

Social Capital, Social Structures, and Triads

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Abstract

Conceptualizing relationships along a continuum—from social capital (empathy) to indifference, and from indifference to negative social capital (antipathy)—offers a valuable framework for analyzing social structures and their role in shaping economic and social exchanges. Different combinations of social capital, indifference, and negative social capital relationships produce ten triadic social structures. By examining how these distinct structures either facilitate or hinder the exchange of commodities, relational goods, and attachment value goods (things embedded with relational goods), this paper highlights the practical significance of social capital across diverse contexts, including families, economies, educational and political institutions, workplaces, and broader society.

Keywords

Social Capital, Indifference, Negative Social Capital, Social Structures, Triads

1. Introduction

Social capital theory has been used to study dyadic relationships that enable or impede the exchange of commodities and relational and attachment value goods and bads. In this paper, social capital is used to study triads of dyadic relationships, revealing important social structures and transitions between them that help explain and predict important social dynamics.

Georg Simmel (see [Simmel, 1950](#)) identified the triad as a qualitatively distinct form of social interaction, creating unique opportunities for coalition, exclusion, and conflict resolution. Modern network theories have built on Simmelian foundations, particularly through the development of concepts such as triadic closure and structural holes ([Burt, 1992](#); [Burt, 2004](#); [Granovetter, 1973](#)). These approaches, however, often reduce relational ties to binary or categorical forms. However, this

structural focus tends to overlook the affective qualities of relationships and the nature of group dynamics that are central to social capital. This paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing relational differences along a continuum from social capital to negative social capital, with indifference as a meaningful intermediate state. We use this framework to describe archetypal triadic social structures, each formed by different combinations of social capital, indifference, and negative social capital relationships.

Social structures, understood here as patterns of social relationships, play a fundamental role in shaping how people and groups exchange goods, maintain institutions, and pursue collective goals (Deji, 2011; Merton, 1938). By analyzing these configurations through the lens of social capital, we gain insight into how emotional connectedness—or its absence and opposite—affects individual and collective well-being.

This paper is exploratory in nature. Scientific inquiry can be divided into two parts: one concerned with gathering data, testing hypotheses, and evaluating results; the other with observing and reflecting on experiences that give rise to explanations and hypotheses. This work belongs to the latter, as concepts must first be identified and defined before they can be measured and subjected to hypothesis testing. In sum, the purpose of this paper is to lay a conceptual foundation of social structures, providing a basis for later empirical investigation. Our main contribution is to identify ten distinct social structures that include social capital, indifference, and negative social capital relationships.

This paper begins by defining social capital as empathy, what Adam Smith referred to as sympathy, which enables people to internalize each other's well-being, making them interdependent. Social capital is one of three archetypal relationships examined in this paper. Two other archetypal relationships identified and reviewed in this paper include indifferent relationships and negative social capital or antipathetic relationships. This paper then combines alternative combinations of the three archetypal relationships to form ten different social structures. For each social structure, this paper provides 1) a description, 2) a discussion of how each social structure enhances or discourages exchanges of commodities and relational and attachment value goods, and 3) stick figure illustrations of the structures. Finally, this paper suggests that social structure analysis can be applied to societies, schools, workplaces, teams, businesses, and countries.

2. Relationships and Social Capital

Research on social capital has been hampered because many proposed definitions fail to meet the logical requirements of a proper definition. Others fall short because they describe its uses, methods of creation, or places where it can be found rather than defining what it is (see Robison et al., 2002).

Definition of social capital. Despite social capital's lack of a commonly accepted definition, there is general agreement that it has to do with human relationships. For example, the Oxford dictionary defines social capital as “networks of relationships among people” (Hellerstein & Neumark, 2020). Lin viewed social capital as

an investment in social relations (Lin, 2001). Hanifan connected social capital to relationships characterized by goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy, and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit (Hanifan, 1916). Putnam claimed that it facilitates cooperation and mutually supportive relations in communities and nations and that we would suffer from its neglect (Putnam, 2000). Coleman associated social capital with networks of relationships that facilitate individual or collective action, including the development of human capital (Coleman, 1988). Finally, the World Bank defined it as “the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions” (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002).

While social capital has to do with relationships, i.e., the state of being connected, there are many ways that people can be connected. Earlier and again here, social capital is defined as empathy enabling people to internalize each other’s well-being, making them interdependent (Robison et al., 2002). A person’s empathy likely depends on accumulated values, commonalities, beliefs, personality type, genealogy, experiences, and circumstances. The source of social capital is the person or group that has empathy. The object of social capital is the person or group whose well-being is internalized by the source.

Negative social capital and indifference. Negative social capital is defined as antipathy. Negative social capital, like social capital, has a source and an object. The source of negative social capital is the person or group who has antipathy. The object of negative social capital is the person or group whose well-being is negatively internalized by the source. In between social capital and negative social capital relationships are arm’s-length or indifferent relationships where selfish actors exchange commodities when it benefits them, independent of any emotional connections.

Social capital is capital. Capital, as used here, is a resource or capacity that can produce a flow of valuable services or goods. Housing capital produces housing services. Human capital produces reasoning and problem-solving services. Social capital produces relational and attachment value goods.

Relational goods. While relational goods (bads) have been defined variously, here they refer to intangible signals that satisfy (frustrate) human needs for internal and external validation, belonging, and transcendence conveyed directly during interpersonal exchanges and sometimes indirectly through physical objects (Robison et al., 2012). Sometimes, relational goods (bads) can be included in exchanges of commodities and, in the process, alter the terms and level of commodity exchanges and the selection of exchange partners. On other occasions, including relational goods (bads) in exchanges of commodities, enables (prevents) exchanges that would not (would) have occurred if only commodities were exchanged. Relational goods (bads) may include expressions of caring (not caring), approval (disapproval), belonging (exclusion), desire for another’s well-being (harm), and physical objects on preferential (disadvantageous) terms.

Social capital is social. Capital has a residence, a place where it lives, works, or is stored. Social capital resides in people, which makes it social. It is also social

because people create and exchange relational goods with one another.

Social capital acts on things. Capital acts on things and other forms of capital, changing their value and meaning. Social capital (negative social capital) also acts on things by producing relational goods (bads) (Robison & Ritchie, 2010). Things embedded with relational goods (relational bads) create what is referred to here as attachment value goods (bads). Embedding a thing with relational goods (bad) often occurs as it becomes associated with social capital (negative social capital) relationships. Examples of attachment value goods include cherished photos, meaningful songs, foods served on special occasions, or places tied to happy memories. Examples of attachment value bads include embarrassing photos, distasteful songs, foods that produced illness, or places tied to failed events.

