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Qualitative Analysis of Social Capital in Arkansas – A Case Study based Approach

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Agriculture Economics

by

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Humboldt University zu Berlin
Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, 2015

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Despite the vast research on social capital in general, only very little research is focused on the quality of social capital. While some research studies incorporated aspects that are associated with the quality of social capital, they often take a one dimensional approach that fails to take the different aspects of the topic into consideration. In order to gain more insights into this I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews in three rural counties in Arkansas. The counties were selected on the basis of a social capital index of all U.S. counties using quantitative measures. I used a guide on qualitative research on social capital as my conceptual framework to analyze the interviews. The analysis, which utilized NVivo, a qualitative data management program, yielded a variety of results. I was able to observe that the involvement in a large number of groups tended to prevent participants from becoming involved on a deeper level. However, often the same people were involved in the majority of groups and many of the groups struggled to recruit new members. In addition, ethnic differences were not perceived to be a hampering factor in building intense social capital by the participants. Among other things the results also showed that there are noteworthy differences in the quality of social capital between the three counties. The results indicate that there seems to be a correlation between the level of local social capital when measured via qualitative or quantitative indicators. A factor that should be explored further in future research.

This study supplements the growing body of literature on social capital. In exploring the largely untapped aspect of social capital quality new insights are gained. The results can be used to improve existing measures of social capital and to develop more efficient policies, particularly for rural areas in Arkansas

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents and my sister. Despite thoroughly testing their patience at times, they have supported me relentlessly in all matters of life. By passing on their experience and imprinting me with their values they have given me the ability to see the world with open eyes and inspired me to live off the beaten path. They have allowed me to pursue my goals and for this I am forever thankful.

Das Erste, was der Mensch im Leben vorfindet, das Letzte wonach er die Hand ausstreckt, das Kostbarste was er im Leben besitzt ist die Familie – Adolf Kolping

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Research Objectives	3
2. Literature Review	5
2.1 Concepts used	5
2.1.1 Indicators for Quality of Social Capital	10
2.2 Importance of Social Capital	12
2.3 Critique on the Concept and Measurement of Social Capital	15
3. Research Framework	18
3.1 Summary of Approach	18
3.2 Methodological Framework	18
3.3 Description of the Case Study Sites	22
3.3.1 Van Buren County	24
3.3.2 Prairie County	28
3.3.3 Lincoln County	30
4. Results	32
4.1 Results grouped by the six Dimensions	32
4.1.1 Groups and Networks	32
4.1.2 Trust and Solidarity	34
4.1.3 Collective Action and Cooperation	35
4.1.4 Information and Communication	38
4.1.5 Social Cohesion and Inclusion	40
4.1.6 Empowerment and political Action	42
4.2 Summary of Results	44
5. Discussion	47
5.1 Limitations of Study	47
5.2 Policy Implications	48
6. Conclusion	51
7. References	55
8. Appendices	61

List of Tables

Table 1: Social Capital Indicators in Italy	16
Table 2: List of Participants	21
Table 3: Education Level of Participants.....	22
Table 4: Median Age	22
Table 5: Religious Adherents per County.....	24
Table 6: County Data for Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's Social Capital Index Indicators	28

List of Figures

Figure 1: Dimensions of Social Capital	6
Figure 2: Relationship between the different Forms of Capital.....	14
Figure 3: Location of the Case Study Sites.....	25
Figure 4: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population 2005-2015.....	25
Figure 5: Median Household Income 2005-2015	26
Figure 6: Unemployment Rate (not seasonally adjusted)	26

Abbreviations

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NCCS	National Center for Charitable Statistics
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
WVS	World Value Survey

1. Introduction

Rural America has been found to have a very rich community life (Kellogg Foundation, 2002) Butler Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer (2015) describe McKenzie Country North Dakota, a very rural area, where local shops trust their customer to pay later if they forget their checkbook.

Ranchers work together to sustainably graze the land. Members of the community band together to erect a local playground. These examples can be seen as evidence for high levels of social capital. Alongside cultural capital and human capital, the concept of social capital, while a less tangible form of capital, is increasingly studied in the socio-economic literature. The database ProQuest renders 47,137 results for the period of 1996-2016 for a keyword search on social capital. The growing literature on the topic has shown the various areas on which social capital can have an influence. Some examples include Putnam, Leonardi and Nonetti (1993), who investigated the role of social capital in the economic advantage the north of Italy has over the south. Akçomak and ter Weel (2012) found a correlation between crime rates and the level of social capital and Acar (2011) found a positive influence of social capital on educational performance. Organizations such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) have recognized the importance of social capital for rural development and are actively integrating social capital measures in their programs. Messeley, Rogge, and Dessein (2013) for example explored if actors could be actively engaged in reflecting on the development of their region by using the rural web as a mobilizing tool. The rural web is a new comprehensive theoretical framework on rural development that incorporates social capital as one of its six main components.

In contrast to most other forms of capital researchers still have not been able to completely agree on a universal definition. Putnam (1995) for example defined social capital as *'features of social*

organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. This differs significantly from Bourdieu's definition which defines social capital as *'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'* (Bourdieu 1983). Partly due to the lack of agreement on one definition a broad variety of methods to measure social capital has been developed. Most of them focus on quantitative measures such as memberships in groups and organizations or the voter turnout. Although they do not necessarily reflect the multidimensionality of social capital they can be seen as indicators of the level of social capital in the particular area.

Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006) conducted a study that measured the quantitative level of social capital on a county basis. Using principal component analysis the researchers employed the associational density, the voter turnout in the last presidential elections, the county-level response rate to the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census and the number of tax-exempt non-profit organizations to create a county level index of social capital. This index shows differences in the level of social capital across all U.S. counties with McKenzie County ranking in the upper mid-range. While their study combines several quantitative metrics in order to create an index of the level of social capital it completely ignores the quality aspect of social capital.

According to Morrow (1999) this is a common flaw in U.S. studies on social capital. The typical study focuses on the analysis of large quantitative data sets and does not explore the quality of social capital. Some studies distinguish between different forms of social capital, most commonly bonding, bridging and sometimes also linking social capital (e.g. (Hawkins and Maurer 2010) (Babaei, Ahmad and Gill 2012)). According to Putnam (2000) bonding social capital is a sociological superglue and bridging social capital acts as a sociological WD-40.

Differentiating between the strength of relationships can be seen as an indicator for quality, however it again only focuses on one aspect of social capital instead of acknowledging the multidimensionality. Studying the quality of social capital will fill this knowledge gap. Additionally, an understanding of differences in quality might be able to provide insights on differences in quantity of social capital. Based on the aforementioned multidimensionality of social capital, I define certain indicators and characteristics measuring quality for the different dimensions of social capital. They include among others the reliability of information members receive from their network and the inclusiveness of the communities and groups. Following one of the few guides available on qualitative research on social capital, which was published by the World Bank (2006), I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews in three rural counties in Arkansas. The interviews aimed to gain insights on the research objectives described below. I organized this study as follows. Chapter 2 is a literature review of the concept of social capital, the importance of it and of the different measurements of social capital. This is followed in Chapter 3 by an explanation of the research framework and methods used to conduct the study. Additionally, the case study sites are described. In Chapter 4 the results research are stated. Finally, I describe the limitations of my study and propose certain policy implications.

1.1 Research Objectives

The geographical focus area of my research are the rural counties in Arkansas, in particular three counties that I chose as case study sites. Representing the counties that rank the highest the lowest and the median for rural Arkansas counties in Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) index, I aimed to depict the range of levels of social capital. By conducting semi-structured interviews in each of the case study sites, I intended to obtain observations to address

my research objectives. Due to the fact that this analysis is predominantly based on a qualitative approach of an inductive nature, I chose to follow two main research objectives instead of a hypothesis. The first objective is to identify the most salient themes and topics of each dimension of social capital. The identified themes and topics will be used to frame my discussion of similarities and differences in the dimensions of social capital among the three case study counties and to aid in an evaluation on the quality of social capital in these three counties. The second objective is to assess whether there are perceivable similarities and differences in the quality of social capital among the three chosen case study sites.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concepts used

Due to the complexity of the concept, it is necessary that I provide an explanation of how the term social capital itself was interpreted in this thesis and how the quality aspect of it was understood.

First it must be admitted that there is no broadly agreed upon definition in contrast to other forms of capital such as the economic or human capital. Several papers have aimed to collect, compare and/or find the common factor that unites all the definitions (e.g. (Adler and Kwon 2002, Scrivens and Smith 2013, Hernandez 2015). The three most commonly used definitions are provided by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam.

Focusing on the gain to an individual that can be achieved through the utilization of social capital Bourdieu developed a very theoretical definition of the concept. According to him social capital is *'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'* (Bourdieu 1983). In contrast, Coleman recognized the potential of social capital not only for the individual but as well as for the community. He also describes its potential to benefit the private and the public good (Scrivens and Smith 2013). According to him social capital can be *'defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure'* (Coleman 1988). Finally, Putnam was deeply influenced by Coleman's work. In contrast to Coleman, who focused on the micro- and meso-level of networks, Putnam perceived social capital as predominantly operating at the macro- and meso-levels of society (Scrivens and Smith 2013). He defined social capital as

‘features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1995).

An in-depth analysis of similarities and differences between the three authors can be found in an OECD working paper compiled by Scrivens and Smith (2013). They conclude that a single definition that represents all the different elements of social capital, such as personal relationships, civic engagement, trust and cooperative norms, might be a hindrance for statistical measurement and analytical understanding. Agreeing with this, I decided to use the conceptual framework published by the World Bank on qualitative research on social capital. The framework recognizes the multidimensionality of the concept and chooses to organize it into six partly overlapping dimensions (Dudwick, et al. 2006).

