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## Social capital as an interdisciplinary concept

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The main purpose of the article was to present the interdisciplinary nature of the concept of social capital on the basis of own research.

**Methodology:** The research method used was a scientometric analysis conducted based on items found in the Web of Science database. For the literature search visualisation was performed using the VOSviewer application, and the methodology used allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the co-occurrence of keywords in scientific publications on social capital, as well as an overview of the scientific categories to which these publications were assigned.

**Results:** The analyses led to conclude that the concept of social capital is correlated with a wide range of terms anchored in various research disciplines. The perceived multiplicity of approaches to the category of social capital in the literature also results in the wealth of scientific definitions formulated and the possibilities of operationalisation, which further strengthens the interdisciplinary evaluation of this category. This is evident in attempts to embed it on various cognitive levels and to assign multiple causal powers based on the considerations carried out.

**Implications and recommendations:** This article attempts to fill the cognitive gap in the analysis of the interdisciplinary nature of the concept of social capital. It is an expression of the position taken by the author that the conceptualisation and operationalisation of this category visible in the literature, does not have to be accidental and occasional. The adopted research methodology, i.e. a scientometric analysis, allowed for the elimination of incidental (singular) connections between words of terms co-occurring in the base.

**Originality/value:** The observed multiplicity of definitions of this concept, according to some researchers, indicates its scientific immaturity. However, there is still a belief in the many positive effects that the building of social capital and its proper use in various social groups causes. In the

author's opinion the conducted research is scientifically justified as it provides a clear statement about the interdisciplinary nature of the category of social capital.

**Keywords:** social capital, interdisciplinarity, trust, scientometric analysis, keyword map

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## 1. Introduction

The dynamic growth of globalisation processes, supported by the development of advanced technologies, is causing significant changes in building the competitiveness of enterprises, regions, as well as entire economies. Pointing only to economic sources of building the competitive advantage of organizations has become insufficient as they are now faced with the need to revise the identified factors of growth and development and expand them to include items of a non-material nature. Key in these processes are not only the unique material resources of the organization, but also its soft resources and the nature of their connections. Among non-material resources, researchers see increasing utility in social capital, referring to collective trust, cooperation and commonly shared norms and values (Markowska-Przybyła, 2023, p. 202).

Social capital is now a category associated with many fields of knowledge such as management, economics, sociology, psychology, sustainability and others. In the scientific domain, it is a concept that is assigned a causal role for the growth of various social groups. Social capital, along with trust, is now a desirable research direction for explaining success factors within the functioning of various types of organizational units. In this category, researchers see a non-economic source of success not only for organizations (micro), but also on a global (macro) basis.

The first scientific studies related to the social capital resource were recognised in the areagrounds of sociological sciences, where its role in the functioning of society is revealed. Opinion-forming approaches are drawn here from the work of sociologists: P. Bordieu, J. S. Coleman and R. Putnam. The latter made an important contribution to the popularisation of the concept by making it even a fashionable category. Further development of the categorisation of social capital was due to its consideration in the economic sciences, yet over time it also began to be recognised in the management sciences. The multitude of approaches to social capital is a result of the interdisciplinary nature of the concept and causes many problems in clearly defining and measuring it.

The growing interest in the category of social capital is due to several reasons.

First, pointing only to economic sources for building an organization's competitive advantage has become insufficient (Frykowski, & Starosta, 2008, p. 33). Social capital can provide the missing link to the unexplained economic causes of dysfunction for various types of socio-economic structures. The potential of social and cultural factors to fill the gap in the discourse on state economic poverty was recognized by Fukuyama (2009, pp. 145-151), among others, and subsequent studies followed this thought by also transferring it to smaller socio-organizational structures, such as the enterprise. There is a conviction in the literature that it is social capital, together with intellectual capital, that should be treated on a par with the physical capital of an enterprise in the process of building its value (cf. McElroy, 2002, p. 33; Bratnicki, 2000, p. 101). This is because the quality of social relations, including interaction, determines the effectiveness of the activities performed, bringing new value to the organization (Gajowiak, 2012, p. 13).

Second, the concept of social capital provided some criticism of a society consumed by excessive liberalism, materialism and individualism, the disturbing symptoms of which were evident in the 1980s in developed economies such as the USA and the UK (Frykowski, & Starosta, 2008, pp. 33-34). Coleman's concept of social capital as an in-group and out-group resource that brings benefits, both to the entire social structure and their members, grew out of this foundation (1988, p. 98).

Third, social capital supports the perception of society as a structure with its own subjectivity and helps to activate it (Frykowski, & Starosta, 2008, p. 34). It is an alternative resource to the tools at the disposal of the state, capable of stimulating communities to carry out tasks that would not be possible with state instruments.

