

## VIEWPOINT

# Is food sharing a better measure of social capital in some contexts?

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The role of social capital in mediating health is increasingly well recognized (Eriksson, 2011; Ferlander, 2007; Hawe & Shiell, 2000; Kawachi & Berkman, 2023; Lomas, 1998). Social capital refers to the resources and benefits individuals gain through their social interactions and networks (Bourdieu, 1986), such as “horizontal associations” between people (“networks of civic engagement”) (Putnam, 1993) and institutional relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Grootaert, 1998; World Bank, 1998). Social capital affects food and diet intake by influencing resources for food procurement, enhancing knowledge on food and nutrition (health literacy) (Chen et al., 2019), alleviating psychosocial distress (Mieziene et al., 2022), buffering against shocks and extreme weather events (Christ &

Niles, 2018), increasing food access and availability (Martin et al., 2004; Nosratabadi et al., 2020), and promoting access to both formal and informal institutional support (King, 2017). With mounting evidence on the importance of social capital, food and diet researchers are now tasked with integrating social capital questions into their studies of diet quality and food choice.

In this viewpoint, I share my experience attempting to integrate social capital questions into a household and diet quality survey as part of my doctoral research on Indigenous food environment transitions in Northern Thailand. By sharing my survey design and implementation experience, I hope to raise unresolved issues surrounding the assumptions made by large institutions in their

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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questionnaires. I argue for caution in adopting ready-made survey questions and advocate for tailoring culturally-appropriate, context-specific and scale-sensitive survey questions.

Compiling a survey questionnaire can be an unexpectedly daunting and overwhelming task, especially for early-career researchers, who often receive no training in survey design and implementation. Selecting the right questions to distill key variables of interest can become a fiddly exercise of finetuning nearly identical questions, only to discard them during the piloting phase. Survey design is difficult for multiple reasons. Firstly, the questions must be easy to understand and to answer. What is more, the responses must generate enough variation within the study population to test statistical relationships. Ensuring sufficient variation is highly sensitive to scale: questions that capture variation at a national, provincial or district level may not work at a community level where shared community-level characteristics could result in more similar responses.

As a doctoral student, I embarked on the challenging task of survey design, naively anticipating it would take a few weeks. In reality, survey design and piloting took many months. Given the increasingly well-established relationships between social capital and diet (Mbugua & Nzuma, 2020; Peterson et al., 2022), I aimed to include questions on social capital in my household and diet survey. I discovered, to my relief, that the World Bank had already developed a social capital questionnaire (Grootaert et al., 2004). Combined with the Gallup Poll's Thailand-adapted Diet Quality Questionnaire (Global Diet Quality Project, 2023), I thought I had hit the doctoral efficiency jackpot with ready-to-go survey questions. However, within several days of piloting the survey, I realized that the World Bank social capital questions would not work in my field sites of Indigenous Pgaz K'Nyau communities in Northern Thailand.

To briefly describe my main field site: The entire 70-person community is extended family related either directly or through marriage. Because everyone is family, neighbors wander in and out of one another's homes and are always welcome to sit down and eat. "Come eat rice" is a ubiquitous greeting called out to any passerby. While incomes

can be as low as US\$20 per month, no one in the community goes hungry. Rice is planted and harvested using reciprocal labor. The community is mostly self-sufficient with its own rice production and has even instituted a rice bank to ensure village-level food security. The social structure functions primarily on high social capital to an extent that may seem unfathomable to high-level experts designing survey questionnaires for low-income countries. Questions about crime, violence, numbers of social interactions, and whether you could trust your neighbors were not designed for a densely interrelated village. With many questions, I would be met with either a quizzical expression or outright laughter, as if I had told a great joke. A typical question-and-answer exchange while piloting surveys would go as follows:

"How many people do you talk to in a given week?"

[laughter]

"Everyone who crosses my path. I talk to everyone."

[more laughter]

Suffice it to say, I was not conducting this survey in a large urban center, but in a tightly knit community where social interactions were too frequent for survey respondents to recall. As question after question faltered during piloting, I quickly realized the World Bank social capital questions were not well suited for the context. The questions were either too difficult to answer, not applicable in the context, or generated unreliable responses or insufficient variation (see Table 1).