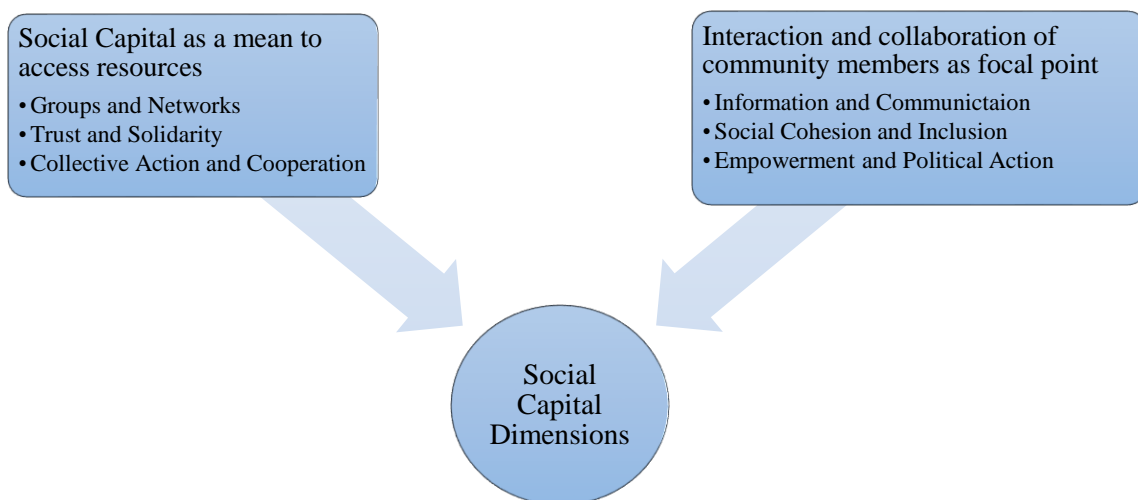


Figure 1: Dimensions of Social Capital, Source: Adapted from Dudwick et al 2006

The six dimensions can be grouped into two categories that represent different approaches of thinking about social capital (see. Figure 1). Dimensions in the first category are focused on utilizing social capital as a means to acquire resources, which is typical for a micro or individual approach following Bourdieu. The second category is more closely connected with Putnam's

ideology by making the interaction and collaboration of community members the focal point (Dudwick, et al. 2006).

In the following section I will briefly describe the six different dimensions. The descriptions contain certain aspects that can be associated with the quality of social capital; however, I provide additional indicators for the quality in Chapter 2.2.

Groups and Networks

The majority of available definitions focus on this dimension of social capital. It focuses on the density and character of participation in social organizations and informal networks within a household (Grootaert, et al. 2004). Beyond looking at the contribution of individuals it also encompasses the return or benefit received as a result of the participation. Moreover, factors such as the diversity of a group, the form of leadership and the individual involvement is analyzed. By analyzing the nature of the networks and organizations, this dimension also identifies what form of social capital (bonding, bridging or linking) is most prominent. Interactions and relationships that occur between people that belong to one group and therefore share certain similarities is ‘bonding’ social capital (Putnam 2000). If the relationship is amongst individuals that belong to different groups, it is referred to as ‘bridging’ social capital (Larsen, et al. 2004). The last form, ‘linking’ social capital, addresses vertical connections. In this sense Szreter and Woolcock (2004) define it as *‘norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society.’* A distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital can also be applied to the other dimensions.

Trust and Solidarity

This dimension predominantly centers on the abstract concept of trust. As Grootaert et al (2004) explain different people tend to have different understandings of what trust means to them. To accommodate for different perceptions of trust it looks at different aspects of it. On the one hand, it examines the trust an individual generally has for others. On the other hand, the depth of trust for different groups of people is important. Dudwick et al (2006) define this as the extent to which people feel they can rely on relatives, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, key service providers, and even strangers. Being able to rely on your network is an important aspect of solidarity, which is defined as the agreement between and support for the members of a group (Cambridge Dictionary 2017).

Collective Action and Cooperation

This dimension explores if and how people work with one another in the community on projects and/or in response to a problem or crisis to produce a public good or outcome which is non-excludable and non-rivalrous (Dudwick, et al. 2006). Grootaert et al suggest emphasizing three items of information for research:

1. The extent of collective action
2. The type of activities undertaken collectively
3. An overall assessment of the extent of willingness to cooperate and participate in collective action (Grootaert, et al. 2004)

On top of this, it explores how a violation of community and individual expectations affects participation norms (Dudwick, et al. 2006).

Information and Communication

This dimension identifies how households and the community receive and share information.

This includes the sources of information and the means of communication (Grootaert, et al. 2004). Specifically, information which concerns the general community, market conditions and public services (Dudwick, et al. 2006). Moreover, it also looks how well the communication infrastructure can be accessed.

Social Cohesion and Inclusion

Social bonds within a community have the ability to both exclude, as well as include people (Dudwick, et al. 2006). This dimension looks directly at the barriers or ease of entry into a group or network, the transparency and intensity of feeling that one belongs with the group or network. Furthermore, the occurrence and character of social interactions is analyzed. Finally, the study of this dimension also may include the examination of the presence of conflict and violence with the community.

Empowerment and Political Action

The last dimension refers to what extent networks and members of a group are able to achieve, be satisfied with and feel a personal efficacy to impact events and generate desired civic or political outcomes on a local as well as a larger scale (Dudwick, et al. 2006). Additionally, the existence or absence of intersectionality or the interconnected nature of social categories e.g. gender, ethnicity or religion is explored.

2.1.1 Indicators for Quality of Social Capital

While the description of the dimensions incorporate quantity and quality aspects, it is necessary to understand how exactly quality was understood in connection with social capital and which indicators were used to measure it in this thesis.

‘*Quality*’ according to the Cambridge dictionary (2017) refers to the degree of excellence of something. The direct measurement of quality is difficult due to the subjective and abstract nature of it. While the database ProQuest renders 47,137 results between 1996-2016 for a keyword search on social capital, it only provides 36 results for the keyword search on quality of social capital. In addition, the majority of the 36 listed results do not provide any further explanations about what exactly is meant by quality of social capital. One exception is a study by Lee (2010). The author defined the quality of social capital as the associational commitment and interaction. In particular he measured the participation in group meetings and activities and political discussions, which were specific to his research. Lee defined an active participation as an indicator for high quality of social capital. While this ventures into the first dimension of social capital, *Groups and Networks*, it does not include the aspects of the other five dimensions. For my research I identified certain indicators and characteristics for each of the six dimensions beyond the ones mentioned above that provide an insight into the quality of social capital. It is important to note that the dimensions are interrelated and therefore some of the indicators and findings apply to more than one dimension.

For the dimension of *Groups and Networks*, the quality aspect is among other things reflected in how involved a person is in his or her groups and networks and how they interact with other members. Another indicator for quality in this dimension is the return members receive through

their membership and how they can utilize the groups and networks to achieve individual outcomes.

In the dimension of *Trust and Solidarity*, quality presents itself in the level of trust and solidarity among not only friends and family but also with other members of the community such as neighbors, colleagues and key service providers. The intimacy of the relationships and the ability to rely and confide into other community members acts as indicators.

The quality of *Collective Action and Cooperation* is analyzed through several indicators.

Whether an individual or a community can or even has to rely on their networks and groups is one indicator. How the collective action and cooperation functions among the community members is another one. Lastly the level on which cooperation takes place serves as a proxy. Level in this case refers to the geographical range of cooperation, e.g. within the community, county, state, etc. and between whom the cooperation takes place, e.g. members of one age group, social circle, etc..

The dependability of information members receive from their networks and groups, the way members communicate and make decisions are indicators for the quality of *Information and Communication*, the fourth dimension. I also look at how well they can access the communication infrastructure.

In order to evaluate the quality of the fifth dimension of social capital *Social Cohesion and Inclusion* within a community I look at how inclusive the groups are and how different groups, people and communities work with one another. The bridging and linking aspect of social capital is especially emphasized in this dimension.

In the last dimension *Empowerment and Political Action*, I use the extent and form of influence that individuals and groups have within the community and on politics as indicators.

Furthermore, I also look at the conflict potential of decision making within groups and within the community.

2.2 Importance of Social Capital

The descriptions above of the different dimensions and how quality expresses itself in the different dimensions already provide an insight about how broad the concept is. In line with this social capital influences a wide range of outcomes. A variety of studies have shown a positive correlation between social capital and economic growth/success. Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2000) found that the per-capita income of counties with high levels of social capital grew faster than in counties with low levels of social capital. In '*Making democracy work*' (1993) Putnam, Leonardi, and Nonetti identified social capital as a key factor explaining why the north of Italy outperformed the south economically. Knack & Keefer (1997) found trust and civic cooperation have significant impacts on the aggregate economic activity for example by triggering greater investments and promoting beneficial policies. A spatial analysis in Germany showed a positive relationship between economic well-being and social capital on a regional and local basis (Botzen 2016).

A positive correlation between higher levels of social capital and the performance of small companies was found by Stam, Arzlanian, and Elfring (2014). In addition, social capital was identified as positively contributing to a firm's ability to identify opportunities (Bhagavatula, et al. 2010).

The influence of social capital is however not only limited to economic factors, but expands far beyond that. Akçomak & ter Weel (2012) investigated communities in the Netherlands and

found a significant correlation between crime rates and the level of social capital. Communities that had higher levels of social capital had lower crime rates.

Another observed effect is the mainly positive influence of high social capital, especially within a family, on educational performance (Acar 2011). Coleman (1988) found that social capital contributes to lower dropout rates in high school and is therefore an important factor in building human capital. Besides being beneficial for the level of education, social capital seems to also be beneficial for an individual's health (Hutchinson 2006).

Within the development context, different aspects of social capital were shown to be valuable in areas such as resource management (Krishna and Uphoff 1999), the reduction of transaction cost (Fafchamps and Minten 1998) and in making agricultural extension services more effective (Reid and Salmen 2002).