Investments and disinvestments in social capital. Capital can be enhanced through investments and maintenance or depreciated through misuse and neglect. The capacity of social capital to produce flows of relational goods can be improved through exchanges of relational goods, attachment value goods, and commodities on favorable terms. It can also be reduced through the absence of exchanges of relational and attachment value goods, as well as exchanges of relational bads and attachment value bads.

Social capital matters. Finally, social capital matters—nearly everywhere. It matters economically (Robison & Ritchie, 2010). It matters socially (Moore & Carpiano, 2019). It matters at work (Granovetter, 1973). It influences where and what we study, where we go on vacation, how we worship, where we live, what language we speak, and who we hang out with (Robison et al., 2002). Similarly, while not often discussed, negative social capital matters in nearly all the same areas and instances as social capital.

3. Social Ties and Network Analysis

Early psychological theories, particularly Heider's (1946) balance theory and its extensions by Cartwright & Harary (1956), recognized that social ties encompass positive and negative qualities that profoundly influence network stability and social cohesion. Davis's (1967) elaboration of clustering and structural balance reinforced the importance of relational valence by highlighting how triadic configurations tend toward stable, balanced states. These theories were foundational in recognizing that positive and negative ties contributed actively to network cohesion or division.

Despite this early attention to tie valence, much of the later work in network analysis, particularly from the 1970s onwards, shifted towards structural and computational modelling that often assumed unweighted or unsigned ties (Newman, 2004). This was partly due to the methodological limitations of early data collection tools and a broader preference for parsimonious models. However, renewed interest in the role of negative social ties emerged in the early 2000s, especially in organizational and political contexts where conflict, rivalry, and distrust have been shown to significantly affect network performance and outcomes (Everett &

Borgatti, 2014; Labianca & Brass, 2006). The field of signed network analysis has since sought to model networks with both positive and negative edges, acknowledging that antipathies are not merely the absence of friendship, but distinct forms of social relation with their own dynamics (Leskovec et al., 2010).

This paper presents a methodology for analyzing social structures using positions on a relational continuum that spans empathetic, indifferent, and antipathetic ties. This spectrum reflects a bipolar range of emotions and attitudes akin to those used in psychological models of affect and social evaluation (Osgood et al., 1957), and aligns with Heider's original typology of attitudes such as liking, esteeming, and their opposites.

The explicit inclusion of indifferent ties adds conceptual and empirical value by highlighting an important dimension of network interactions that neither fosters cooperation nor actively promotes antagonism. Indifferent relationships facilitate interactions based on institutional norms, market incentives, or role-based expectations, without necessarily engendering trust, empathy, hostility, or rivalry. Their inclusion enables researchers to distinguish between relational structures that actively promote social cohesion (positive ties), structures characterized by active opposition or tension (negative ties), and those where actors maintain neutrality or detachment.

Moreover, indifferent relationships play a crucial mediating role in stabilizing social networks. They provide structural buffers and avenues for transaction in situations where emotional ties could introduce bias or where negative ties might otherwise prevent exchange altogether. Recognizing these social ties allows researchers to better capture the structural conditions under which individuals or organizations rely on impersonal or formal interactions.

Conceptualizing relationships on a bipolar continuum (empathetic-indifferent-antipathetic) rather than as strictly positive or indifferent allows for deeper exploration of relationship changes. It facilitates understanding the conditions under which indifferent ties become empathetic or antipathetic, and how changes in one relationship within a triad can influence the stability or evolution of others.

By integrating this bipolar continuum into triadic social structures, the analysis extends existing network theory to capture the emotional and normative dimensions of social capital more fully. In doing so, it proposes a more nuanced framework for understanding how different configurations of relational quality shape opportunities for the exchange of commodities and relational goods, the creation of attachment value for institutions, and the distribution of well-being within social systems.

4. Social Structures and Social Capital

Consider three actors represented as A, B, and C. Relationships between them are denoted as AB, BC, and AC. While relationships are sometimes asymmetric, for simplicity, we assume relationship symmetry among AB, BC, and AC, a condition promoted by arbitrage. Adding additional relationship details, including asym-

metry in relationships, expands the number of models to consider that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Social capital relationship (+). A social capital relationship is represented by “+”. In such relationships, individuals internalize each other’s well-being, motivating them to act in ways that enhance their own well-being and that of others. Social capital relationships are essential for producing and exchanging relational goods and creating attachment value goods. Actors who enjoy social capital relationships also exchange commodities on preferential terms, often favoring those in commodity inferior positions, reducing commodity disparities.

Social capital relationships, however, are among the most emotionally demanding and vulnerable. They are prone to breakdown when relational and attachment value goods are exchanged or when commodities are traded on terms that disadvantage one of the exchange actors. Ultimately, the primary way to build and sustain social capital is through the continued exchange of relational and attachment value goods and commodities on preferential terms.

Indifferent relationships (0). An indifferent relationship is represented by “0”. Indifferent relationships are often assumed in neoclassical economic models where selfish, perfectly rational, and fully informed actors exchange commodities in formal markets motivated by their need to satisfy their own physical needs.

In practice, purely indifferent relationships are rare, but relatively indifferent relationships are common. An indifferent tie involves two actors who are connected, whether through shared context, interaction, or mutual awareness, yet neither internalizes the other’s well-being (empathetic) or lack of well-being (antipathetic) to an extent that meaningfully influences their actions. This form of tie does not require familiarity or emotional closeness; the actors may barely know each other, or they may know each other well but remain emotionally disengaged, exhibiting little or no concern or investment in one another’s experiences. Indifferent ties are thus defined not by the presence or absence of interaction, but by the lack of affective consideration. Their indifference does not diminish the importance of their role in social structures. Still, even indifferent relationships rely indirectly on social capital, as orderly exchanges typically require shared attachment value for rules, laws, customs, or social norms.

Negative social capital relationships (-). A negative social capital relationship, represented by “-”, arises when one party feels worse off as the well-being of its object improves. These relationships do not generate relational goods—essential for meeting socio-emotional needs—and instead produce and exchange relational goods, often contributing to unhappiness. At best, they may yield substitutes for relational goods when individuals bond over shared antipathy or derive satisfaction from others’ misfortune. Negative social capital can also serve as a resource in mobilizing against perceived threats.

Those engaged in negative relationships often lack respect for, or attachment to, shared institutions. Nevertheless, they may exploit the attachment others hold to such institutions while disregarding them when convenient. Frequently embed-

ded within larger social systems, these relationships undermine collective well-being from within.

