The Reliability and Validity of Time Use   
Co-presence data

[Working paper]

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plan :

1. time use review
2. social capital review
3. family review
4. description methods
5. results
6. conclusion
7. new concept proposed of social capital

Social capital is one of the most important concepts of social sciences. It is one of the rare concepts that easily crosses disciplines: sociologists, economists, demographers and political scientists used it copiously. Despite its broad uses, the concept of social capital often relies on very different definitions and theoretical background. Social capital sometimes includes *social contacts* and *togetherness*. The aim of this paper is to explore further the “social contacts dimension” of social capital and in particular to conceptualize the co-presence data available in time use survey as part of social capital. Social contacts are not easily measurable and data are hard and expensive to collect. We argue that time use data offers a formidable source of knowledge of social capital and personal networks that have not been fully used. This paper begins by discussing the epistemological aspects of the problem. It then reviews some literature on social capital and family social capital and emphasizes the gap it hopes to fill. The second part of the paper on empirical results from a time use experiment.

## ## Social capital, family practices and time use

## ## Epistemological measures

The concept of reliability and the validity are at the heart of classical epistemology. Reliability poses the question: Are the results consistent after several replication of the experiment? Validity on the other side refers to the question: does our instrument measure what we ought to measure? Are we properly measuring the phenomenon we want to measure or are we measuring something else? These two questions make sense of course only if we are fully aware of what exactly it is that we are measuring. This problem is not as obvious as it seems and in fact poses serious problems to social scientists.

Social scientists must use concepts in order to describe the social world but often the reality of the concept is put into question. This debate is particularly vigorous when using the concept of “social classes”. Bourdieu discussed this issue at length in a classical paper about classes. These issues arise also when sociologist uses the word “family”.

Some of them advocate to ban the word, some think than even the word is a bit fuzzy it is still a useful concept and some uses but with no particular definition and let the respondents freely define their own concept of the family.

So what is the problem that we have with the time use with co-presence data ? The co-presence data describe one simple thing: how much, when and how do people spent time with others or alone. Beside this apparent simplicity two important questions arise : what is it mean for individuals to spent time with others and what does it mean sociologically. What are we exactly measuring when we measure time spent or shared with others ?

In this article we want to answer this three questions : what are we measuring and do we want to measure (sociological), is it measuring what we want to measure (validity) and is it a consistent measure (reliability)?

The strategy we have adopted here is the following. The first question has two dimensions. One theoretical and one empirical. The empirical question is what are we measuring. The most appropriate method for answering this question in our view is qualitative interviews. In asking individuals about their time with others or alone, we will be able to answer the theoretical question : what is the sociological relevance of time with others. Because our aim in the end is the build a sociological theory of social contacts via time with others. Qualitative interviews also enable us to answers the second question about validity. In asking individuals about their time with others we able then to verify is time use diaries are measuring the correct concept and theory that \*we want to measure\*. The last question can be answered directly by quantitative methods on time use dataset.

The most intuitive plan to reach our goal is the following.

We will begin by answering the sociological question, what are we measuring ?

Once we have a grasp of what it means to individuals, we can begin building a sociological theory. Then we can ask the direct question of validity and reliability.

## ## What are we measuring

Our qualitative strategy here is twofold. We used The Family Network Method (FNM) (Widmer, 1999b; Widmer & Lafarga, 2000) along with two time use questionnaires. The FNM is a quantitative method aiming to measure cohesion, influence, conflict and support in contemporary families. It is also aiming to measure “the family”. It is based on the central idea: individuals should freely define what they consider being their family. “The term « family » is left undefined and respondents are asked to use their own definition of what they intend by « family »”  p.17

Thanks to this list of effective family members, it is possible to draw conclusion about “the family” without enforcing formal family ties in the definition of the family. It first asks respondents to list the current “important” persons in their life[[1]](#footnote-1). Then, it asks to indicate who would gives support to whom, who is in conflict with whom, and who can discuss important matters with whom. It asks too the frequency of contacts ranging from several times a week to once a year or less. Ego is included in the family “configuration”, ego can gives and receives help and so on. We then administrated two time use questionnaire. The first time use questionnaire is a standardized time use questionnaire and the second a special emphasize on co-presence. The first time use simply record the day before the interview took place. The second questionnaire record with whom people have spent time during the week before the interview. We went through each day of the last week and asked with whom and at what time of the day respondents had social interactions. We also asked what did they do in the presence of others. We also asked about enjoyment about the social time. We also recorded time alone and enjoyment of it. We also introduced a brief module about social contacts at work. We asked several questions such as : “are you mostly working alone or others (how many) ?”, “do you share an office ?”, “do you consider your workplace as social ?”, “does it sometimes happen that you do not interact with anyone during a day ?”, “Considering your job satisfaction, how important are contacts with others ?”, “Do you feel sometimes lonely during your work ?”. This dimension is rarely taken into account in traditional time use survey.

We choose to compare the time use questionnaire to the family network questionnaire because it enables us to compare the two extreme perspective of the network spectrum. The FNM represents the most subjective, “cognitive”[[2]](#footnote-2), way of conceptualizing families. On the other side, the time use co-presence data solely inform us about the very everyday life practices of network; the everyday contacts. Routinized, “taken for granted”, of co-presence. We can imagine that for example someone is met everyday but never viewed as a family member. On the other hand, someone can be viewed as a family member but nevertheless no interactions ever occur with this person. In the case of high family conflict, the persons never talk to each other but still consider themselves as family members. This highlights the difficulties of family sociology because family is so multidimensional and so intertwined with objective and subjective, cognitive and practical, matters. However, it seems that the cognitive and subjective side of family life is considered as the “true” family and what’s not in the head has no importance.

## ## Results

One striking findings is that who individuals consider being their family members, the support their receive from them, the contact they have with them, the time their practically spend in their presence and what they think of them are not astonishingly associated or correlated. This finding is perfectly illustrated by the concept of “ambivalence”. All aspects of family life do not seem to function as a coherent and predictive system. Most importantly, contacts and visits to some members considered as crucial family members may be very rare. The case of death is telling, someone can be dead and still considered as a family member. But you won’t receive anything or have any sort of contact with this person.

## ## Family relations, social contacts or social capital?

1. “I am going to ask you to cite the person you consider important currently in your life. Play a positive or negative role in your life”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “It [FNM] is based on the cognitive network or “socio-cognitive” approach of social networks” (p.17). See also from the same author : “cognitive networks” (Widmer, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)