The discussed processes have led to an increase in interest among researchers in the category of social capital and scientific and the wealth of research in the area of the importance of social capital for the development of various types of economic activity.

The interdisciplinarity of the concept of social capital stems from its multidimensionality, however irrespective of interpretation, it always concerns the relationship between individuals who are members of a given collectivity. The cognitive gap regarding the parameterisation of social capital may not only result from the complexity of the concept, but also from its status as an immaterial resource. The possibilities to operationalise this type of resource are severely limited, and this effect is further reinforced by the difficulty of finding its direct link to the economic dimension (Baraniecka, 2014, p. 20). These circumstances contribute to a decrease in motivation among researchers to consider the possibilities of measuring this category.

It should be noted that the interdisciplinarity of the concept of social capital stems from the position of many researchers, treating it as the glue that binds various individuals or institutions together, or as the missing link in explaining hitherto unrecognised economic phenomena. An increasingly frequent direction of research on social capital is the search for answers to the question of why certain institutions or economies are more efficient than their material resources would suggest. Work on uncovering these mechanisms requires a deeper understanding of human nature, coordination, interaction and relationships, which leads to a natural scientific rapprochement between sociology and economics, giving impetus to the development of new sub-disciplines such as institutional economics, economic sociology and behavioural economics.

The purpose of the article was to present social capital as an interdisciplinary category. The research method used was a scientometric analysis conducted on the basis of bibliographic items found in the Web of Science database. For the literature search, data visualisation was performed using the VOSviewer program.

The usual understanding of interdisciplinarity refers to “the interaction among two or more different disciplines and ranges from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field” (Berger, 1972, p. 25). The concept of interdisciplinarity is most often understood in the context of the growth of innovation, creativity and knowledge in network structures (Mountford et al., 2017, p. 2558). Thus, the interdisciplinary nature of social capital can be seen in the analysis of its anchoring among concepts embedded in different fields or disciplines.

## **2. Social capital and its structural complexity**

The concept of social capital was first introduced in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan, who used it to describe such a set of characteristics as goodwill, fraternity, mutual affection, and social relations between individuals and families that make up a particular social group (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130).

For the conceptualisation and popularisation of the category of social capital, the following definitions are considered the most important:

- “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationship of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248),

- “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors (...) not lodged in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production” (Coleman, 1988, p. 98),
- “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam et al., 1993, p. 35),
- “an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals” (Fukuyama, 2003, p. 169).

Each of the identified authors applied a slightly different approach to the resource in question, thus giving rise to its multidirectionality in research. Currently, research on social capital has a multifaceted focus, mostly concerned with the positive effects of the creation and use of this resource in social groups. In the literature, social capital is often described as a phenomenon correlated with many factors of social well-being, and in this context it is pointed out that social capital is the driving force behind civic engagement (Son, & Lin, 2008, pp. 330-349). One can also find numerous publications relating to its contribution to building economic growth and development (Woolcock, 1998, pp. 151-208; Knack, & Keefer, 1997, pp. 1251-1288; Torsvik, 2000, pp. 451-476; Sztompka, 2016; Markowska-Przybyła, 2014, p. 116). Hence, one can speak of many positive aspects of social capital which “facilitates negotiations, reduces transaction costs, shortens the investment process (reduces the likelihood of challenging subsequent decisions of administrative authorities), reduces corruption, increases the reliability of contractors, promotes long-term investment and knowledge diffusion, prevents abuse of the common good and increases intergroup solidarity, and, through the development of the third sector, promotes social control of government action” (Czapiński, 2015b, p. 351). In addition to economic effects, social capital is also considered to have a positive impact on the broader quality of life of society – Putnam saw social capital as a key success factor for Italy’s democratic transition (Putnam et al., 1993). Moreover, one can see the opinion that it contributes to reducing crime (Putnam, 1993; Dilulio, 1996), raising the level of education (Coleman, 1988), and provides mutual aid within specific social groups, such as helping people find jobs (Granovetter, 1973). Mutual aid as an effect of social capital also appears in the literature as a reference to global disasters, therefore it is indicated that in the face of those, community members use social capital resources to coordinate rescue and recovery efforts for the community (Craig, & Storr, 2022, p. 124). In the literature one can also find the view of increased mortality of societies as a result of depreciation of social capital (Kawachi et al., 1997, pp. 1491-1498).