Interactions in negative social capital are typically avoided or, when unavoidable, defensive or destructive. They are most advantageous for resource-rich actors who can impose unfavorable terms on weaker partners. Ultimately, they remain deficient in producing the relational goods necessary for socio-emotional fulfillment, offering only imperfect substitutes through shared hostility or the imposition of losses on others.

The importance of all three archetypal relationships. All three archetypal relationships, social capital, indifference, and negative social capital are important. Social capital enables the creation and exchange of relational goods as well as attachment-value goods. Indifferent relationships play a key role in markets, where developing social capital between exchange partners may not be feasible. Finally, shared negative social capital for the same object can be significant for mobilizing resources required for defense.

5. Ten Social Structures

Social structure shorthand. Social structures are patterns of relationships formed through past exchanges of relational and attachment value goods and bads and commodities between actors A, B, and C (Deji, 2011; Merton, 1938). We focus here on structures composed of triads—sets of three dyadic relationships represented by AB, BC, and AC.

For clarity, we use a shorthand to describe each triad: the three relationships are enclosed in parentheses (AB, BC, AC), with the nature of each relationship replacing its placeholder. For example, if AB = +, BC = 0, and AC = −, the shorthand for the triad would be (+, 0, −).

Such triadic social structures can occur across many domains, including individuals, families, businesses, religions, political organizations, schools, athletic teams, social clubs, cities, countries, and political movements.

Social structure and connectivity. Each social structure consists of three relationships. The strength of connectivity within a triad reflects the likelihood of exchanging relational and attachment value goods and commodities, as well as supporting institutions and investing in shared resources. To represent this, each type of relationship is assigned a connectivity score.

An empathetic relationship (+) is scored +1 because it is most likely to involve exchanges of relational goods, attachment value, and commodities. An indifferent relationship (0) is scored 0, as such ties rarely involve relational or attachment value goods and generally support commodity exchange only when both parties benefit. An antipathetic relationship (−) is scored −1, reflecting its low likelihood of positive exchange; if exchanges occur, commodity benefits must outweigh the relational bads produced.

A triad's overall connectivity score equals the sum of its three dyadic scores, ranging from +3 (three empathetic ties: +, +, +) to −3 (three antipathetic ties: −, −, −).

-). While this measure provides a useful general indicator of triadic social capital and exchange potential, it aggregates positive and negative ties, thereby masking the more nuanced dynamics each structure embodies.

Social Structure and Stability. Social structure stability is defined here as the likelihood that one social structure will transition into another. It is assumed to be correlated with the average difference in dyadic connectivity. Social structure stability is an important subject that we intend to address in later work.

More complicated social structures. Triadic social structures of dyadic relationships can be generalized into more complex structures by combining more than one of the ten structures into a single structure. However, creating more complicated social structures by repeating one or more of the ten basic structures would not create another social structure. We could complicate our analysis by allowing for asymmetric relationships and more variations in the intensity of relationships than the three archetypal ones of social capital, indifference, and negative social capital introduced here. However, asymmetric relationships would require differences in resources and power between A, B, and C—another complication we do not consider here. This paper is content to “walk before running” by first identifying ten fundamental social structures.

Naming social structures. Imposing symmetry on relationships in the social structure reduces each triad to three relationships. Exchange potential in the triad is indicated by the triad’s connectivity score, and from that score, we associate a name that represents the structure. Beginning with the highest possible connectivity score and in descending order, (+, +, +) is named an empathetic social structure, (+, +, 0) is named a broker social structure, (+, +, -) is named a peacemaker social structure, (+, 0, 0) is named an outsider social structure, (+, 0, -) is named an unstable social structure, (0, 0, 0) is named an indifferent social structure, (0, 0, -) is named the bystander social structure, (+, -, -) is named the discrimination structure, (0, -, -) is named the cheap social structure, and (-, -, -) is named the Hobbes or antipathetic social structure. The naming basis for each social structure will be explained later.

Social structure and power. Social structures are often used to describe the distribution of power in relationships, creating strata or groups in society organized by their influence and ability to direct the efforts of others. For example, officers, parents, teachers, and employers have the power to direct the actions of soldiers, children, students, and workers by virtue of their position and resources earned or inherited. Of course, there are different ways to exert influence on others. A popular cliché has suggested that we encourage a donkey to pull a cart using a stick to punish, offering a carrot to reward with a commodity, or embracing it with a hug to reward with a relational good.

While the stick, carrot, or hug metaphor lacks academic standing, it does suggest that responses to those in power depend critically on relationship connectivity. If the relationships are based on negative social capital, soldiers may revolt against their officers, children may disobey their parents, students may ignore

their teachers, and workers may strike rather than comply with their bosses' directions. In indifferent relationships, power may be granted in response to potential gains from commodity exchanges. And in social capital relationships, power is granted through exchanges of relational goods, signaling empathy of those in power for those they have authority and power over. In response to social capital, soldiers who know their officers have internalized their well-being willingly obey their orders; children who know their parents care about them obey them because they want to please them; students who recognize the knowledge resource of their teacher is being shared for their benefit voluntarily provide them attention.

Social capital relationships in the ten social structures. Social structures, patterns of relationships determined by past exchanges of relational goods and commodities, determine the connectivity in the structure. Social capital connections represent the strongest possible connectivity in a relationship and, as such, have an important role in determining the patterns of exchanges in a social structure and the well-being of members of the structure.

Social capital in the social structure plays a crucial role in establishing patterns of exchange. When institutions, including rules, norms, formal laws, customs, and practices, acquire attachment value by becoming embedded with relational goods, they enable exchanges by helping establish the terms and level of exchange or prevent them when institutions lack agreement and support. Even people in indifferent relationships require their institutions to acquire attachment value because institutions enforced with fear and threats have limited effectiveness. Therefore, the role of social capital in the ten social structures is two-fold: 1) to produce relational and attachment value goods and to facilitate the exchange of commodities on favorable terms; and 2) to embed institutions with attachment values that establish mutually agreed terms and conditions of exchange.

6. Ten Triadic Social Structures

Three actors, represented as A, B, and C, can create three symmetric dyadic relationships, expressed as AB, BC, and AC. Relationships are designated for each relationship using symbols "+", "0", and "-" for empathy, indifference, and antipathy, respectively. Their connectivity scores range from 3 to -3 and may not be unique to a particular structure. The three dyadic relationships, when combined in different ways, produce ten different social structures of varying connectivity. These are named, represented using triadic shorthand, and reported in **Table 1** along with their connectivity scores. While dyadic relationships are symmetric, relationships between dyads in the social structure may be asymmetric.