However, while the results in the studies mentioned above indicate the significance of social capital on social and individual outcomes, other studies (e.g. (Rupasingha, Goetz and Freshwater 2006) used factors such as crime rate or household income as indicators for measuring the level of social capital. This highlights the complicated and reciprocal relationship of social capital and associated factors. Moreover, several studies have also pointed out that an abundance of social capital or high levels of social capital can also have negative effects. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) emphasize that *'social capital can be used to promote or to undermine the public good'* therefore highlighting the dualistic nature of it. Portes (1998) summarized four negative consequences that can be related to social capital: (1) exclusion of outsiders, (2) excess claims on group members, (3) restrictions on individual freedoms, and (4) downward leveling norms. Examples Portes (1998) gives for this are e.g. the Mafia and youth gangs.

While the concept of social capital and its effect on various factors is very enticing, it should not be seen as a cure for everything and an independent entity. Fine (2002) points out that the concept has been used in all areas of life and society to explain almost all grievances and defects. Bourdieu (1986) pointed out that the different forms of capital are connected. Figure 2 is an exemplary representation of this. It highlights that the different forms of capital are interrelated with one another and are able to increase as well as decrease one another.

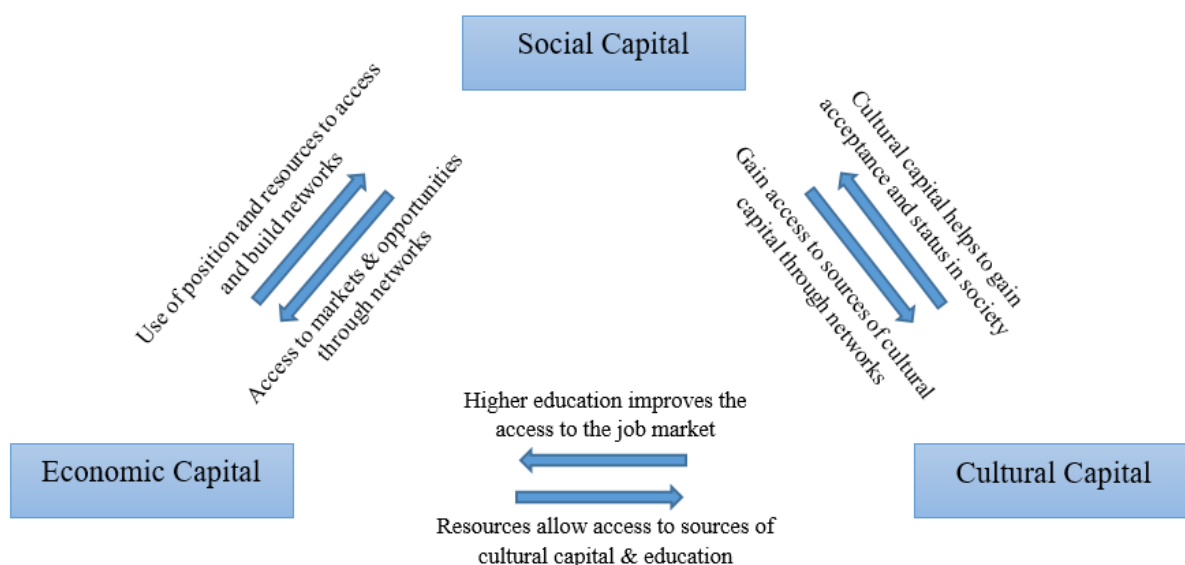


Figure 2: Relationship between the different Forms of Capital, Source: Partially adapted from Bourdieu, 1986

Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration that the results obtained in the studies above are always strongly influenced by their context. While social capital should not be underestimated, results obtained in studies should be viewed within their context and limitations instead of generalizing them to a global scale. Yet, it remains important since it allows to refer to resources other than physical and human capital, such as organizations, coordination, etc. that contribute to social outcomes.

2.3 Critique on the Concept and Measurement of Social Capital

The literature on social capital is replete with discussions of the problems of properly measuring social capital (e.g. (Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2004, Grootaert and van Bastelaer 2001, Tzanakis 2013). Two critiques are often central to the discussion. First, opponents of the concept comment on the designation of social capital as capital. They contend that social capital lacks certain attributes of capital. Arrow (1999) argues that one important aspect of capital is that there has to be a '*deliberate sacrifice in the present for future benefit*'. According to the author, this does not hold true for social networks. Robinson, Schmid, and Siles (2002) counter by arguing that the concept may indeed imply saving and investment for a future payoff. Baron and Hannan (1994) criticize that social capital is acquired without opportunity cost, a prerequisite for capital. Yet, building networks, trust and relationships requires the expenditure of time and effort, which can be seen as the opportunity cost of social capital. The second critique regards the entire concept of social capital. Bjørnskov and Sønderskov (2013) reason that the general concept of social capital lacks coherence as defined by Gerring (1999), therefore making it unsuitable as a general concept. However, they acknowledge that the coherence greatly varies between the different conceptualizations.

Grootaert and Bastelaer (2001) describe critiques they received for using proxies instead of direct measurements. As the authors explain though, the use of proxies is also a common practice in the measurement of human capital. The lack of a direct form of measurement and use of proxies has not prevented researchers to make great advances in the field. Additionally, it has also not led people to mistake the proxies with human capital itself.

In their comparative study of northern and southern Italy Putnam, Leonardi, and Nonetti (1993) used a census of membership in groups and associations as an indicator to measure social capital.

Their approach is the most common one and was used by other scholars in the field (e.g. (Casey 2004) (Beugelsdijk and van Schaik 2005)). An important question that remains when such an approach is chosen is whether indicators such as trust and group membership are a consequence or a source of social capital itself (Woolcock 1998). While group membership is relatively easy to determine, trust is a more abstract construct. Surveys such as the World Value Survey (WVS) elicit variables that attempt to represent trust. The OECD (2001) criticizes the validity of the findings. They argue that some of the questions related to trust contain an interpretation bias. The multidimensionality of social capital complicates the measurement, since it requires several indicators, which reflect the multifaceted nature. Nevertheless, this also allows for a wide array of indicators that can be chosen. Table 1, compiled by Andriani (2013), compares several studies on social capital and their indicators against one another.

Table 1: Social Capital Indicators in Italy, Source: Andriani, 2013

Nuzzo (2006)	Sabatini (2009)	Guiso et al (2004)
<i>Synthetic measures</i>	<i>Synthetic measures</i>	<i>Outcome-based measures</i>
Sub-indicators	Five Indicators	Two indicators
<i>A Social Participation</i>	<i>1. Family ties</i>	<i>1. Blood donation</i>
<i>B Political Participation</i>	<i>2. Informal networks of friends and neighbours</i>	<i>2. Electoral turnout</i>
<i>C Trust</i>	<i>3. Voluntary Organisations</i>	
Final indicator	<i>4. Indicator of political participation</i>	
<i>SC = simple mean of</i>	<i>5. Indicator of civic awareness</i>	
<i>A + B + C</i>		

As the table shows most of them focus on quantitatively collectable data. The World Bank (2006) published a guide to using qualitative methods for social capital research. As the guide points out, it is necessary to complement quantitative data with qualitative data to obtain all-embracing results. A more comprehensive summary of measurement approaches can be found in e.g. Andriani's 2013 study.

Despite the wide range of empirical studies on social capital the focus of many studies is almost solely on the nature of social capital (bonding, bridging, linking) or the quantity of social relations, memberships, associational activities, etc. (Morrow 1999). The former approach does incorporate aspects of quality but as mentioned above the studies often focus their attention on just one aspect of social capital such as the nature and depth of the relationship (Putnam 2000). By having defined indicators for quality for the six dimensions of social capital I am able to avoid this short-coming.

3. Research Framework

3.1 Summary of Approach

Based on my research objectives, I developed the framework of analysis to address each objective. First, I selected three counties using purposive choice to include counties with high, medium and low levels of social capital as estimated by Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006). I then developed a semi-structured interview process involving a set of community members in each of the counties to respond to a set of open ended questions (See Appendix 1). An institutional research board protocol was developed and submitted for approval (See Appendix 2). I identified the primary participants by contacting key actors and stakeholders of the community, such as governmental officials and leaders of groups and organizations. I then found the subsequent participants through snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted during the period of April 13th to May 8th 2017. I conducted the interviews as face-to-face or via telephone or skype. I transcribed notes from the interviews and entered them into the NVivo software to identify common themes and words.

3.2 Methodological Framework

The focus of my thesis is social capital in rural counties in Arkansas. I purposively selected three counties based on Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) data collection for 2009 on the production of social capital in U.S. counties. The researchers created a county-level index of social capital based on the voter turnout in the last presidential elections, the county-level response rate to the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census, and the number of tax-exempt non-profit organizations. In addition, they also looked at the associational density in each county. In order to achieve a representation of the range of different levels of social capital, the three

counties that I selected represent the rural counties in Arkansas with the highest score on the 2009 county level index (Van Buren), the median score (Prairie) and the lowest score (Lincoln). With regards to the associational density the counties rank similarly to the county-level index, with Van Buren having the highest density, Lincoln being near the bottom and Prairie county being close to the median. Comparable datasets are available for the years 1997, 2005, 2009 and 2014. The dataset for 2014 was published after the interviews were already completed. While Van Buren County and Lincoln County maintained their rank, Prairie County ranked 4th out of the 16 counties for 2014 showing an improvement to the previous results.

While I only look at certain aspects of social capital in this study, it is one of the only studies analyzing social capital on a county basis. The Petris Social Capital Index (PSCI) is a similar index. However, the PSCI limits its analysis to the number of employees hired at voluntary organizations by the population of that county or state (Brown, et al. 2006). A study by Lee and Kim (2013) recognized the limitations of Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's index but acknowledged its usefulness. The first limitation Lee and Kim see in the index is the use of proxy-measures which might be an outcome of social capital rather than social capital itself. The other limitation is the one dimensional focus of the index, which fails to explore the cognitive dimension of social capital. The cognitive dimension according to the authors encompasses to what extent social networking involves interpersonal trust and reciprocity (Lee and Kim 2013). I define rural according to the definition of the U.S. Census Bureau. The agency differentiates between rural and urban areas. Urban areas are those that encompass at least 2,500 people with at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters. Rural areas are those that do not fall into this categorization (U.S. Census Bureau 2015a).