There is also a long list of effects that interact within organizations and contribute to their building and maintaining a long-term competitive advantage. Based on these, a number of benefits for the organization can be distinguished as a result of the process of building and utilising the social capital resource. These include, first and foremost (see Grudzewski et al., 2009, p. 61; Bratnicki, 2000, p. 101, Jędrych, & Berniak-Woźny, 2018, p. 24; Sankowska, 2011, p. 195; Adler, & Kwon, 2002, pp. 17-40; Fukuyama, 1995; Kwon, & Arenius, 2010, pp. 315-330; Stephan, & Uhlaner, 2010, pp. 1347-1364):

- significantly contributing to the reduction of transaction costs,
- increasing the credibility of the organization,
- positive impact on organizational learning processes,
- raising the credibility of the organization,
- fostering the exchange of resources within the company, including knowledge, which facilitates knowledge management and serves as a catalyst for entrepreneurship and innovation,
- creating a network of partner relationships,
- improving company performance and enterprise value creation,
- facilitating the creation of the organization’s intellectual capital,
- developing leadership in the organization and supporting processes of entering new markets,
- achieving and maintaining the stability of the organization, thereby achieving competitive advantage.

Most of these areas are related to the support of social capital in the process of knowledge creation and transfer, and therefore the creation and use of human capital. As G. Węgrzyn rightly noted, human capital contributes significantly to the creation, dissemination and use of innovations, thereby strengthening the innovative potential of economies, and thus ensuring their growth and development (Węgrzyn, 2016, p. 386).

In light of the above, social capital should be understood as a complementary resource to the other forms of capital in the organization (physical or financial), and is distinguished from them in that it can eliminate or enhance the benefits of, for example, human capital, including inhibiting its development. Therefore it can be considered that social capital is a category that should be strengthened on a par with other intangible forms of capital.

The multidimensionality of the concept of social capital, which constitutes its interdisciplinary character, results in an extensive typology of the phenomenon in question. M. Theiss distinguished many types of social capital, depending on the criteria adopted, which are: the scope of the concept, the level of sociological analysis and/or the centre of concentration, the economic type of good, the nature of externalities, the objectives of the holder of social capital, the type of links, the radius of trust, the degree of formalisation, the sphere of occurrence and the strength, exclusivity and frequency of contacts. Based on these criteria, the following types of social capital can be distinguished (Theiss, 2012, pp. 34-35):

- exclusively social ties and norms; social ties, norms, social institutions and organisations; ties, norms, social institutions, legal and economic arrangements (country),
- individuals or households; social groups or local environments; institutions; countries,
- private good; 'club' good; public good,
- producing negative or positive externalities,
- oriented towards particular goals (inward looking) or the common good (outward looking),
- based on associational (bridging), natural (bonding) or vertical relationships of power and authority (linking),
- varied – from trust limited to the immediate family to generalised trust,
- informal or formal,
- private (family) or civic (social capital in the public sphere),
- based on strong or weak ties (frequent or occasional contacts).

The outcome of the presented considerations of social capital is that it is very vague in its definition and thus operationalisation, which contributes to the perception of it as a category with insufficient scientific maturity. This definitional vagueness, according to some researchers, may be a barrier to its further empirical verification, however there are also opinions that the apparent discrepancies in conceptualisation reflect the complexity of the phenomenon and provide a basis for its further analysis. Hence, it is still not possible to speak of a theory of social capital in the scientific discourse. As stated by S. Martikke, "there is no consensus about which benefits are associated with different types of social capital, whether social capital is an individual or public good, whether it transcends or reproduces the existing social order and how it can be evidenced" (Martikke, 2017, p. 15). There are good reasons to believe that reaping its benefits is possible, provided the right context in which it was created and used. Despite the differences in approaches to social capital, it is seen as a resource positively entwined in social relations, which allows access to certain resources belonging to a given structure. The prevailing view in the literature is that social capital determines the position of a team in a collaborative network, the consequence of which is whether and to what extent it acquires resources, including knowledge (Norbutas, & Corten, 2018, pp. 120-134). Moreover, the position occupied in the relationship structure determines how they connect with other teams, which opens up new opportunities for the team and brings inter-team communication to a higher level of cooperation (Piazza et al., 2019, pp. 1857-1878; Liu et al., 2023, p. 4956).

Table 1 presents selected definitions of social capital present in the literature.