Empirical Analysis. In the next section, we ask: Can you identify the ten different social structures in real-world encounters illustrated by our examples? Only once we establish that our proposed social structures are recognizable can we proceed to empirical tests that address questions such as: What is the distribution of social structures? What is the nature and causes of transitions between them? Do

transitions occur in the order suggested by their connectivity scores? Is connectivity reversible? And what happens when two or more social structures combine?

Table 1. Ten triadic social structures representing alternative combinations of three dyadic relationships and their connectivity scores.

<i>Social structure names, shorthand representations, and descriptions</i>	Three dyadic relationships			Connectivity score
	A and B	B and C	A and C	
1. <i>The empathetic social structure</i> (+, +, +). Features empathetic relationships that facilitate exchanges of relational and attachment value goods and commodities on favorable terms between actors A, B, and C.	+	+	+	3
2. <i>The broker social structure</i> (+, +, 0). Includes B, an empathetic broker, who has opportunities to use his/her connections with A and C to enable them to exchange commodities.	+	+	0	2
3. <i>The peacemaker social structure</i> (+, +, -). Includes B, an empathetic peace maker, who has opportunities to use his/her empathetic connections with A and C to reduce conflicts between them.	+	+	-	1
4. <i>The outsider social structure</i> (+, 0, 0). Includes A and B who enjoy the benefits from their empathetic relationship, not available to outsider C.	+	0	0	1
5. <i>The unstable social structure</i> (+, 0, -). Includes B and C, whose indifferent relationships are unstable because B is friends with A, who is C's enemy.	+	0	-	0
6. <i>The indifferent social structure</i> (0, 0, 0). Include selfish strangers A, B, and C whose relationships are maintained by opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges facilitated by shared attachment value for institutions that enable orderly exchanges.	0	0	0	0
7. <i>The bystander social structure</i> (0, 0, -). Includes B, whose indifferent relationship with A and C makes it unlikely he/she will become involved in A and C's conflict.	0	0	-	-1
8. <i>The discrimination social structure</i> (+, -, -). Includes A and B who enjoy the benefits from their empathetic relationship and use them to disadvantage and exclude C, who is the object of their antipathy.	+	-	-	-1
9. <i>The cheap social structure</i> (0, -, -). Include A and B, whose indifferent relationships are maintained by their shared antipathy for C.	0	-	-	-2
10. <i>The Hobbes social structure</i> (-, -, -). Includes A, B, and C who war against each other, making their lives, as the philosopher Tomas Hobbes described, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.	-	-	-	-3

7. Descriptions, Examples, and Analysis of Social Structures

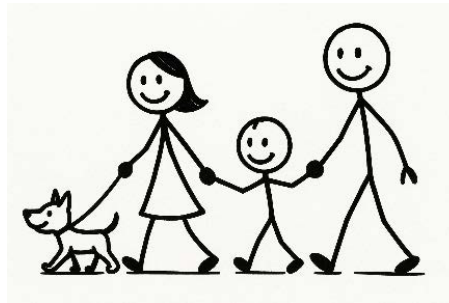
Sections 7.1 through 7.10 describe, illustrate, and discuss the roles of social capital, indifference, and negative social capital in social structures 1 through 10 identified in **Table 1**.

7.1. The Empathetic Social Structure (+, +, +)

Description. In an empathetic social structure, social capital connections among actors in relationships AB, BC, and AC enable the direct exchange of both relational goods, attachment value goods, and commodities on preferential terms of exchange.

Discussion. Because members of this structure internalize each other's well-being, they enjoy increased incentives for specialization and trade, investment in public goods, optimal management of common resources, reduced oversight costs, and collective actions. Furthermore, empathetic relationships produce an environment in which relational goods are produced and exchanged and embedded in things to create attachment value goods. Attachment value for institutions, rules, customs, and traditions reduces conflicts over what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Finally, the production and exchange of relational goods and attachment value goods satisfy both physical and socio-emotional needs of members of the empathetic structure. This structure can be expressed with the expression: "one for all and all for one". Also, because of empathy for each other, actors in this structure internalize externalities (acts that impose consequences on others without their permission). Thus, problems that plague selfish social structures, such as free riders, negative externalities, inadequate investments in public goods, unsustainable use of natural resources, unsupported institutions, and lack of collective action, are not a threat in the empathetic structure.

The primary threat facing the empathetic network is sustainability. Of all the social structures, the empathetic social structure is the most energy-consuming and the one that can most easily be undermined by social acts that destroy trust, regard, empathy, and sympathy, replacing social capital connections with indifferent or antipathetic ones. Furthermore, maintaining the three dyadic relationships with adequate exchanges of relational goods and commodities on favorable terms risks being viewed by some as unequal or unfair. As the size of a network increases, the number of dyadic relationships requiring social energy expands, meaning that as social structures grow, so does the difficulty of maintaining the empathetic nature of the social structure.



Examples. The empathetic social structure is exemplified by those nuclear families that act as a single unit, where family members internalize each other's well-being. Perhaps their empathetic connections explain why family businesses are so

successful. Also characterizing the empathetic structure are teams committed to the same goal, so that each one's effort is in the interest of the entire team. Often, an empathetic structure is produced during extreme stress and sacrifice, such as soldiers who come to depend on each other because their survival requires it. Although social capital in large units is difficult to maintain, it is possible. For example, the Bank of America tries to foster a social capital connection among its employees (Radeva & Krasner, 2024). According to Radeva and Krasner, Bank of America pledged to pay its workers a living wage of \$25 minimum by 2025 and has so far raised its minimum wage to \$23 an hour, and offers extensive benefits that include 16 weeks of paid parental leave for both primary and secondary caregivers, flexible scheduling, and backup dependent care.

7.2. The Broker Social Structure (+, +, 0)

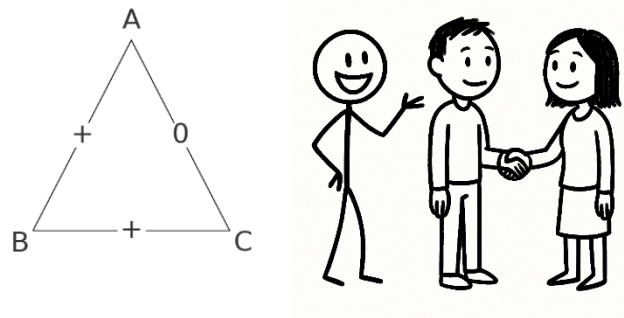
Description. In the broker social structure, actor B's social capital with actors A and C may enable A and C to indirectly exchange some relational and attachment value goods and commodities on preferential terms. Shared attachment values for institutions allow them to exchange commodities on terms established in markets. B may use some of its own resources to effect exchanges between A and C, becoming a mediator in the process.