Within the rural counties I conducted a total number of 30 semi-structured with different members of the respective communities (s. Table 2, 3 and 4). The semi-structured interviews consisted of 8 main questions (s. Appendix 1). I provided them in advance to the interviewee and supplemented them with individual follow-up questions. The questions cover the different dimensions of social capital identified in Chapter 2.1. The above mentioned guide by the World Bank recommends the use of interviews in the exploration of all dimensions of social capital (Dudwick, et al. 2006). Additional qualitative approaches such as focus groups were not feasible to conduct due to constraints on time and money

The participants were residents of the three counties from different areas of employment. I identified the primary participants by contacting key actors and stakeholders of the community, such as governmental officials and leaders of groups and organizations. I then found the subsequent participants through snowball sampling.

The approach to examine the responses followed an emergent design concept. This meant that while I defined certain main themes and sub-themes a priori based on the six dimensions of social capital, new themes and concepts that I did not consider in the beginning were added along the way. Based on the first analysis using the NVivo software, which is a qualitative data management program (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2015). I then identified the most salient themes and topics regarding the quality of social capital as well as examined the differences between the individual counties. To do so I examined each transcribed interview with the NVivo software. I coded the interviews according to the predetermined and emerging themes and sub-themes. The different main and sub-themes were cross tabulated with one another based on an overall and county-specific basis to identify connections and relations.

Table 2: List of Participants

Participant	County	Number of groups Participant is involved ins
1	Lincoln	4
2	Lincoln	3
3	Lincoln	2
4	Lincoln	3
5	Lincoln	3
6	Lincoln	3
7	Lincoln	3
8	Lincoln	1
9	Lincoln	6
10	Lincoln	3
11	Prairie	3
12	Prairie	3
13	Prairie	8
14	Prairie	4
15	Prairie	7
16	Prairie	1
17	Prairie	9
18	Prairie	4
19	Prairie	14
20	Prairie	6
21	Van Buren	7
22	Van Buren	16
23	Van Buren	1
24	Van Buren	5
25	Van Buren	2
26	Van Buren	12
27	Van Buren	3
28	Van Buren	3
29	Van Buren	4
30	Van Buren	11

Table 3: Education Level of Participants

County	Participant with High School degree as highest degree	Participant with Community College degree as highest degree	Participant with Bachelor degree as highest degree	Participant with Master degree or higher
Van Buren	2	-	2	6
Prairie	2	1	2	5
Lincoln	4	1	3	2

Table 4: Median Age

County	Median Age in County (in Years) (U.S. Census Bureau 2017b)	Median Age of Participants (in Years)	Age Range (in Years)
Van Buren	47.1	57	33-68
Prairie	45.4	52.5	29-76
Lincoln	37.5	54.5	28-70

The selection of the most salient themes was partially based on the number of times a topic was mentioned. I also selected relevant themes that stood out during the analysis due to their content and how the particular topic stood in relation to other topics.

3.3 Description of the Case Study Sites

I selected Lincoln, Prairie, and Van Buren, three rural Arkansas counties, to serve as case study sites. The state of Arkansas is situated in the southcentral part of the US. The total population is about 3million, with in the largest city being the state capital, Little Rock (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c). From 2010 to 2015 the population increased by 2.1% (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). In 2010 43.84% of the population lived in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2015a). All three selected counties were classified as 100% rural by the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau 2015b). The U.S. Census Bureau indirectly defines rural as those territories, population and

households that do not meet the criteria for urban areas. A territory is defined as urban if at least 2,500 people live there and a minimum of 1,500 of those have to reside outside institutional group quarters (U.S. Census Bureau 2015a).

With an annual gross domestic product (GDP) of about \$118,707 million Arkansas is ranked 34th of 50 states (U.S. Department of Commerce 2017). A 5-year estimate of 2011-2015 for the median household income ranks Arkansas at 49 of 50 states with \$41,371 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a). In January 2017 the unemployment rate was 4.2%, which was below the national average of 5.1% (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2017). However, Arkansas also scores below average in the area of education. On a national level 86.7% of people over 25 have at least a high school degree and only 29.8% have at least a bachelor's degree. Arkansas falls below this average with 84.8% of people over 25 having at least a high school degree and 21.1% having at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c).

Two thirds of the approximate 1,147,000 households are family households with two or more people living there. In about 70% of those households the male is the householder. 42.8% of families have children under 18 years old (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Being located within the so-called Bible belt¹, the state shows an above average religiosity with 52% of people being very religious compared to a nationwide average of 40% (Gallup 2016). 79% of people follow the Christian faith, 18% are unaffiliated and 3% are non-Christian faiths (Pew Research Center 2017a).

As shown in Table 6, in the selected counties the number of religious adherents per 1,000 inhabitants suggests a lower religiosity than the state average (U.S. Religion Census 2012).

¹ According to Merriam-Webster (2017) the Bible Belt is defined as “*an area chiefly in the southern U.S. whose inhabitants are believed to hold uncritical allegiance to the literal accuracy of the Bible*”

Table 5: Religious Adherents per County, Source: U.S. Religion Census, 2012

County	Religious Adherents per 1,000 Inhabitants
Van Buren	408
Prairie	500
Lincoln	364

In the last ten presidential elections the Democrats only won in Arkansas in 1992 and 1996, when Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton ran for office (National Archives and Records Administration 2017). Since 2015 the Republican Asa Hutchinson has been the Governor of Arkansas.

3.3.1 Van Buren County

The county is located in North Central Arkansas (s. Figure 3). It has a total population of about 17,000 with 96.4% being white. From 2010 to 2015 the population shrank 3.0% (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). The decline in population over the last several years is displayed in Figure 4. As it shows, the decline in population is a common feature between the three counties. The county seat is located in Clinton.

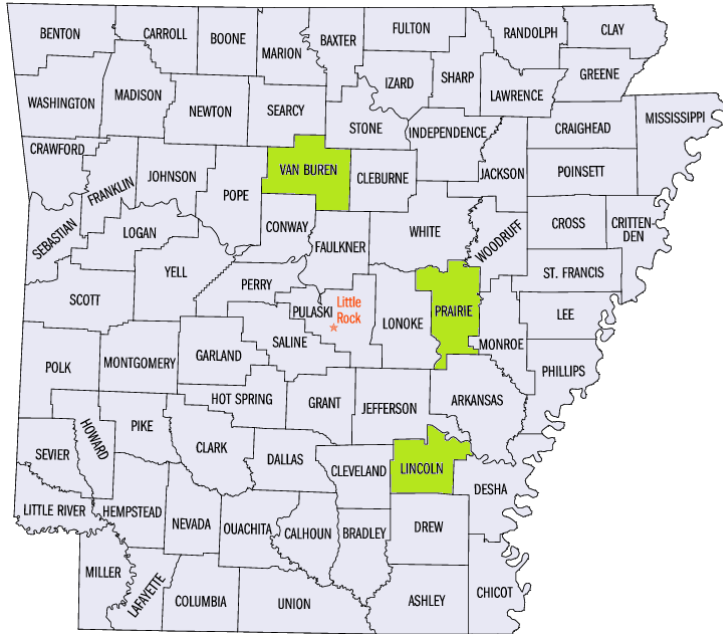


Figure 3: Location of the Case Study Sites, Source: Adapted from Wikimedia, 2006

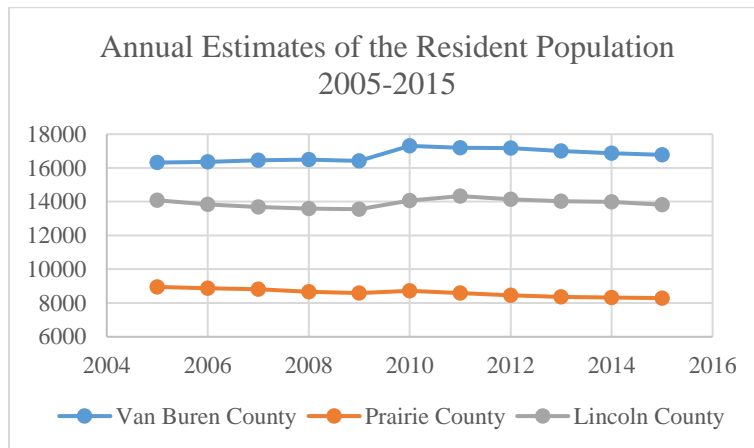


Figure 4: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population 2005-2015, Source U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a

A 5year estimate from 2011-2015 showed a median household income of \$32,312. This is below the above mentioned state average and the lowest of all three counties (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c). Figure 5 shows that over the last twelve years the median household income in all counties has gradually increased with Van Buren County showing significant volatility.

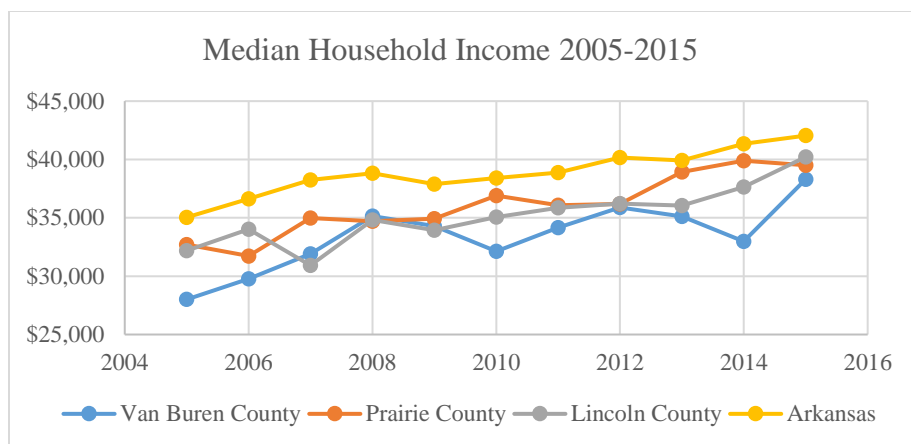


Figure 5: Median Household Income 2005-2015, Source: Adapted from U.S. Census Bureau, 2016

Van Buren County has the highest rate of unemployment of all three counties with 5.0% in April 2017 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2017). However, similar to the other counties and the state overall there has been a constant decline in unemployment since 2011 as shown in Figure 6.