Table 1. Selected conceptualizations of social capital

Author	Definition
Baker W.E.	the resources that acting individuals draw from specific social structures and then use to pursue their interests (Baker, 1990, p. 619)
World Bank	the internal social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that govern interactions among people and the institutions in which they are embedded (World Bank, 1998)
Boxman E.A.W., De Grant P.M., Flap H.D.	the number of people who can be expected to provide support and the resources those people have at their disposal (Boxman et al., 1991, p. 52)
Knack S.	shared values, norms, informal networks and participation in associations that affect the ability of individuals to act collectively to achieve common goals (Knack, 2002, p. 42)
Lin N.	investments in social relations with expected returns (Lin 1999, p. 30)
Portes A.	the ability of active individuals to gain advantage through membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes, 1998, p. 6)
Theiss M.	a network of social relationships and norms that contributes to the interaction of individuals to improve their individual life situation and to prevent and solve social problems (Theiss, 2012, p. 40)
Wallace C.	strategy for securing the economic benefits of the entity (Wallace et al., 1999, pp. 751-770)
Turner J.H.	forces that enhance the potential for economic development at the micro, mezo and macro levels by creating and sustaining social relations and social patterns of organisation (Turner, 1999, p. 95)

Source: own elaboration based on the literature provided.

The author adopted the definition of social capital as "the resultant of trust, occurring on each side of the relationship, norms and values, and interaction, hidden in internal and external social relations, which enable both individuals and the group they form to benefit" (Libertowska, 2020, p. 64). The definitional form presented here is an attempt to bring together the different approaches to social capital, as a result of the features highlighted and the driving forces behind the category.

### 3. Methodology

This article contains the results of bibliometric and scientometric studies, which allow to draw conclusions about the interdisciplinary nature of the concept of social capital. Scientometric analysis is one of the methods of modern science, concerning people, things, processes and scientific phenomena, such as the number of scientific publications, their citations, authors, degrees, etc. It refers to the quantitative analysis of metadata of various aspects of scientific activity, its potential and results on a global scale (Racki, 1999). The analyses were carried out using databases generated in academic knowledge sources, in this case the Web of Science (WoS), which provides a platform and a collection of bibliographic and bibliometric databases containing bibliographic data, abstracts and information on citations of scientific publications.

The first stage of the conducted research was to generate a list of records with bibliometric data for the set search parameters, i.e. concerning primarily keywords, timeframe and indexes.

For the generated list of records no timeframe was specified, and all publications available in the database were considered, i.e. those dated between 1900 and 2024 for the following indexes: Social Sciences Index (SSCI), Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH), Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Science (CPCI-S), Book Citation Index – Social Science & Humanities (BKCI-SSH), Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) and Book Citation Index (BKCI-S). The article's keywords and KeyWords Plus were used as search criteria. and were defined as the phrase "social capital" (lowercase and uppercase spelling was taken into account).

This step provided a list of 31,104 records that met the search criteria, namely scientific publications included in the WoS database related to the topic of social capital.

The next stages of the research conducted consisted of analysing the keywords of the generated publications on the topic of social capital and their mutual correlations, thus clusters of keywords were

obtained, which were then used in connection with social capital. To visualise the data, the VOSviewer software was employed, providing a graphical presentation of the keywords along with the strength of the links between them. It should be added here that the generated keyword database, which is the input for the presented visualisation, was based directly on words (and their variations), taken directly from the bibliographic items contained therein. This resulted in limited possibilities for coding keywords, combining them into collocations, etc., with only their limitation being possible. This should be kept in mind when drawing conclusions about the networks presented in the article.

#### 4. Results

The Web of Science database currently contains more than 30,000 scientific publications dealing with the topic of social capital. The available data unequivocally indicated a steady increase in the interest of the scientific community in this phenomenon, as confirmed by the data shown in Figure 1. The first scientific item available in the database, dealing with the phenomenon of social capital, dates from 1959. In subsequent years, only occasional interest in the studied phenomenon was observed, reaching a total of 15 scientific publications in 1989. The real boom in interest occurred after the 1988 publication of an article by J. S. Coleman, entitled "Social capital in the creation of human capital", which presented social capital as a resource that benefits social groups.