Discussion. The distinguishing feature of the broker social structure is B's opportunity and willingness to leverage his or her social capital to enable exchanges. The hope is that A and C will engage relational goods and commodities on favorable terms because they want to please B, with whom they have an empathetic relationship, and build social capital between them in the process. Even without B's social capital, A and C may exchange commodities when they both benefit.

Compared to the empathetic social structure, the broker social structure is likely to be less productive because specialization and trade that are enabled by empathy are reduced when only two of the three relationships are empathetic. Also downgraded by the reduction in connectivity are investments in public goods, care of common resources, and support for institutions.

Brokers can be distinguished by their knowledge of the goods and services that A and C could beneficially exchange. B's knowledge could also include knowledge of the institutions that organize their potential exchange. For example, a real estate broker is expected to have the skills and contact information required to complete a legally binding exchange of property (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

One threat associated with the broker social structure is that attempts to connect A and C may be unsuccessful or disappointing, threatening the broker's relationship with either A or C or both. The consequences may be that the empathetic connections between broker B and A, and broker B and C, are downgraded to indifferent relationships or worse. In this case, the threat is expressed as: "Mother loved you best". Then it is a short step from the broker social structure to the peacemaker social structure in which A and C view each other with antipathy.



Examples. The 1998 Disney movie *The Parent Trap* tells the story of identical twins, Hallie and Annie, who were separated at birth by their parents' divorce. Years later, they meet unexpectedly at a summer camp, where they discover their true relationship. Determined to reunite their family, they switch places to bring their divorced parents back together. Lindsay Lohan portrays both twins.

On one occasion, Lindon and his wife, Bonnie, acted as intermediaries between their daughter and son-in-law and a trusted real estate agent. Because their daughter and son-in-law were unavailable, Lindon and Bonnie toured homes recommended by the agent in a competitive housing market. With the agent's guidance, they found a suitable house and helped finalize the purchase—without their daughter or son-in-law ever seeing the property. On a more personal note, Lindon and Bonnie were introduced to each other by mutual friends who acted as informal brokers.

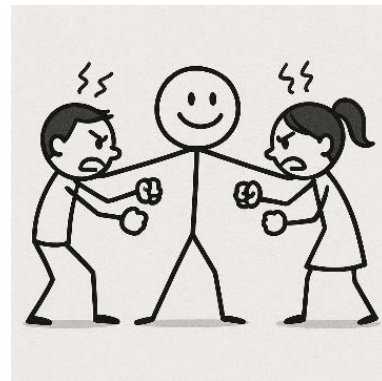
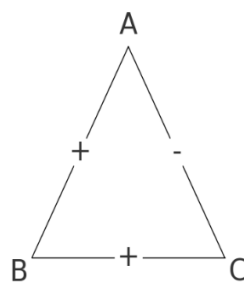
7.3. The Peacemaker Social Structure (+, +, -)

The peacemaker social structure resembles the broker structure, except that the relationship between A and C is hostile. The antipathy between A and C prevents them from exchanging not only relational and attachment-value goods but also commodities. Consequently, A and C often impose embargoes, tariffs, or other barriers to exchange. Communication between A and C is strained. In this context, B leverages its social capital with both parties to provide peacemaking services and to moderate their defensive and destructive interactions. As a peacemaker, B often seeks to establish institutions that enable the exchange of commodities and eliminate defensive and destructive acts. These efforts to foster attachment to shared institutions and facilitate exchange are frequently framed in relational terms, such as: "Will you do it for me?"

Discussion. Empathetic connections to conflicting parties provide B with an opportunity to prevent or mitigate defensive and destructive acts between them. The challenge of the peacemaker social structure is whether the empathy A and C have for B will be enough to overcome the negative social capital they have for each other. The peacemaker may still use the possible exchange of relational goods between A and C and B as an incentive for A and C to exchange commodities, but it is unlikely for them to exchange relational and attachment value goods. The

peacemaker and the broker perform similar duties, but the peacemaker faces greater challenges in achieving success.

Sometimes, peacemaker B provides A and C resources that encourage them to upgrade their antipathetic relationships to at least relationships of indifference. The significant opportunity of the peacemaker structure is to divert resources used for destructive and defensive purposes to efforts to improve their well-being. One threat associated with this model is the possibility that B may lose his/her envied peacemaker so that neither A nor C will maintain an empathetic relationship with B. Another threat is that jealousy between A and C about each other's relationship with B may lead one or both to sabotage each other's empathetic relationships with B.



Examples. Former President of the United States Bill Clinton was a peacemaker when he helped Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Yasser Arafat find conditions for peace that led to their shaking hands at the Oslo Accords signing ceremony on September 13, 1993. Enabling President Clinton's successful effort to broker the peace arrangement was his empathetic connections with both Rabin and Arafat (see Oslo Peace Accord) (Oslo, 2000). In another example of the peacemaker structure, B has empathetic ties to A and B but is unable to help them agree to a treaty. Social workers often work with troubled families in which children are faced with the challenge of trying to please divorced and antipathetic parents competing for their affections. In these cases, the child is often forced to choose between them, making it almost impossible for the child to maintain separate empathetic relationships. In this instance, the picture would show A and C in a tug of war pulling on B to gain her endorsement.

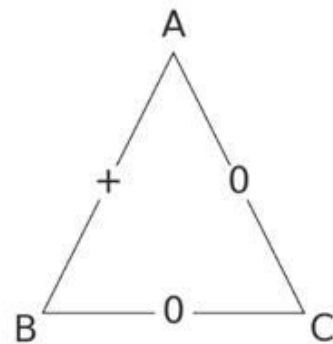
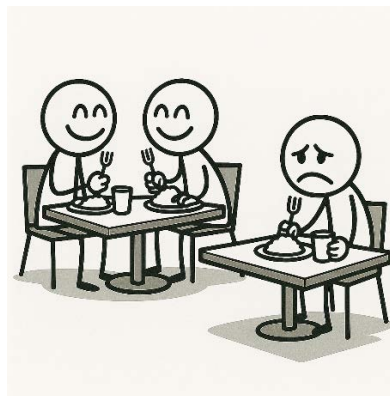
7.4. The Outsider Social Structure (+, 0, 0)

Description. In the outsider social structure, B loses her empathetic relationship with C and can no longer serve as a broker. However, this reduced connection lessens A's envy of C's prior ties to B, shifting A's attitude toward C from antipathy to indifference. A and B retain their empathetic bond, allowing them to exchange both relational and attachment value goods and commodities. C, lacking empathetic ties with either A or B, becomes an outsider. Nevertheless, C still benefits

from commodity exchange, as all parties continue to recognize and uphold shared institutional agreements that enable such transactions.