I began searching for alternative, culturally appropriate measures of social capital by participating in everyday life. From participant observation, I witnessed how food sharing was pervasive in both daily social interactions and special occasions. For instance, after group foraging excursions to gather mushrooms, crabs, and banana blossoms, I would invariably be given all the forest foods collected to share with my host grandmother (a respected village elder). Neighbors would deliver foraged ferns (*Diplazium esculentum*) or a cultivated mint variety

(*Elsholtzia griffithii*) neatly wrapped in banana leaves to one another. Special occasions, such as funerals, weddings, temple parties, Christmas, and New Year's, revolved around food sharing. During my diet quality survey, 15% of food items consumed the previous day were shared (Zeitler et al., 2024, 2025). From communal meals to sharing foraged food items, food sharing was integral to the reciprocal relations binding the community together.

While food sharing practices were widespread, the community was not homogenous. Some households certainly had more resources and means than others through steady employment, larger land holdings, or social status. I began to wonder whether food sharing could reflect these subtle nuances of social capital even within a cohesive community with overall high social capital. I decided to trial two simple questions on food sharing in my pilot questionnaire:

In the last week, how many times have neighbors shared food with you?

In the last week, how many times have you shared food with neighbors?

I found that the questions were intuitive: everyone could understand and answer the questions. Unlike social capital questions on decision-making power, food sharing was not an abstraction, but an easily relatable everyday practice. Importantly, the food sharing questions generated much-needed variation for statistical analyses, even at a small-scale community level (answers ranged from 0 to 10 times per week).

In the final stages of survey design, I discarded the World Bank's core social capital questions for the reasons listed in Table 1 but retained the questions on food sharing as a valuable proxy for social relations and networks. If social capital is an "endless effort at institution" to "produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 22), then food sharing would be an appropriate measure of social capital in Pgaz K'Nyau communities. Through everyday reciprocal food exchanges, Pgaz K'Nyau Peoples maintained food availability: by sharing surplus, one is more likely to

receive during times of scarcity. Food sharing also promotes greater diversity of foods consumed ('material profits'). By signaling generosity and virtuous behavior (important values in all religions practiced in Pgaz K'Nyau communities—Christianity, Buddhism, and animism), food sharing also generates what Bourdieu refers to as the 'symbolic profits' of status and reputation as a form of social capital.

While my own research was limited to a few small communities, the question of whether food sharing reflects social capital applies to many societies worldwide. Regular and ritualistic food sharing is central to the cultures of Hadza Peoples in Tanzania (Marlowe, 2004), Hausa Peoples in Nigeria (Etkin, 2009, pp. 145–170), !Kung San Peoples in the Kalahari (Wiessner, 1981), Ache Peoples in Paraguay (Kaplan et al., 1985), Tsembaga Maring in New Guinea (Rappaport, 1984), and throughout Polynesia (Bell, 1931; Hogbin, 1932; Kirch, 2001), to list a few well-known examples from the food anthropology literature. More recently, in the Solomon Islands, 9% of foods were acquired through food sharing with kin and community (Bogard et al., 2021). In Native Alaskan communities, approximately 30% of high-status 'super-households' procure 70% of the wild meat shared and consumed in communities (Wolfe & Walker, 1987). Pacific Northwest Peoples host potlatch feasts to redistribute wealth and convey social status through reciprocal systems of food sharing and gift exchange (Barnett, 1968). Social status and relations are signaled through food sharing in diverse cultures, reflecting access to capital and resources (Dietler & Hayden, 2001; Gurven & Jaeggi, 2015).

Food sharing and exchange are not limited to hunter-gatherer or agrarian subsistence societies in rural areas. Urban dwellers in the present day are experimenting with collectives for growing, cooking, and eating to rediscover community and sustainable lifestyles, for instance, through urban gardening, Slow Food *convivia*, or as a food waste reduction strategy (Bakharev et al., 2023; Davies & Evans, 2019; Davies et al., 2019; Etkin, 2009, pp. 25–27). Diverse societies around the world, both rural and urban, continue to build social relations and community through the everyday practice of

generosity, reciprocity, and care that is food sharing.

With this brief critique, I do not wish to discredit or discard the admirable work of researchers developing useful tools at respected institutions. I hope to invite other researchers, especially those at an early career stage, to critically reflect and, where appropriate, challenge and reimagine well-established metrics and data collection instruments. Refining data collection tools is an iterative process to which we can all contribute, including early career researchers. No tool is perfect, and certainly

no tool is perfect for every context and at every scale. Especially for the messy world of social relations, we can continue to explore alternative measures of social capital that are appropriate for each context and analytic scale. While food sharing and social capital are not synonymous, there are substantial overlaps between the two in many societies. In small villages in the hills of Northern Thailand and in many communities worldwide, food sharing is how social relations are reinforced each day. In such contexts, food sharing offers a viable alternative for measuring social capital. 