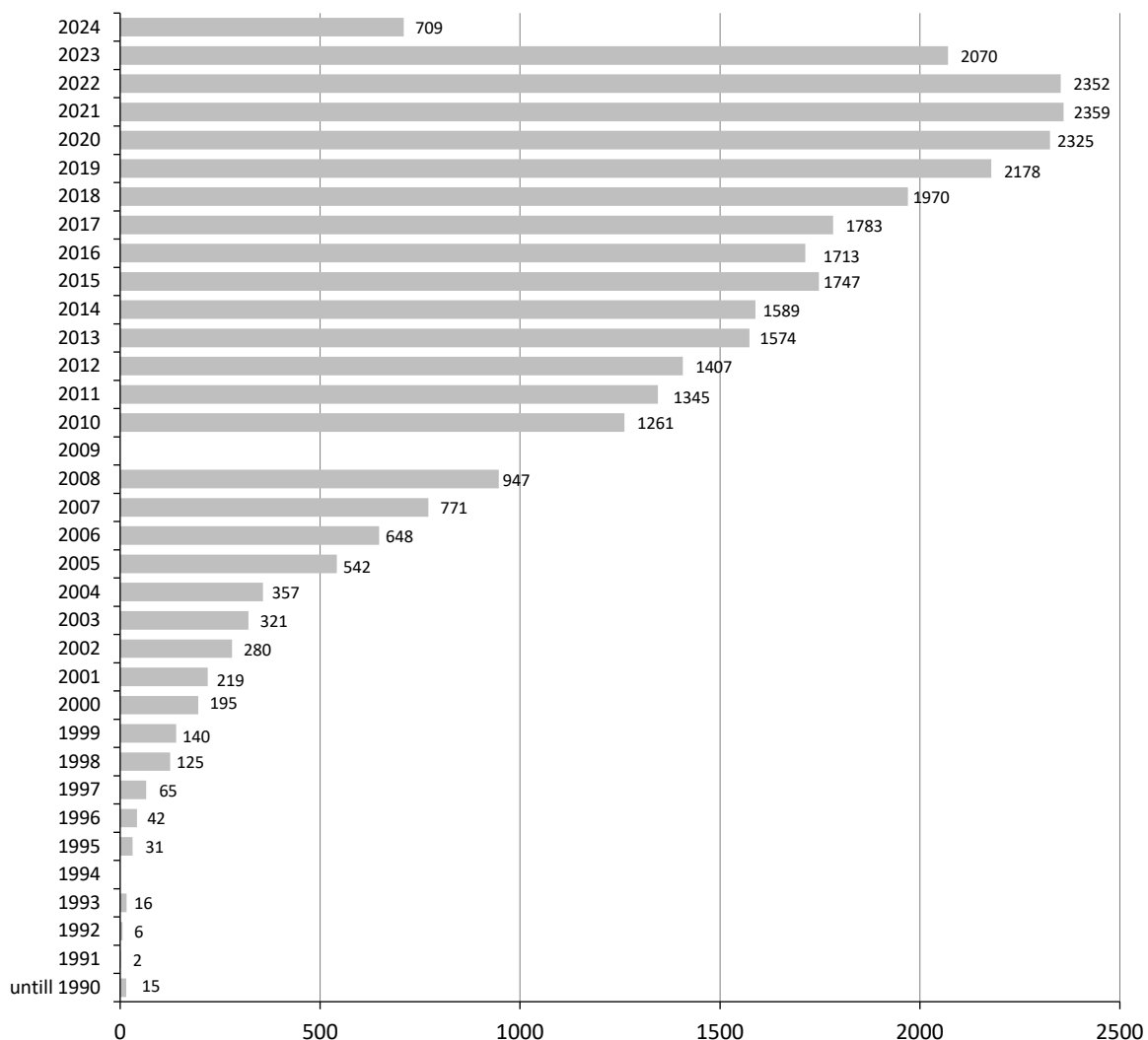


Fig. 1. Number of scientific publications available in WoS database as of 13.05.2024

Source: own study based on data from WoS database.

The use of social capital in the context of the scientific issues addressed in the publications indicates that this concept was applied to a number of different scientific categories highlighted within the WoS database. Based on data on the number of publications assigned to the various scientific categories highlighted within the WoS database, a ranking of the 25 most popular categories under which social capital works are published was created (Figure 2), according to which, social capital was most strongly embedded in the management category, regarding 3658 publications available in the database, a share of 11.38% of the total number of publications on this topic. Another group of categories strongly correlated with social capital were business, economics and sociology, accounting for a share of the total thematic publications at 9.78%, 9.61% and 9.51%, respectively.