Discussion. In this social structure, A and B enjoy an empathetic relationship that provides them with economic and social benefits. However, A and B only have an indifferent relationship with C, who is denied many of the benefits enjoyed by A and B. Being excluded from an empathetic network exposes C to what some have called the dark side of social capital, being an outsider and lacking opportunities enjoyed by the empathetic relationship that exists between A and B. Empathetic groups often share a commonality that the excluded party lacks. A commonality frequently lacking between A and B and C is the difference in income and wealth. This lack of commonality makes it difficult for C to live in the same neighborhood, attend the same school, or have access to the same medical attention as A and B. Other commonalities that produce exclusion include gender, race, age, education, and language.

Empathetic relationships among subgroups of a larger population are a natural means of gaining special benefits not available to members of the larger group. For example, such relationships are the basis of family formations, business partnerships, and clubs emphasizing practical activities and interests. They often exist because they require less social energy than sustaining larger empathetic networks. The threat associated with the outsider social structure is that the excluded party C will view empathetic connections between A and B with hostility and adopt defensive and destructive measures to reduce their disadvantages. This threat is likely realized when A and B are connected by inherited commonalities making it impossible for C ever to gain an empathetic relationship with actors A and B. Alternatively, C may attempt to level the playing field by trying to destroy the empathetic ties between A and B or either A or B substitute its social energy devoted to the other in favor of C and downgrade their own relationship to indifference.



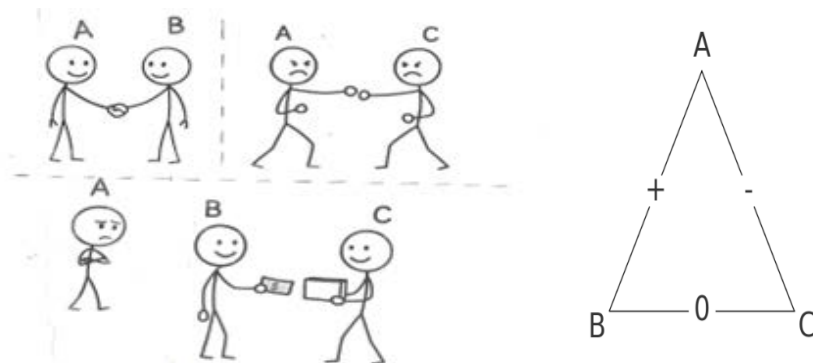
Examples. The outsider social structure is illustrated in the adjacent stick figure drawing in which an outsider sits alone in the lunchroom while actors A and B enjoy each other's company at a different table. Another example of the outsider structure is fraternities and sororities on university campuses. These enjoy hous-

ing and social opportunities that are not available to non-fraternity brothers and non-sorority sisters. These social connections may also provide employment, housing, and education opportunities after they have left the university.

7.5. The Unstable Social Structure (+, 0, -)

Description. In the unstable social structure, B has empathetic connections to A and indifferent connections to C. B is in a difficult position because it has ties to both A and C, who view each other as enemies. In contrast to the peacemaker structure, (+, +, -), B has empathetic connections to both A and C, which can be used to connect them. In the unstable structure, B lacks the strong connections to both A and C to act as a peacemaker.

Discussion. B would like to maintain the status quo because its social capital connections to A provide them opportunities to exchange relational and attachment value goods and commodities on favorable terms. B would also like to maintain their indifferent relationship with C because it offers commodity exchange opportunities. However, B's position is threatened by both A and C. A asks B: How can you internalize my well-being while trading with my enemy C? C asks B: How can I trust you when you are friends with my enemy A? Such a conflict will lead A to realize that B is not really a friend and downgrade their relationship. C will likely downgrade its relationships with B, whom they view as aiding their enemy.



Examples. Hungary, Russia, and the European Union (EU) have unstable and conflicting relationships. Hungary is culturally and economically tied to the EU through treaties and agreements that provide it significant benefits. At the same time, Hungary maintains economic ties with Russia. The conflict arises because the EU supports Ukraine in its war with Russia and would like Hungary to downgrade its relationship with Russia. This tension is increased with Hungary's refusal to support Ukraine's EU membership and military aid stances that all other EU members have endorsed. Recently, the EU threatened economic retaliation if Hungary continues to block additional aid to Ukraine (Mishra, 2024).

7.6. The Indifferent Social Structure (0, 0, 0)

Description. In the indifferent social structure model, social capital supports attachment to institutions, rules, customs, traditions, and formal laws, allowing

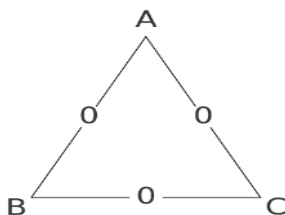
A, B, and C to exchange commodities with minimal conflict when doing so aligns with their selfish interests. In his behavioral economics book *Misbehaving*, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein contrast the behavior of “econs”—the rational, self-interested, perfectly informed agents of traditional economic theory—with that of real-world “humans.” Econs, as Thaler describes them, engage in exchanges without emotional ties or empathetic relationships, reflecting an indifferent stance toward others (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009).

Discussion. Economic theory based on the behavior of econs has provided a useful framework for analyzing people who, under certain conditions, behave like econs. This is especially true when the identity of exchange partners is obscured, and the transaction raises no moral concerns that might threaten one’s sense of ideal self. The econ-based social structure—represented as (0, 0, 0) occupies a middle ground between the extremes of (+, +, +) and (–, –, –). It reflects the world envisioned by neoclassical economists, in which relationships are driven purely by opportunities for selfish commodity exchange.

In this structure, relationships are created, maintained, or dissolved based solely on the potential to improve one’s material well-being. Such connections are flexible, low in social energy consumption, and incentivized by personal gain. The model functions efficiently if individuals perceive opportunities for mutually beneficial exchange and share attachment to the institutions that uphold property rights, contractual norms, and market rules, the foundational elements of the social contract that make the world of econs possible.

However, the indifferent social structure has a critical vulnerability. Because individuals differ in intelligence, timing, strength, speed, or access to information, the distribution of benefits is inevitably uneven. Those with less—typically the majority—may grow resentful or envious of those with more. When perceptions of unfairness arise, they often spark efforts to redistribute wealth or opportunity. This can erode indifferent relationships, sometimes transforming them into antipathetic ones.