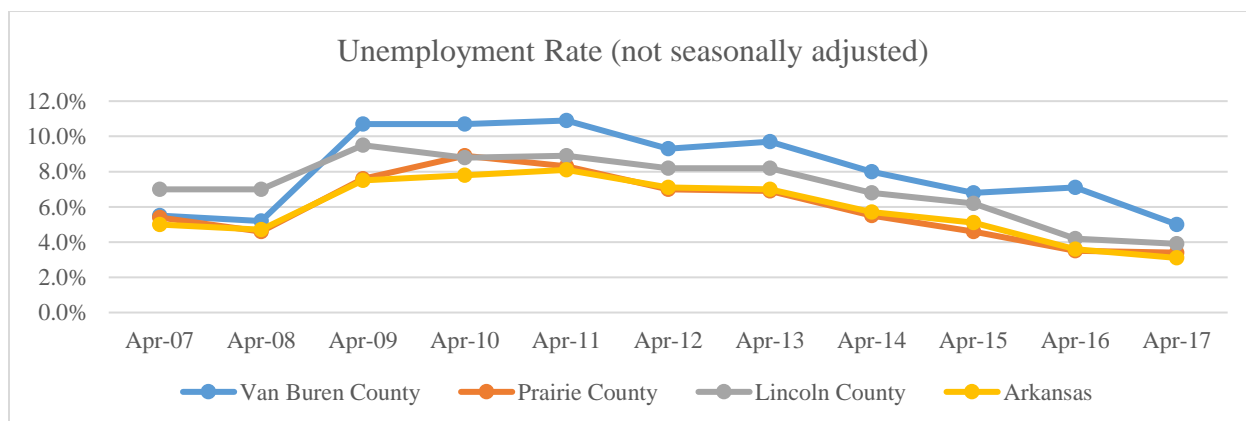


Figure 6: Unemployment Rate (not seasonally adjusted), Source: Adapted from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2017

In 2015 around 8.7% of people were employed in the agricultural sector, making it the biggest source of employment next to retail trade (12.2%) and government and government enterprises (12.7%) (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2016). Van Buren is geographically located above the Fayetteville Shale and benefitted greatly from the hydraulic fracturing taking place there.

However, due to the low market prices in oil the activity started to decline significantly in 2015 and by 2016 no active rigs remained (Taylor 2016).

Similar to the state wide average, about two thirds of the approximately 7,400 households are family households with two or more people living there. In about 75% of those households the male is the householder. 33.6% of families have children under 18 years old, which is below the state average (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a).

The county has eight public schools that serve approximately 2,300 students (Public School Review 2017). 81.9% of persons over 25 have at least a high school degree and 12.3% have at least a bachelor's degree. These are both below the state average (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c).

According to a study by the University of Wisconsin Health Institute (2017) Van Buren County ranks 59th of 75 counties in Arkansas for socio-economic factors in the County Health Ranking of 2017. The report takes education, employment, income, family & social support, as well as community safety into account.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) 100 nonprofit organizations were registered in the county with a total revenue of more than \$61,000,000 (NCCS 2017) (s. Table 6).

In the 2016 presidential election 75.6% of voters chose Donald Trump and 21.7% chose Hillary Clinton. The support for the Republican Party is above the state level of 60.4% and the highest of the three counties (Politico 2016). The voter turnout of 73.61% was above the state average of 64.65% and the highest in all counties (Clarity Elections 2017) (s. Table 6)

Table 6: County Data for Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's Social Capital Index Indicators, Source: Rupasingha, Goetz and Freshwater, 2006

County	Number of NCCS registered organizations	Voter Turnout Presidential Election 2016	Response Rate 2010 Census
Van Buren	100	73.61%	56%
Prairie	31	71.99%	55%
Lincoln	30	64.07%	54%

As discussed in Chapter 3.2 the counties were selected on the basis of the county-level social capital index developed by Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006). The index was created by using principle component analysis. For the rural counties in Arkansas, Van Buren County was ranked the highest.

3.3.2 Prairie County

Located in Central Arkansas Prairie County is the smallest of the three counties with only about 8,300 inhabitants. Its northern county seat is Des Arc and its southern county seat is DeValls Bluff. Around 86.3% of the population is white and 12.1% is black. It showed the biggest decline in population between 2010 and 2015 with a loss of 4.9% (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c).

While the median household income of \$35,833 measured for the 2011-2015 period is below the state average, it is the highest of all three sites. Moreover, the unemployment rate is the lowest of all three counties with 3.4% in April 2017 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2017). Prairie County's main sources of employment are also in the farm sector (22%), retail trade (10.1%), and in the government and government enterprises (13.9%) (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2016).

In line with the state average, about two thirds of the almost 3,700 households are family households with two or more people living in the household. In more than 75% of those the male is the householder. Nearly 42% of families have children under 18 years old which is slightly below the state average (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). While smaller than Lincoln County, Prairie County has four public schools that serve 1,257 students (Public School Review 2017). 79.3% of persons over 25 have at least a high school degree and 10.3% have at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c).

Prairie County ranked the highest of all three counties in the 2017 County Health Rankings for socio-economic factors, achieving rank 12 out of 75 (University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute 2017).

While Prairie County had 31 registered nonprofit organizations their total revenue only accumulated to about \$360,000 (NCCS 2017). Van Buren County's non-profit organizations collect a majority of the revenue through the Ozark Medical Hospital and the Petit Jean Electric Cooperative Corporation. In Lincoln County the C&L Electric Cooperative Corporation is responsible for the lion's share of revenue. In contrast to this, Prairie County does not have a big cooperative or a hospital but rather a variety of smaller organizations.

Just like in the other two counties the support for the Republican Party is above the state average with 72.8% of voters choosing Donald Trump (Politico 2016). As Table 6 shows the voter turnout was 71.99% (Clarity Elections 2017).

Prairie County takes up the median for rural counties in Arkansas according to Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) index. The counties associational density is below that of Van Buren County but above Lincoln County.

3.3.3 Lincoln County

Lincoln County is located in the Lower Delta of Arkansas (s. Figure 3). Its county seat is Star city. 67.6% of the 13,820 residents are white and 30.3% are black. Similar to Van Buren County the population declined between 2010 and 2015 by 2.2% (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c).

With a 2011-2015 average median household income of \$32,580 the county falls below the state average but is slightly above that of Van Buren County (U.S. Census Bureau 2017c). In April 2017 the county registered an unemployment level of 3.9% (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2017). Farm employment (13.4%) and the government and government enterprises (29.4%) are the main sources of employment (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2016). The third most important source is not retail trade, which ranks 4th with 6.3%, but manufacturing with 7.5% of total employment.

There are about 4,200 households in the county, 72% of which are family households with two or more people living there. The male is the main householder in more than two thirds of those and almost half of the households have children over under 18 years old (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a).

Lincoln County has a total of three public schools, which together serve 1640 students (Public School Review 2017). Less than 9% of the population over 25 has at least a bachelor's degree and 78.4% have at least a high school degree. This is both below the state average as well as the lowest of all three case studies (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

With regards to socio-economic factors, the county ranked 49 of 75 in the study by the University of Wisconsin Health Institute (2017).

According to the NCCS Lincoln county had 30 Non-profit organizations in 2016 that amassed a total revenue of approximately \$40,600,000 (NCCS 2017).

While the support for the Republican Party is above the state average with 64.2% of voters voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, it is the lowest of all three counties. In addition, the voter turnout was also the lowest of all three counties with 64.07% (s. Table 6). In Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) study Lincoln County ranked the lowest of all rural counties in the 2009 index.

4. Results

4.1 Results grouped by the six Dimensions

Based on the framework I used for the analysis I grouped the results by the six dimensions to provide a better overview. While most results were assigned to one dimension they are often connected to other dimensions and their results. I briefly explain some of the connections to highlight complex connectivity between the dimensions. Finally a brief summary comparing the different case study sites against one another is provided at the end of the chapter.

4.1.1 Groups and Networks

The first thing that became very apparent throughout the interviews was that a majority of people joined their respective groups either through work or were appointed to their position. 16 participants from all counties stated that they got involved in at least one of their groups because of their work or they were appointed to their position. Interestingly, nine of those participants stated that they either limited the contact to other members to just the meetings of their groups or organizations. If there was some form of socializing outside of the meetings it was focused on work. Participant 10 described this as follows when I asked if she/he socializes with other members outside of the meetings:

I would say to a certain extent. Work related, community related yes. And I like them a lot. Do we go and have BBQs at each other's houses? No! But I see them around town, they come and I see them at my work place. Participant 10, Lincoln County

This might indicate that there is a more superficial quality to their involvement that is not fully voluntary or guided by the desire or interest to contribute in a certain field.

However, another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is that every participant that I interviewed was in at least one organization and on average a participant was in about five

organizations (s. Table 2). Considering that a majority of those organizations have monthly or even weekly meetings it becomes apparent why some participants limit their level of involvement in the groups to a required minimum. Eight participants reported that they are not able to attend all meetings of the groups that they are involved in due to overlapping commitments either with work, other groups or their private lives. Participant 12 from Van Buren County who was involved in 13 groups and organizations, predominantly through work, commented on this fact as follows:

For groups that meet weekly,

They kind of want you to attend those meetings, but every week meetings is kind of hard with our job, with everything we do, our schedules and things. So I kind of backed off.

