theorists utilized metaphor as a means through which to objectify, add meaning to and thus define and potentially measure the concept of 'relationships'. The paper thus argued that the use of metaphor in this way is useful. However, a question, which is illuminated through such statements as 'theorists utilize metaphor', and which still remains unanswered, is whether the use of metaphors is unconscious or conscious. In the case of social capital, were the three leading authors conscious of the fact that they used the identified metaphors to construct their theories or not? In the absence of evidence or informed insight, we do not think it is helpful to speculate on this one way or the other. It is difficult to know with any degree of certainty whether their metaphors were consciously intended, unconsciously generative or a combination of both. However, an interesting avenue for future research would be to explore theorists' use of metaphor in publications, as has been illustrated in this article, and then investigate the extent to which the theorist in question consciously selected those metaphors.

In many fields within organization studies there is considerable controversy about key theoretical concepts. Systematic metaphor analysis can be a useful approach to explore the underlying conceptualizations that give rise to these controversies, and put them into perspective and perhaps encourage progress towards reconciliation.

Notes

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Daniel Andriessen   Daniel Andriessen is Professor of Intellectual Capital at INHOLLAND University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. He is director of the Centre for Research in Intellectual Capital, a research group set up to study the impact of intellectual capital on people and organizations. His current interests are the role of metaphor in organizational theorizing, and the methodology of organization studies, in particular the combination of design-based research and action research.
Address: Centre for Research in Intellectual Capital, INHOLLAND University of Applied Sciences, Saturnusstraat 2–24, 2132 HB Hoofddorp, The Netherlands.
Email: daan.andriessen@inholland.nl

Claire Gubbins   Claire Gubbins is a Research Fellow at the University of Limerick. Her PhD was on the influence of social capital on career and professional development outcomes. Her research interests are social capital, trust and knowledge sharing.
Address: Enterprise Research Centre, University of Limerick, Plassey Technological Park, Limerick, Ireland.
Email: claire.gubbins@ul.ie