The Achilles’ heel of the indifferent social structure is that natural inequalities—rooted in differences in ability, inheritance, and position—lead to disparities in commodity wealth. Without empathy to generate relational and attachment value goods, there are no counterbalancing forces to soften or moderate these disparities. As a result, the structure becomes vulnerable to tension, resentment, and conflict (Chua, 2004).

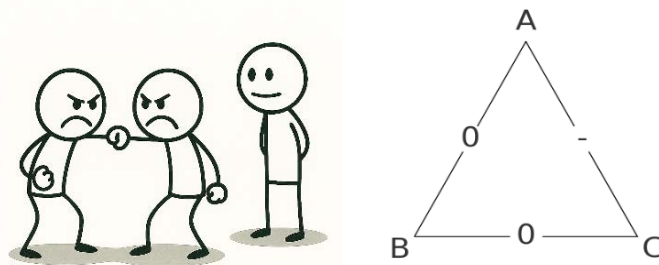


Examples. Online shopping may characterize behavior consistent with the indifferent social structure. Purchasing things (without attachment value), such as buying gasoline at an impersonal pump, may also represent conditions consistent with the indifferent structure. The predicted behavior of econs is selfish; people always search for the lowest price in the most convenient settings. They are immune to the influence of empathy or antipathy, making them fickle customers.

7.7. The Bystander Social Structure (0, 0, -)

Description. In the bystander social structure, A and C lack institutional agreements that would commit them to mutual respect, removing constraints on their treatment of each other. B, who has indifferent relationships with A and C, lacks motivation to serve either as a broker or as a peacemaker in moderating their mutually defensive and destructive acts. In other words, what happens to A and C is not B's concern. The consequence of this social structure is a society that fails to enforce or maintain its institutions and to help a person in distress.

Discussion. In the bystander social structure, B seeks to avoid being entangled with A and C's conflict, which would undoubtedly require him/her to commit resources. This social structure calls into question one's responsibility for the greater good, beyond one's selfish self. It asks: What is our collective responsibility to aid others who often lack commonalities that qualify them for our empathy? B asks: Shouldn't I take care of my own first? Can we afford to become involved when we face so many needs ourselves? The problem is that the bystander structure encourages bullies and the strong to abuse the weak and the small. If we are all part of the main, as John Donne claims, and any man's loss diminishes us all, then, as bystanders, what is to prevent the triumph of evil when good men and women do nothing?



Examples. In the early hours of March 13, 1964, Kitty Genovese, a 28-year-old bartender, was raped and stabbed outside her apartment building in Queens, New York. Two weeks after the murder, The New York Times published an article erroneously claiming that 38 witnesses saw or heard the attack, and that none of them called the police or came to her aid. However, researchers have since uncovered significant inaccuracies in the *New York Times* article. Police interviews revealed that some witnesses had attempted to call the police. Still, the incident

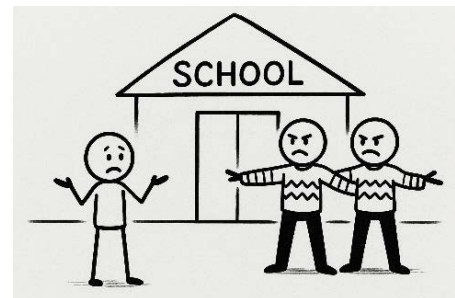
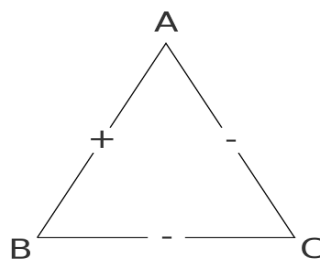
prompted inquiries into what became known as the bystander effect or the “Genovese syndrome” (see [Wikipedia contributors, 2025d](#)).

A more recent bystander example involves United States military aid to Ukraine. Until recently, congressional Republicans blocked an emergency spending bill to fund Ukraine’s war effort against the Russian invasion. They voted against sending aid to Ukraine despite efforts by Congressional Democrats and then President Biden. The congressional Republican’s no vote reflects the attitude of some in the United States, which favors a bystander approach to the Ukraine/Russia conflict ([Demirjian, 2023](#)).

7.8. The Discrimination Social Structure (+, -, -)

Description. In the discrimination social structure, discussed by [Breit and Horowitz \(1995\)](#), A and B have empathetic ties while sharing antipathy for their enemy C. While A and B share economic and social benefits between them, they actively work together to disadvantage C. The discrimination model is like the outsider model, but with a greater intensity. In the outsider model, A and B can be accused of neglecting C. While some form of discrimination is required for choosing where we live, work, worship, and who we hang out with, these factors mostly do not limit the choices of others. In the context of a discriminatory social structure, discrimination is intended to disadvantage another group and restrict their options. When discrimination is based on inherited commonalities such as race, gender, age, and genealogy that permanently separate people into relationships that cannot be changed or preclude opportunities, we sometimes adopt policies to mitigate or prevent discrimination-produced disadvantages. In this model, C is in a difficult position because social capital has failed to create attachment value for the commodity exchange institutions that would enable C to enjoy commodity exchanges with either A or B.

There may be cases where A and B’s view of C as a threat is warranted. For example, when C has proven to be untrustworthy in the past. In such cases, A and B may be justified in taking defensive and destructive actions toward C. On the other hand, the discrimination model may incentivize C to challenge the discrimination and compete for the resources and advantages enjoyed by A and B. However, the greatest threat posed by the discrimination model is that it precludes the production and exchange of commodities and relational goods that could benefit all members of the social structure.



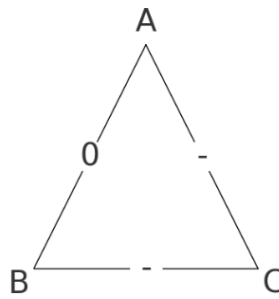
Examples. The 1954 court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* declared discrimination barring black children from attending white schools in the United States unconstitutional. Some resisted school desegregation. One approach was to require students to pass an entrance exam that was difficult for black students. Six-year-old black student Ruby Ridges passed the exam and enrolled in William Frantz School in New Orleans. To ensure her safety and to enforce desegregation, Ruby was escorted to school by federal marshals. Ruby later described being greeted at her school by crowds shouting and throwing things. At her school, white parents withdrew their children, and all but one teacher refused to teach Ruby (Wikipedia contributors, 2025c). In another example of the discrimination structure, our penal system is built on moral outrage towards those who break the rules, and they are placed in prison or face monetary fines.