**Table 1. Issues Encountered while Piloting the World Bank Social Capital Core Questionnaire**

World Bank Core Social Capital Question	Common Responses	Issue Encountered
I would like to start by asking you about the groups or organizations, networks, associations to which you or any member of your household belong. These could be formally organized groups or just groups of people who get together regularly to do an activity or talk about things. Of how many such groups are you or any one in your household a member?	Most women are members of the women's group, the women's weaving cooperative, and participate in NGO activities, such as the Thai Association for Forest Conservation (e.g., tree planting). Most women get together regularly to weave, cook, or chat.	Too little variation.
About how many close friends do you have these days? These are people you feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, or call on for help.	Almost everyone in the village is friends with one another and either directly related or related through marriage.	Too difficult to answer. Too little variation.
If you suddenly needed to borrow a small amount of money [RURAL: enough to pay for expenses for your household for one week; URBAN: equal to about one week's wages], are there people beyond your immediate household and close relatives to whom you could turn and who would be willing and able to provide this money?	The women's group provides lending services, so almost everyone in the village can borrow money from a women's collective with many members. However, the second part of the question excluding family members does not work in a village where everyone is related.	Too little variation. Not applicable in the context.
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?	Everyone knows everybody in the village and agrees that most people can be trusted.	Too little variation.
In general, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? A. Most people in this village/neighborhood are willing to help if you need it. B. In this village/neighborhood, one has to be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of you.	Everyone helps everyone else with reciprocal labor, food sharing, childcare, and everyday small tasks.	Too little variation.
If a community project does not directly benefit you but has benefits for many others in the village/neighborhood, would you contribute time or money to the project?	Every able-bodied person contributes time and labor to communal projects, such as road repair, firebreak maintenance, etc. Most people do not have money to contribute.	Too little variation.

In the past 12 months did you or anyone in your household participate in any communal activities, in which people came together to do some work for the benefit of the community?	Everyone surveyed contributes to every communal activity, including those of other religions (e.g. Christians help at Buddhist events and vice versa), except in exceptional circumstances (e.g., illness).	Too unreliable, as most answered that they go to all events, but numbers varied between respondents, indicating recall errors.
If there was a water supply problem in this community, how likely is it that people will cooperate to try to solve the problem?	The village water source in the forest is managed by a village elder. Everyone who is able contributes time and labor to weir construction (check dams) to increase water-holding capacity in the watershed.	Too little variation.
In the past month, how many times have you made or received a phone call?	The village has no cell phone service.	Not applicable in the context.
What are your three main sources of information about what the government is doing (such as agricultural extension, workfare, family planning, etc.)?	The village is part of a participatory governance model. The municipality holds meetings directly with the villagers where they can vote on which projects should be funded and prioritized. Government initiatives are communicated directly by government officials in their Indigenous language.	Too little variation. Not applicable in the context.
There are often differences in characteristics between people living in the same village/ neighborhood. For example, differences in wealth, income, social status, ethnic or linguistic background/race/caste/tribe. There can also be differences in religious or political beliefs, or there can be differences due to age or sex. To what extent do any such differences characterize your village/neighborhood? Do any of these differences cause problems? Which two differences most often cause problems? Have these problems ever led to violence?	There are religious and gender differences (both approximately 50-50) and a wide variety of ages. Almost all community members are Indigenous P'gaz K'Nyau, so there is almost no ethnic diversity. Social differences have never led to any problems or violence in the history of the community.	Too little variation. Not applicable in the context.
How many times in the past month have you gotten together with people to have food or drinks, either in their home or in a public place?	People are constantly eating in one another's homes, because almost everybody in the village is related. Food sharing is a large part of everyday life. Accurately remembering the number of social gatherings for an entire month is impossible for most respondents.	Too difficult to answer.
Were any of these people.... A. Of different ethnic or linguistic background/ race/ caste/ tribe? B. Of different economic status? C. Of different social status? D. Of different religious groups?	People often eat in their neighbor's homes who practice a different religion. All members of the community are low-income, so there is little difference in economic status.	Too little variation.
In general, how safe from crime and violence do you feel when you are alone at home?	There is no crime in the village.	Too little variation. Not applicable in the context.
Do you feel that you have the power to make important decisions that change the course of your life?	Most people simply did not understand this question. The question is framed outside the day-to-day realities of agricultural subsistence and wage labor livelihoods.	Too difficult to answer.

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