For groups that meet monthly,

And I try to make those monthly meetings. You know, there is some months that you know you got something personally or something like that, or work related, so you cannot make it. So you try to get it covered. Participant 12, Van Buren County

This could mean that participating in a high number of groups or organizations might compromise both the quantity and quality of engagement in those groups.

Another interesting theme that emerged when I analyzed the results was that only two participants did not consider that having a network of friends, family and acquaintances might be important. In fact, 18 of the 30 participants stated that this is of highest importance. When I asked if they utilize their network or have done so in the past, the most prevalent answer voiced by 10 participants was that they use(d) it for job purposes. This is clearly a Bourdieu approach to social capital in the sense that social capital is used to access resources for one self. Out of the 10 participants four were from Van Buren County, five from Prairie County and only one from Lincoln County. This could be a possible explanation for differences in the measured quantity of

social capital. Being able to personally benefit from your network might cause an individual to be more motivated to get more involved.

4.1.2 Trust and Solidarity

We are a small community, and [...] basically everybody knows everybody. Participant 14, Prairie County.

Sentences similar to this were used by several interviewees to stress the level of intimacy that rural communities generally have. However, when I asked about their relationship to people in their group it became apparent that especially in Lincoln and Prairie County people predominantly seemed to have a professional or superficial relationship with other members of their groups. In contrast, of the five people who reported a very close relationship to their fellow members three were from Van Buren County. When I asked whether they share serious or personal matters with their network, seven people in Van Buren County and 6 people in Prairie County responded that they feel comfortable to at least share such information with select individuals in their circle if not the entire community. In contrast, five participants in Lincoln County reported that they prefer to not discuss private or serious matters with others or people outside their family. This indicates a lower level of trust among inhabitants of Lincoln County compared to the other counties and can also be seen as another indicator showing a tighter network among people in Van Buren and Prairie Counties. Referring back to the dimension of *Groups and Networks* this might be one potential explanation why the inhabitants in Lincoln County refrain from utilizing their network. With regards to social capital solidarity became very apparent in all of the counties. A number of participants reported that either they or other people in their community had an inert desire to serve, improve or help their respective communities. They often do so in an altruistic fashion as this anecdote shows:

[O]ur city technically, has been bypassed by a new road. [...] Off and on groups have tried to get food and lodging signs on 530. We can't, because technically we are not bypassed, a road actually intersects with the highway. And there have been groups that have taken up the banner from time to time. There is a group now that has kept their shoulders to the plow. None of them have a business. They have really stepped forward to try and get the food and guest lodging sign. They do it for the service of the people that have a business. Participant 3, Lincoln County

This selfless attitude was also reflected in how they utilized their network. I mentioned above that many participants took advantage of their network for their job. Yet, while it was to help them, the requests that were made often served, taught or helped other people or the community as a whole as the following quote shows:

Well because of my job [...] there are a lot of times [when] we need things from the community, whether it be donations for things, or donations of goods and services, that sort of thing or we need someone to come in and speak to a class or that sort of thing. So [...] I can call on the people in that network in this community and say 'Hey I need this or can you tell me where I find such and such'. They have been very good to us, they have always been... the community has always been very generous, so having those connections helps me to do my job better. Participant 20, Prairie County

4.1.3 Collective Action and Cooperation

A theme that was prevalent in all counties was that the groups and organizations struggled to recruit new members or that there was a general lack of involvement among the general public.

[I]t seems like people are happy to participate and not take part. Just enjoy the work everybody else has done and shy away from getting involved. And then they ask 'Why doesn't the city do this and this?' Why don't you come to the meetings and get active? Participant 12, Prairie County

However, as I discussed above many of the participants were in a variety of groups. Not being able to enlist other people might compel engaged individuals to try and compensate for a lack of members by being a part of many groups.

Especially younger citizens were pointed out by the participants as being the group that seems to not be as heavily involved.

What has happened here and what I see around me and what I see in Northwest Arkansas, what has happened here most of the young people that were here do not seem to want to be involved in what we are talking about. There are exceptions to that [...]. But young people seem to be more self-cantered or selfish and they are only concerned with what they want. Participant 6, Lincoln County

So you always got a group that is active and will be involved in helping the community and then you have a good number of people that is just not comfortable in doing things, that doesn't have time. Especially young people. It is hard to get young people, cause they have their jobs, they have their families. It is just harder to get younger people involved in those volunteer organizations than it is to get older people. That is unfortunate but that is just the way it is. Participant 13, Prairie County

The second quote brings up another problem stated by several participants from both Prairie and Lincoln County. While there is a variety of groups, there is not much variety in members and the same people tend to be involved in the majority of groups.

If you are in one group...If you are on the city council, you will be or you probably have been on the school board. If you have been on the Quorum Court you will be on the others....In fact the people don't really change, they just change seats. Participant 13, Prairie County

Interestingly, as I noted in the dimension of *Trust and Solidarity*, the relationship with members of the groups remained superficial despite the fact that many of them were in several groups together.

Having the same people engaged in a majority of the groups creates two main problems that are closely related to one another. As mentioned before the level of social capital in many studies was determined by the number of groups or organizations in an area or the number of participants. Though, if just one core group of people is involved in all those groups the number of individual participants will be measured too high. Therefore, while the social capital might be high among those people, it will not be representative for the rest of the population in this area. Secondly, it limits the bridging social capital. Bridging social capital requires the interaction of

individuals that are in different groups (Larsen, et al. 2004). With the same members in most groups the possibility bridging is limited.

Two thirds of the participants reported that the network they had built in their county was reliable. This indicates a certain level of trust among them but also a high willingness to cooperate with one another. This can be related back to the dimension of *Trust and Solidarity*. The willingness to cooperate with one another is closely related to the desire of many of the participants to improve the local community.

Something that was very apparent when interviewing participants from Van Buren County was that the community had suffered a number of hardships in the last several years. Among other things the county had experienced floods, a tornado, and the decline in oil prices. As I mentioned in the case study description the county as well as the neighboring counties relied heavily on natural gas royalty payments from the Fayetteville Shale as a source of income. The decline in oil prices affected the economy adversely. Those adversities, however, have had a positive influence on the social capital in the area. As described by Participant 26, adversities caused people to expand their bridging, bonding and linking social capital in order to cope with the consequences of negative events.

You know, this county has been faced with a lot of adversity over the last decade or so [...]. We went through a major tornado. Went through some flooding. We have gone through some loss of industry and things like that. And if the people and the government here had not worked together. [...] it could have been a lot different story. And then you also go back to this community development committee and talking about meeting once a month for a breakfast committee. It has municipalities from Clinton and Fairfield Bay. It has county government involved. It has different organizations that themselves are involved in that. And we come together and we talk about the things that happen in the county and affect each of us and our organizations, but most of all what has affected the people and the county and what can be done. That is surely something for a group in a county. Not just the city, or a certain area, but a county-wide effort like that. And that is what makes this place such a beautiful place to live. Cause I mean the people really make efforts and strive to work together across the county. Participant 26, Van Buren County

The last aspect of a county-wide engagement is another point that is closely related to the dimension of Social Cohesion and Inclusion. Overall the majority of groups and organizations operated at a local level, especially in Lincoln County. In Van Buren however, a lot of groups and organizations operated on at least a county-wide basis and collaborating with or helping the surrounding counties was not uncommon, as the quote by Participant 22 shows.

A couple years ago, Faulkner County had a devastating tornado and there were 7 counties that went and helped for 2-3 weeks after that. And they would return gladly. And we got paid eventually, but we did it because that was the right thing to do. Participant 22, Van Buren County

This again shows a more intense level of bridging social capital for Van Buren County that exceeds that of the other two counties. This can be strongly linked to the dimension of *Social Cohesion and Inclusion*, since it allows groups and organizations as well as the community as a whole to be more inclusive.

4.1.4 Information and Communication

As mentioned above all counties struggled to recruit younger people for the different groups and organizations, which with regard to diversity creates a problem since not all viewpoints are incorporated in discussions. This in turn might negatively affect the quality of social capital. While all counties did recognize this problem and a lot of groups and organizations did make an effort to reach out, only Van Buren County utilized modern methods of communication in the form of an up to date online and social media presence. Comparison of the content and detail of the official county websites for Van Buren, Prairie and Lincoln confirm the quality differences between Van Buren and the other two counties.

We have a website here in our county that you can visit anytime and it shows any meeting that we have in our county. It shows everything that we discuss. Or if we done something on the roads or whatever, they have those minutes in there and people can look. Same thing with Quorum court notes. So there is a lot of information to it. They just go and look at it. Same thing with the church; we have a website. Fire departments as well. Everybody has gotten pretty much on board with websites and Facebook and stuff.

Participant 30, Van Buren County

The increased accessibility of information and the heightened level of communication positively affects not only the quality of social capital in the dimension of *Information and Communication*, but also extends further into other dimensions. In the dimension of *Social Cohesion and Inclusion* it allows more members of the community and county to be informed and participate in the operations of the different institutions and groups. In the dimension of *Empowerment and Political Action* it allows people to have a better overview over the proceedings of the government.

While modern methods of communication might not create a deep connection between members and non-members of the groups and organizations in a county, the provision of information and the ease of access are able to provide a solid foundation for a high quality of information exchange and communication which are important cornerstones of social capital.

In each county at least half of the participants reported that the informal network in their county was essential for receiving information and conducting business.

[T]he old story here is that if you do not know what you are doing here ask your neighbor, he will know what you are doing. That is just small communities. But as far as business and who is in financial trouble and needs to sell their farm or their land or their equipment, or who is looking for cattle and will pay a good price for it, that information passes through the feed store and I can tell you [...] I have had over the years a couple of clients that own feed stores. They don't do it to make money by selling a bag of corn and chicken feed, they do it so they can gather the information and so they know what is going on in the community. That way they know who is selling and who is buying and they pick up opportunity like that. Participant 27, Van Buren County

This shows that networking is a key element of the everyday life of the participants. Considering that participants reported that everyone knows each other, the importance and influence of the informal network in the daily proceedings of the communities is stressed even further.