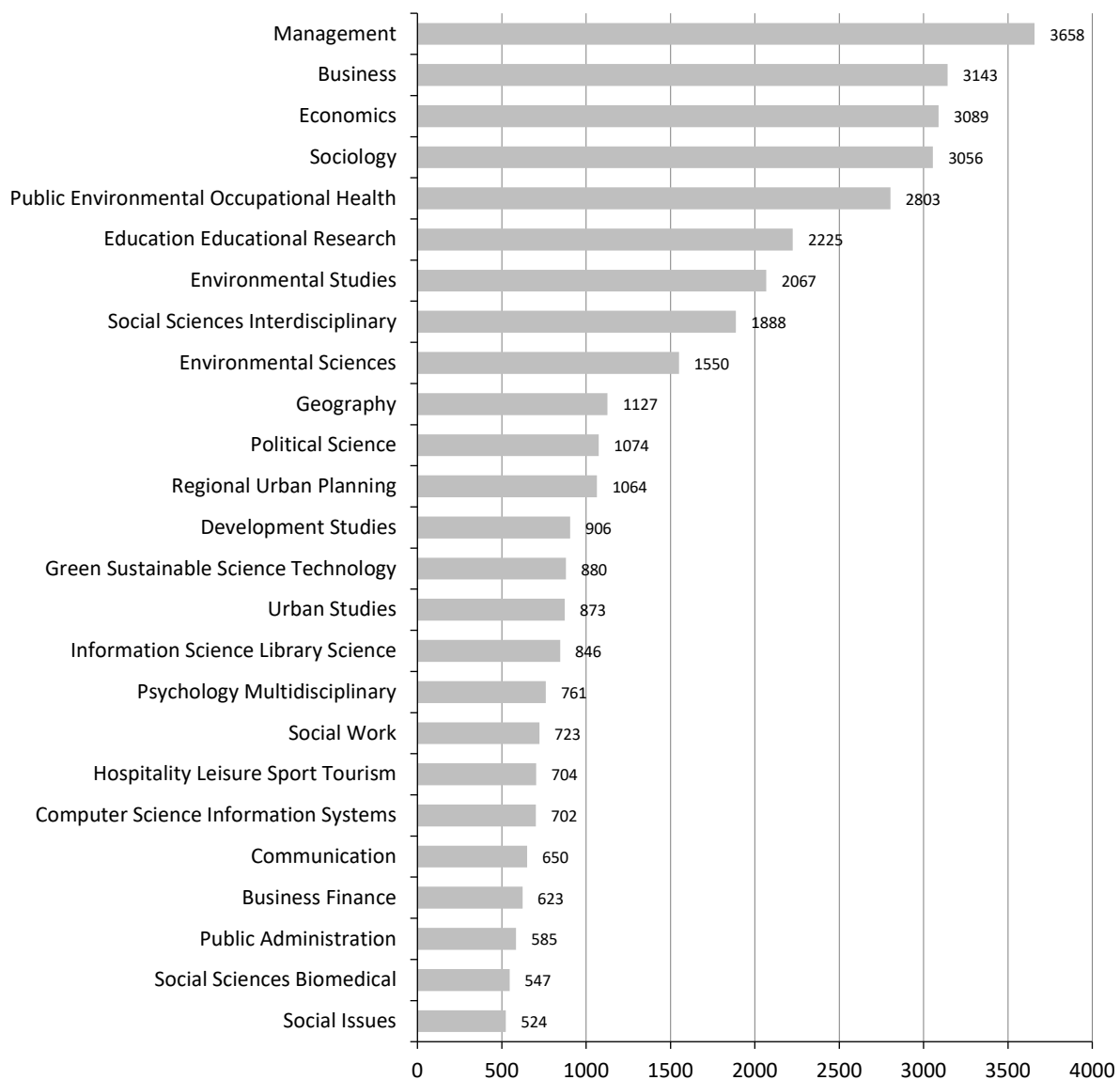


Fig. 2. The 25 most important scientific categories defined in the WoS database according to the number of publications to which they refer (as of 13.05.2024)

Source: own study based on data from WoS database.

The executed query of the WoS database and the generated database containing a list of bibliometric records (31104 records) provided input for the VOSviewer program. A network of co-occurring keywords within the publications, visible in the prepared database related to the topic of social capital, was drawn up. Taking the minimum number of occurrences of a keyword as 1 and excluding unconnected keywords, 368 words compiled in 22 clusters were obtained. In order to increase the



accuracy of the analysis and reduce the phenomenon of random occurrences, the minimum number of occurrences of a keyword was assumed to be 2. In addition, the list of keywords was reduced to include incidental words with no impact on the analysis being carried out, and whose presence was due to the constraints of placing and searching for keywords in bibliographic databases (e.g. 'don't'). As a result, a keywords co-occurrence map was obtained, consisting of 76 keywords in eight clusters as shown in Figure 3.