7.9. The Cheap Social Capital Social Structure (0, -, -)

Description. In the cheap social capital social structure, A and B share attachment values for institutions, which permit them to exchange commodities. However, in this structure, A and B may attempt to strengthen their connection based on their shared antipathy for C, with whom there are no institutional agreements to exchange commodities. Instead, their antipathetic ties encourage them to join their efforts in committing defensive and destructive social acts against C. In comparison to the discriminatory social structure, the relationship between A and B is less connected and unlikely to generate relational and attachment value, such as good exchanges that would support greater institutional attachment value.

Discussion. This social structure has been described in some detail elsewhere, and the focus of at least two podcasts. It emphasizes the importance of commonalities created from objects of shared antipathy. This pattern of relationships creates a relationship between A and B referred to elsewhere as cheap social capital—neither empathetic, indifferent, nor antipathetic, but a cheap relationship or inexpensive connection that can be easily created and manipulated for personal gain and at the expense of the greater goods (Robison, 2023).

The significance of the cheap social capital social structure lies in its ability to garner support independently of facts and without requiring significant social energy investments. Networks created by creating an object of shared antipathy depend on maintaining the appearance of a shared threat. The threats associated with the cheap social capital structure are that it focuses on defensive and destructive acts. It is challenging to utilize such a structure for socially constructive purposes or to focus on alternative solutions to social problems that consider diverse perspectives and alternative viewpoints, rather than viewing the object with antipathy. Finally, another threat associated with cheap social capital structures is that they often enable the rise of influential, dictatorial leaders. Some may describe this social structure as Machiavellianism, characterized by interpersonal manipulation, indifference to morality, lack of empathy, and a strategic focus on self-interest (Wikipedia contributors, 2025b).



Examples. Donald Trump, president of the United States, provides a more recent example of how to create alliances using cheap social capital. One of his cheap social capital objects is illegal immigrants, especially those entering the United States from Mexico. He recently claimed that “illegal immigration is poisoning the blood of our nation. They’re coming from prisons, from mental institutions — from all over the world.” (Gibson, 2023). His making illegal immigration and migrants the object of cheap social capital, some analysts have claimed, has earned him significant support among some voters (Swenson, 2024).

A historically significant example of cheap social capital occurred during World War II. England and Russia were enemies at the beginning of the war. But when Germany attacked Russia, England and Russia were united by their mutual antipathy for Germany and for a time were allies. Unfortunately, like most cheap social capital alliances, it didn’t last beyond the shared threat that ended with the defeat of Germany.

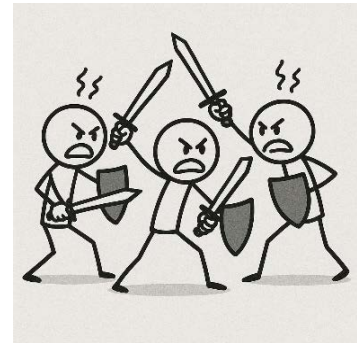
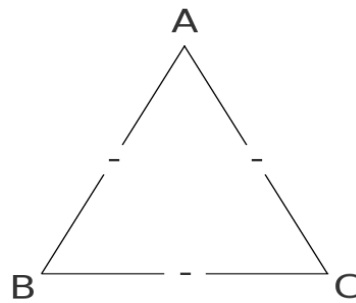
7.10. The Hobbes Social Structure (-, -, -)

Description. In Hobbes’s world, where relationships between A, B, and C are antipathetic, there is no attachment value for institutions that would enable the exchange of commodities, preserve common resources, or invest in public goods. In Hobbes’ social structure, it is indeed a war of all against all, each adopting social acts that defend against aggression by others or disadvantage them without constraint by agreed-upon institutions.

Discussion. The Hobbes social structure is characterized by a lack of connections required for exchanges of commodities and relational and attachment value goods. A, B, and C in the Hobbes social structure seek to disadvantage each other and adopt defensive and destructive social acts. The Hobbes social structure is a close relative of the cheap social capital structure—it emerges when the indifferent connection between A and B descends into an antipathetic connection. In the Hobbes world, where relationships between A, B, and C are antipathetic, there is no institutional attachment value to support either the exchange of relational goods or commodities. In this structure, all members adopt social acts that create a world which is solitary without exchanges, poor without the benefit of specialization and exchange, nasty without the exchange of relational goods to satisfy socio-emotional needs, and brutish where the focus is on defensive and destructive

social acts. Furthermore, there are no brokers or peacemakers who might produce institutional support to enable an escape from this awful state.

The Hobbes social structure is the least organized of all the social structures. Lacking indifferent and empathetic relationships, it is unlikely to evolve into a higher organized structure without outside intervention and support. Furthermore, due to a lack of resources, members of the Hobbes social structure can easily be manipulated by other countries and entities to become their proxy fighters.



Examples. A country whose social structure closely characterizes the Hobbes social structure is referred to as a *fragile state*, previously referred to as a *failed state*. A fragile state is characterized by the absence of attachment value for institutions that enable orderly exchanges of goods and services. It is also characterized by an absence of social capital that encourages investment in private and public capital. Finally, lacking attachment values for institutions and social capital among its citizens, its governments are weak and unable to provide public services, prevent corruption, or provide safety and secure property rights for its people (Fragility of States Index, 2025). At the top of the Fragile countries list identified since 2005 by *Fund for Peace* and the magazine *Foreign Policy* include Somalia, Yemen, and South Sudan (Wikipedia contributors, 2025a).

8. Summary and Conclusion

Societies are distinguished by the ways relationships are organized into social structures. This paper has identified ten such structures, each described as a triad of dyadic relationships that range from empathy to antipathy, with indifference in between. More complex social structures can be created by combining additional dyadic relationships, but doing so does not expand the number of fundamental types.

We all inhabit one or more of these ten social structures. Each structure has internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats that shape our exchanges of relational goods and commodities, and the creation of attachment value goods. Each structure is likely to transition to a different structure. The study of the transition dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper.

Future research can build on the foundation of social structure presented in this paper. One important task is to validate the ten triadic structures across diverse

social settings, such as work organizations, communities, and international systems. Another task is to correlate different configurations of empathy, indifference, and antipathy with observable outcomes like cooperation, conflict, or institutional resilience. Researchers could also investigate the transitional dynamics between triadic structures over time, shedding light on how relationships evolve and how social capital is gained, lost, or transformed. The incorporation of asymmetry and power differentials within triads, currently held constant in this analysis, offers another rich domain for study, particularly in contexts of hierarchy, inequality, and marginalization. Additionally, the continuum model invites the development of more nuanced measurement tools for relational quality and emotional connectedness, expanding beyond binary or categorical network metrics. Finally, the integration of this framework with computational models and simulation techniques could help predict the emergence and stability of social structures under different conditions, contributing to a more robust theory of social capital as a dynamic, relational system.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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