Something that was mentioned several times by the participants was that this sets them apart from non-rural communities in which this form of informal communication would not be that important or customary. This could indicate that generally rural communities require a high quality of their informal network since inhabitants heavily rely on the exchange of information through it.

4.1.5 Social Cohesion and Inclusion

In each county, participants reported the efforts the different formal and informal institutions make to engage or include others and particularly as potential members. While the institutions, groups and organizations in Prairie County and Lincoln County mainly just put out official notices, many in Van Buren County went a step further. In particular governmental officials were very motivated to learn about the different opinions and tried to engage with as many people as possible, for example by providing opinion boxes in public places and frequently attending community events where they interacted with inhabitants of the county. As mentioned previously this might be due to the superior quality of the bonding, bridging and linking social capital in the county. It is also related to the generally stronger relationships of participants reported for Van Buren County. Participant 22 was a member in 16 groups and organizations. Even though she/he got involved in many of them through work she/he stated the following:

I guess I have been involved in most civic organizations wherever I was. I just try to stay involved in that because it helps you to understand your community. Participant 22, Van Buren County

Among other things the participant not only found a monthly breakfast club for local business and community leaders to exchange information and strengthen the bond within the community, she/he also put an emphasis on joining two local chapters of a national charitable organizations since she/he is engaged in both communities. This additional effort that was put forward by not only Participant 22, but also by other members of the different groups and organizations. This might be another supporting reason for a higher level of social capital for Van Buren County as measured by Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater.

When I asked about whether there are any groups or individuals that stick out in being able to influence the proceedings of the community, almost half of the participants reported that especially certain individuals tend to have more influence than others. While only two participants from Van Buren County reported this, five participants from Lincoln County and seven from Prairie County emphasized this. The predominant reasons that were given for this comparatively high influence of certain individuals were on one hand a stronger financial power of those individuals and on the other hand their ardent engagement in the community and/or certain groups. The latter indicates that a qualitatively and quantitatively high level of social capital of an individual increases the influence that person has. This seems to be more important than the collective influence a group or an organization has, as this quote by Participant 17 shows:

I would say that there are certain groups that have more influence. And the reason I would say that is because they have some key power players... [they] are members of their groups and the key power players are very involved and have a wide network themselves. Participant 17, Prairie County

While one person in Lincoln County mentioned that his/her community was relatively closed off to outsiders, three people in Prairie County stated that their respective communities tended to be closed off to outsiders or even clannish.

Prairie County in general is very old families. You can't survive, because a lot of what we have is word of mouth. And sometimes it is really hard to get to know people because they are more closed off to outsiders. Participant 11, Prairie County

This can be seen as a negative example for social capital as described in Chapter 2.2. The close relationship the people have among them reduces their potential for building bridging social capital and they therefore limit their social capital in addition to lowering the quality of the existing social capital. Considering that participants reported to have the same people in a lot of the groups while struggling to recruit new members, this behavior might be surprising. However, since the engaged individuals hold considerable influence in this county, they might be reluctant to share this influence.

4.1.6 Empowerment and political Action

While ethnic diversity is relatively low in Van Buren County as described in Chapter 3.3, it is substantially more extensive in Prairie County and especially in Lincoln County. Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006) found that a greater racial fragmentation causes a less socially connected community. Their observations are limited to a period from 1980-1990 and another period from 1990-1997 in which the statistical significance of the relationship declined.

Nevertheless, in none of the interviews I conducted did a participant mention race as a reason for any differences in participation, influence or similar factors. A factor that was a lot more at the center of attention for differences between community members were the different political party associations of the inhabitants of the communities. Despite those differences, most participants stated that there was only a very low or even no conflict about how decisions were made in the groups and organizations and in the county governments. While there might be discussions about

differences in opinions there generally seemed to be no deep disagreement and the approach to solve things was often very similar as shown in the quote by Participant 16.

When you go to a meeting it is kinda like everybody is on the same page. Everybody kinda got the same thinking. They have a committee meeting about Des Arc and everybody is just kinda on the same page. There is not much arguing. They try to hash things and try to get things going. Participant 16, Prairie County

This could indicate that racial diversity for those communities is less important than a low diversity in opinions. This might separate those rural areas from more urbanized areas with a population that has a broader political and cultural spectrum. In addition, the familiarity between the community members is greater as I discussed in the dimension of *Trust and Solidarity*. Being aware of the situation of other community member might facilitate an easier discussion process since the mutual understanding is greater. Especially for Prairie County and Lincoln County, however, it needs to also be taken into consideration that the same people were engaged in many of the group, which automatically creates a lower diversity in opinions.

As mentioned above, all of the participants were engaged in at least one group and on average in five groups. While the level of commitment of the participants in their respective groups and organizations differed, the will to help the community was strong in all the counties. Yet, the level of poverty and the struggling economy was a factor that seemed to inhibit each of the communities from reaching their full potential. The lack of funds limited the opportunities that could be provided or accessed by the people.

There are a couple of counties down here that really have a problem with their tax base. They have problems with enough revenue to, you know, do all the things that we really want to do. So we really have to set goals and try to look at the future. Because we have to work hard to make our budget work. Participant 6, Lincoln County

Poverty even limits the inclusion of certain parts of the population in activities.

I noticed here, and I struggled with that early on when I moved here, it's the level of poverty. I have never experienced that so strongly. In a rural area you will always find more poverty. And the level of education. Opportunities for people, it is just...It affects me at [my workplace] People tell me 'I can't come to town, I don't have a car' or 'Mine just broke and I can't fix it'. How do I reach those people? [...] An urban area might have poverty, but this is just a poor area here. Participant 10, Lincoln County

The quote shows that poverty is an important factor that affects quality and quantity of engagement. It limits the opportunities groups and organizations have in many areas, such as the means to recruit new members. It might also be a possible explanation for the high willingness to cooperate with one another and to better the community among the inhabitants. Bearing in mind that the tax base is relatively weak, the private engagement of citizens allows to facilitate improvements and events, which would not be possible otherwise.

4.2 Summary of Results

While some of the results are not county specific, I will briefly summarize the individual results for the three counties in order to gain a better understanding of the three case study sites.

In Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) index Van Buren County was ranked the highest for rural counties in Arkansas. Throughout the analysis it became apparent that the county demonstrated not only quantitatively high levels of social capital but also a high quality of many aspects related to social capital.

Participants in the county reported to use and be able to use their personal networks for job purposes. They also tended to have a closer relationship with other members of their group than the participants in the other counties. Furthermore, the participants frequently displayed the willingness to share information with other members of their network, indicating a deeper level of trust and a tighter network among community members. One of the triggering factors might have been the number of economic and natural hardships that the county had to face in recent

years. Having to work together with other community members and the surrounding counties caused the bonding, bridging and linking social capital in the county to grow and deepen. Additionally, many of the groups operated and collaborated on a county-wide basis in contrast to a community bound basis indicating a more intense level of bridging social capital. In the dimension of *Information and Communication* the county surpassed the other counties by utilizing modern methods of communication to inform and include as many people as possible. However, beyond providing online information, government officials in the county made an effort to also personally reach out to understand the needs of the community. The combination of a more personal and intimate interaction of the community members as well as with surrounding counties and the mutual efforts to include the opinions of as many people as possible indicates a higher quality of social capital, which is in line with the measured quantity differences.

Prairie County was the median for rural counties in Arkansas for the 2009 index of Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006), but ranked 4th in the 2014 index which was published after I already concluded the interviews. Similar to Van Buren County many of the participants tended to use their personal network for job matters, however, their relationship to other members in their network tended to be superficial. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants still felt comfortable to share personal information with other community members. When it came to the make-up of the groups in the county, the participants reported that the same members were active in a majority of the groups. The problem that arises with this is among other things a reduced bridging social capital since only a certain part of the population is represented. A majority of participants in the county also reported that individuals that are either very involved or have substantial financial power tended to have more influence than the different groups and

organizations of the county. Due to the fact that the communities in the county seemed to have a tendency to be clannish or closed off to outsiders, the county reduced their potential for building bridging social capital.

Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater (2006) ranked Lincoln County the lowest of all rural counties in Arkansas. The quality of social capital somewhat reflects the measured quantity of social capital. In contrast to the other two counties, participants in Lincoln County were not inclined to use their personal network for job purposes despite the fact that they reported it to be essential for personal success. Similar to Prairie County the participants reported a superficial relationship to other members of their groups. In contrast to Prairie County, the Lincoln County participants preferred to not share private or serious matters with other people outside their family. Maybe partially because the majority of organizations in Lincoln County operate at the local basis, they have the same people engaged in a lot of groups, just like Prairie County. Also like Prairie County, the most influence was held by financially empowered and involved individuals.

My results for those counties indicate that the ranking of social capital from a qualitative perspective is similar to the ranking of Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) quantitative index. This suggests that for the three counties qualitative observations align with the relative quantitative rankings. Future research should explore the measures of social capital in both qualitative and quantitative dimensions for a better understanding of the relationship between these two aspects of social capital.

5. Discussion

5.1 Limitations of Study

While the results are important for the research on social capital quality, certain limitations apply.

First, the case study was geographically limited to the State of Arkansas. As such, a range of economic, social, and cultural specificities apply to it and limit any generalizations for understanding qualitative dimensions of social capital. The comparably low median household income and the high level of religiosity are two examples for factors that play an important role in how people behave and what they value. Therefore, the results should not be applied to a national context without further research, which allows for different circumstances.