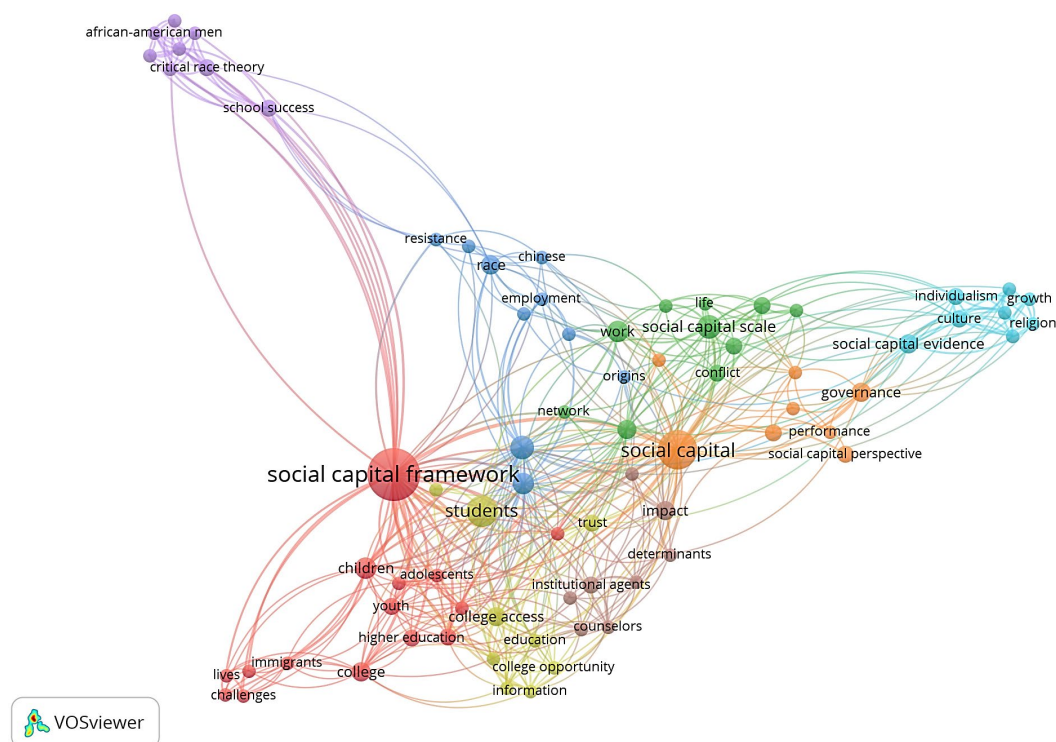


Fig. 3. Keywords co-occurrence map for the term 'social capital'

Source: own study based on data from WoS database.

Each cluster contains no less than nine components, the largest of which is cluster 1 with 15 elements. The component phrases belonging to each cluster are listed in Table 2. The direct connections of the keywords with the concept of social capital are presented in Figure 4. The keywords form a coherent whole, the individual elements (clusters) of which are interconnected, showing the emerging maturity of the network.

Table 2. List of cluster components identified in Figure 3

Clusters	Components
Cluster 1	adolescents, challenges, children, college, high school, higher education, immigrants, Latino students, lives, mentoring, network ties, social capital framework, undocumented immigrants, urban education, youth
Cluster 2	conflict, health, life, mental health, network, personality, reliability, social capital scale, support, work
Cluster 3	black, Chinese, employment, inequality, life course, networks, origins, race, resistance, social capital activation
Cluster 4	academic achievement, college access, college opportunity, education, experiences, guidance, information, students, trust
Cluster 5	African-American men, campus racial climate, college-students, critical race theory, predominantly white, school success, stereotype threat, student loan debt
Cluster 6	culture, dimension, Europe, growth, individualism, productivity, religion, social capital evidence
Cluster 7	experience, gender differences, governance, performance, social capital, social capital perspective, social capital theory, strategies
Cluster 8	community colleges, counsellors, determinants, enrolment, impact, institutional agents, predictors

Source: own study based on data from WoS database.