In addition, the research was also conducted in only three of the sixteen rural counties in Arkansas. For future research I recommend to extend the scope of the research to all rural counties in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of the quality of social capital in rural Arkansas. As described in Chapter 4.1.4, the participants compared their situation to non-rural circumstances. It might be advisable that for future research this comparison is validated through a more comprehensive study that includes urban counties.

Due to a constraint in time and resources the number of participants interviewed was relatively small and does not necessarily reflect the general population of the counties.

All participants were over the age of 21 and the median age in each county was below that of the sampled participants of those counties (s. Table 4). This difference is partially explained by the fact that many of the younger people that were contacted for this study did not have the time to participate, while older inhabitants had more time available.

A qualitative study in contrast to a quantitative study often requires fewer participants. I still tried to reach out to a broad spectrum of professions and while I achieved a relatively good coverage, participants from all professions were not represented.

Another possible short-coming of this study is the fact that each participant was a member in at least one group and on average they were a member in about five groups. Since there is no data available on the average memberships in groups in the counties, it is difficult to judge whether this is above or below average.

Despite those limitations, this thesis still holds significance for the topic of social capital and rural development. As one of the first studies of its kind to explore the quality of social capital, valuable insights were gained for the field and for future research. The results of the case studies provide an insight about the importance of taking qualitative factors into consideration when discussing social capital.

5.2 Policy Implications

Sen. Mike Lee, the Vice Chairman of the United States Congress Joint Economic Committee, recently brought social capital back to the center of political discussion, when the first of a series of reports on social capital titled '*What we do together – The State of Associational Life in America*' (Joint Economic Committee 2017a) was published. In addition, a hearing on the same topic was held in May 2017, which included testimonies by social capital experts, such as the aforementioned Robert Putnam (Joint Economic Committee 2017b). However, neither the report nor any of the speakers focused on rural communities. Moreover, concrete policy suggestions were scarce. Putnam, as well as Yuval Levin, another expert giving testimony, stressed that policies should be made on a local rather than on a federal basis (Levin 2017, Putnam 2017).

This is in line with Grootaert & Bastelaer's (2001) findings. The researchers stress that levels of social capital can vary significantly even on a local level. They do stress that results of other case studies have shown that a supracommunal approach that connects different communities seems promising in the creation of social capital. This is well in line with the results of my research. Van Buren County's quantitative level of social capital was ranked the highest in Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater's (2006) study for rural counties in Arkansas. Also, the engagement in supracommunal organizations of the participants exceeded that of the other counties. A conclusion and recommendation is that future policy approaches should promote umbrella organizations as described by Bebbington & Carroll (2000). Those organizations are in charge of connecting local groups and networks. This way the bridging capital can also be expanded, something that several of my results showed to be lacking. While I am hesitant about providing specific policy suggestions, I will provide suggestions that might contribute to increasing the quality of social capital. The results of the dimension *Information and Communication* suggest that a responsible use of modern methods of communication can help to strengthen the link between the government and the public. Moreover, it provides more people with the opportunity to become informed and participate not only in formal, but also informal organizations. Using for example social media platforms to appeal to a wider audience might also help to recruit more members and encourage a greater participation. This is especially true for younger community members. A survey by the Pew Research Center showed that at least 86% of 18-29 year old U.S. citizens use at least one social media site in contrast to only 34% of people above the age of 65 (Pew Research Center 2017b). However, the access to broadband internet is lower in rural areas (Whitcare 2016). Still 78% of people living in rural areas are online (Pew Research Center 2016). As mentioned in Chapter 4.1.3 groups in all counties struggled to recruit especially young

community members. In his testimony for the Senate Joint Economic Committee hearing Mario Small stressed that early childhood education and childcare programs are a way for children as well as for parents to build social capital (Small 2017). Going even further, I think that engaging children in groups, organizations and the community early on in life will create a basis for more engagement later on in life, as the answers of the participants have shown. Programs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America offered by the agricultural extension services in the counties are a good cornerstone, yet they should if possible be complimented with programs in fields other than agriculture, to accommodate for different interests. This is in line with Rainey et al. (2003), who explain that the capacity of community-based organizations and the civic participation of all residents needs to be encouraged by policies to address local development issues. While it is difficult to suggest policy suggestions that function as a panacea in all counties, it is important to create awareness about social capital and the importance of being engaged in one's community.

6. Conclusion

Research on social capital has been conducted for several decades, and as I have noted in this thesis there is still no consensus about a unifying definition or method to measure it. The majority of studies focus on one dimension of the subject, in particular the dimension of *Groups and Networks*. Taking the multidimensionality of the subject into account, this approach limits the understanding of social capital and its complex causal network. Additionally, the majority of indicators used to measure the level of social capital only provide an insight into quantitative facets of it. In contrast to the typical quantitative approach, the World Bank researchers group social capital into six interrelated dimensions in their guide on qualitative research on social capital (Dudwick, et al. 2006). Among them, the dimensions of *Groups & Networks*, *Trust & Solidarity*, *Collective Action & Cooperation*, *Information & Communication*, *Social Cohesion & Inclusion* as well as *Empowerment & Political Action* acknowledge and encompass the multidimensionality of the concept. I aimed for the interviews to provide insights on the quality of each of the six dimensions of social capital in the three counties.

Beyond this I aimed to gather insights that would allow policy makers to develop more effective programs to promote social capital.

My analysis rendered results that were related to one another beyond the limits of their respective dimension.

With regards to the first dimension, my results showed that for the respective counties the involvement and contact to other members of groups and organizations remained relatively superficial if the involvement was not fully voluntary or guided by the desire or interest to contribute in a certain field. An involvement in a large number of groups also seemed to be a hampering factor in becoming involved on a deeper level. Yet, it became apparent that the

utilization of the personal network for job purposes was common in Van Buren County and Prairie County.

Participants in all counties stated behavior that indicated high levels of solidarity for the community and other members within the community. Nevertheless, the participants in Van Buren and Prairie County showed more trust for their neighbors, which positively influenced the social cohesion and the cooperation. They also tended to form deeper connections with other community members compared to those in Lincoln County, which might be one possible explanation why participants in this county were hesitant about utilizing their networks.

For the dimension of *Collective Action and Cooperation* it became apparent that Van Buren County set itself apart from the other counties. Van Buren County expanded their bonding, bridging, and linking social capital even beyond county borders partly due to the weather and economic hardships experienced by the county in the past. This again is related to the dimension of *Social Cohesion and Inclusion* since it facilitates the community as well as the groups and organizations to be more inclusive.

Van Buren County also led the set in regards to providing information to the citizens by using modern methods of communication such as social media. This positively influences the dimensions of *Social Cohesion and Inclusion* and *Empowerment and Political Action*. While all counties struggled to recruit new members, especially young people, participants in Prairie and Lincoln County reported that they have the same people in all of the groups. The struggle to recruit new members might be a reason why some individuals were engaged in a lot of groups, despite the fact that it kept them from being involved on a deeper level. Not being able to enlist other people might compel engaged individuals to try and compensate for a lack of members by being a part of many groups. Furthermore, the government officials in Van Buren County were

very dedicated in understanding the pulse of their constituents and put a lot of effort in being inclusive. This behavior can potentially be attributed to the superior quality of the bonding, bridging and linking social capital in the county and a generally closer relationship among the inhabitants. In contrast, participants in Prairie and Lincoln County more frequently stated that certain individuals stood out in the community. Their influence was most often derived from financial power or their devoted engagement in the community and/or certain groups.

Ethnicity was not an important barrier to social engagement and was not identified as a source that results in potential conflicts. Instead, the counties seemed to all have a very low conflict potential in their decisions. Political party differences were identified as an important barrier and source of lack of cohesion. Yet, there generally seemed to be no deeper disagreement, and the approach to solve things was often very similar. This again can be linked to the familiarity among community members in a rural area.

I can conclude from those results that the different dimensions are closely related with one another and form a complex web of social interaction and engagement. An analysis of social capital and in particular the quality of social capital has to be guided by a multidimensional approach in order to reflect this complexity. The results do not only suggest a positive relationship between the quality and the quantity of social capital, but also a reciprocal relationship among the different dimensions and therefore within the quality aspect itself.

Even though my results provide a deeper insight into the quality aspect of social capital, they also made it apparent that general policies that act as a panacea to increase social capital are not the right solution. Outside of early childhood education and raising awareness on the importance of social capital, solutions have to be found on a local level. Supracommunal entities are

recommended to assist in creating and promoting bridging social capital but need to be created according to the local environment.

My study has shown the importance of expanding the analysis of social capital to the qualitative aspects in order to achieve a holistic assessment and conduct more accurate research. It also allows to better understand the differences between the counties and hopefully be of assistance when creating local policies.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Questions asked in Semi-structured Interview

- What organizations and/or groups are you affiliated with in _____ (name of community)?
 - How would you describe your relationship with members of those groups/ members of your social networks?
- Do you discuss serious and personal matters with your network
 - If so, who do you confide in?
 - If not, why not?
- Do you feel it is important to have a network of acquaintances, relatives and friends to succeed in this community?
 - Can you rely on the network that you have built?
 - In what way have you been able to or want to utilize this network or the groups you are a member of?
- How would you describe your relationship to people outside of your inner circle?
- What individuals or groups are normally involved in major discussions and decisions involving the future of the community?
 - What efforts are made to include viewpoints from those not in the main discussion group?
- How does the community/group decide if they should act?
 - Is it a conflict prone process?
- How do you feel about the formal and informal institutions in this county fulfilling their purpose?
 - How extensive is the influence you and your community have on formal and informal institutions?
 - Would you say certain groups have more influence than others? If so, how did that come about?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 2: Research Compliance Protocol Letter



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

April 10, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Valerie Kilders
Eric Wailes

FROM: Ro Windwalker|
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 17-03-582

Protocol Title: *Analysis of the Quality of Social Capital in Rural Counties in Arkansas*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 04/07/2017 Expiration Date: 04/06/2018

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 45 participants. If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.