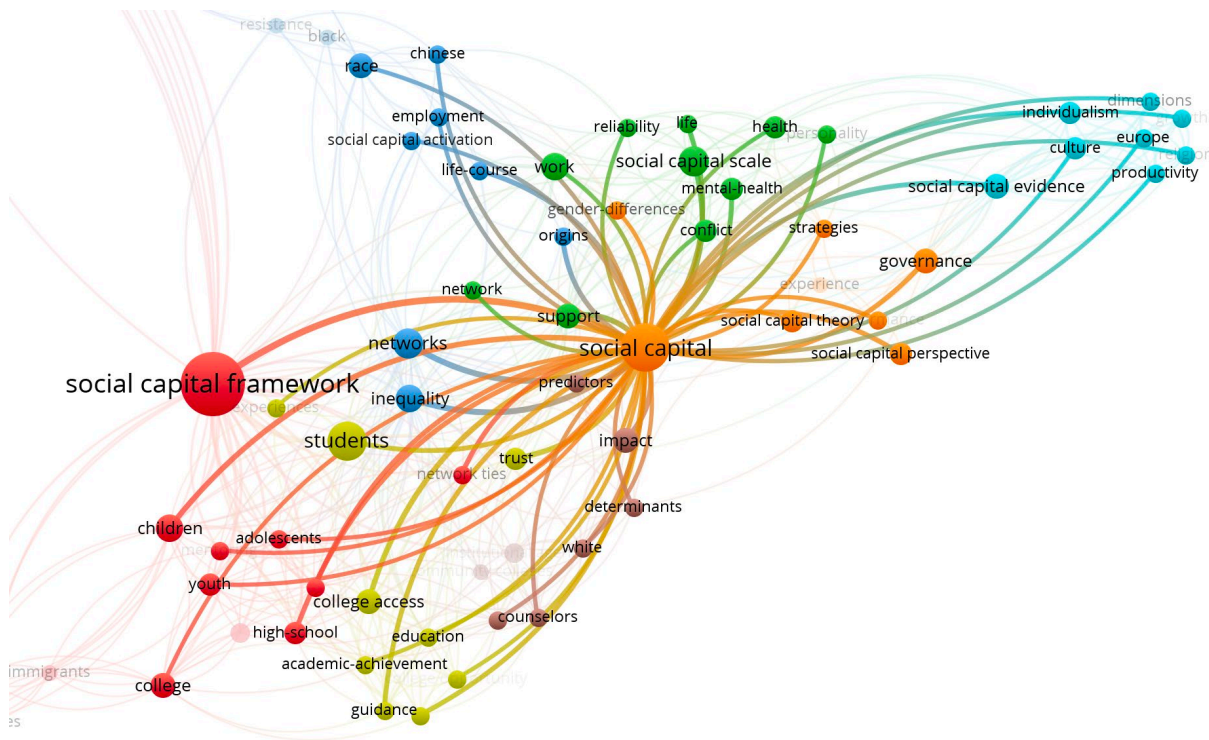


Fig. 4. Map of co-occurrence keywords in relation to social capital.

Source: own study based on data from WoS database.

The largest number of connections on the map is for 'social capital framework', connected to as many as 50 different terms with a total of 118 connections (including multiple connections). For this reason, the largest circle radius on the chart was observed in this case. Thus, this formulation was most often linked to others in a given network.

There were 56 different connections to the term 'social capital', and with repeated connections this number was 92. The number of occurrences was 16, which refers to the total number of documents in which the term appeared. The strength of the connections between the occurring terms can be assessed based on the distance between their districts on the graph. The further away two terms are from each other, the lower the strength of their connections.

The analysis shows that social capital is often analysed in the context of education level (education, college, college access, high-school etc.). Quite commonly conducted were studies on its level in different social groups depending on education (cf. Czapiński, 2015a, p. 418). However, a rather unique approach was also to study the stability of declarations of trust for public and financial institutions according to the level of education (cf. Genge, 2015, pp. 100-107).

Apart from terms related to education, social capital was also considered for terms related to networking, various social groups (including minorities), trust, responsibility, gender, mental condition of individuals, institutions, identity, productivity, etc. Their co-occurrence indicates that social capital is a rather capacious category, which confirms its interdisciplinary nature. This is consistent with the position of many researchers on the complexity of the structure of social capital. This multifacetedness is reflected in three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive (Liu et al., 2023, p. 4957). The first of these, i.e. the structural dimension, refers to the node 'actor's connections' such as network structure at macro level and network position at micro level. The relational dimension refers to interactions with other actors, which are strengthened through the participation of soft factors including respect and trust. The cognitive dimension refers to resources that help actors generate the same cognition, such as sharing project processes, convergence of goals, and jointly shared norms and values.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Social capital can be considered an interdisciplinary category that combines not only sociological and cultural, but also economic and political aspects, which makes it an important element in the economic processes for individuals and entire communities, individual businesses and the economy as a whole. The conducted analyses allowed to conclude that the concept of social capital is correlated with a wide range of concepts anchored in various research disciplines. The perceived multiplicity of approaches to the category of social capital in the literature also results in the wealth of formulated scientific definitions and the possibilities of operationalisation, which further strengthens the interdisciplinary character of this category. This was evident in attempts to embed it on different cognitive levels and to assign multidirectional causal powers on the grounds of the considerations carried out in the article.

The study showed that social capital can be classified as an interdisciplinary category. Although it almost always refers to the relationships between individuals and groups that make up larger collectivities, it can be a category parameterised and interpreted within different fields of knowledge.

It is also worth noting that the concept of social capital as an interdisciplinary category is a rather new field, and the amount of conceptualisation and operationalisation material accumulated so far does not pretend to form a theory on the subject. The various definitions and the context in which they are placed do not yet allow for the formation of a coherent scientific position. However, the results of the research carried out lead to the conclusion that many of the concepts co-occurring within the framework of publications on social capital are grounded in different fields of knowledge. Note that the adopted research methodology allowed the elimination of accidental occurrences of the analysed terms (singular), which in turn strengthens the credibility of this scientific view.

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