

**Network Inequality: An Under Researched Dimension**  
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**Inequalities extend to ‘network’ inequalities**

Most of us would be familiar with income inequality as the gap between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’. We may also be familiar with educational inequality. Yet one type of inequality that seems to elude our attention is ‘network inequality’ – the fact that some groups of people have more ‘social capital’ or valuable social connections than others. Some are better connected than others, while some have become lonely and depressed. Network inequality has, until more recently, has received only scant research attention in Singapore.

The blindsiding of network inequality must arise partly from the meritocratic ideals of our society; we believe that achievement is largely a matter of hard work and ability – in short, human capital. These matter, of course. But we must ask: What, in the first place, determines a person’s acquisition of human capital? The world-renowned American sociologist, James Coleman, teaches us that ‘who we know’ (social capital) is a critical factor in ‘what we know’ (human capital). The capitals are intertwined. He cites the example of John Stuart Mill, the philosopher, political economist, and civil servant, who became the accomplished man he was, due - to no small part - to the devotion of a dedicated father (James Mill) who spent much of his time and efforts honing the intellectual prowess of his son.

In this brief note, I argue the point that ‘network inequality’ deserves to be studied for at least three compelling reasons: First, social capital - the valuable connections that people have - are unequally distributed in the population, along lines we are all familiar with: gender, race and class. Second, network inequalities among groups arise from their unequal access to organizations that facilitate the forging of social capital, such as: families, schools, workplaces and voluntary associations. Third, network inequalities matter precisely because they influence income inequalities. People who have better networks tend to enjoy better attainments in the labour market in the form of better earnings, getting a promotion, and the like.

My elaboration of these points will invoke a range of research findings, all culled from the systematic analysis of social network data in Singapore (including data from the years 2005 and 2012).

**(1) Network inequalities unfold along lines we are all familiar with: gender, race and class**

My analysis of network data in Singapore reveals that the spread of valuable connections is neither random nor haphazard, but concentrate in certain groups. For example, men have a greater number of connections to weak-ties and to non-kin connections than women do. Scholars tell us that these kinds of ties are very useful for procuring new information including information related to the changing of jobs.

My studies have also discovered network inequalities by race, e.g., minorities such as Malays are less likely than Chinese and Indians to mention having connections to university graduates and private

housing dwellers (i.e., wealthy connections). Malays are also less likely to have weak tie connections than Chinese and Indians according to the 2005 data. A later study – in 2012 – has showed that Malays are less likely than other ethnic groups to indicating knowing people in high-status occupations. Therefore the network inequalities by race do seem rather durable with time.

I also found network inequalities to occur on the basis of class. People with more education are more likely to have ties to university graduates, ties to people who are wealthy (e.g., who live in private housing), and ties to non-kin, compared with people who have less education. People who are wealthier tend also to have better quality connections than those who are less wealthy. All these findings illustrate the importance of one's social location, whether gender, race or class, in shaping access to valuable social connections. One's circumstances play a major role in paving or inhibiting access to social capital.

## **(2) Uneven access to social capital linked to unequal access to social contexts that facilitate social capital**

Why do some groups have more social capital and some less? My research has shown tertiary education to be a major factor paving access to social capital. Indeed, Malay are less likely to have ties to university graduates and less likely to have wealthy connections because of their lower representation in places such as universities.

The workplace is another arena for the forging of social capital. Indeed women's lower participation in paid work surfaces as an important reason for why they have less weak-tie and non-kin connections in their network.

Being part of a voluntary association (e.g., places of worship or a hobby club), increases one's access to a wide range of valuable contacts – ties to well-educated people, ties to wealthy people, ties to non-kin, and access to weak ties. As women are more likely to participate in voluntary associations, this arena represents an especially important site of social capital for them.

Interestingly, although minority groups such as Malays have less social capital than Chinese due to their lower representation in critical arenas such as higher education, the few Malays that have higher education do see a bigger increase in their social capital than the many Chinese (who have tertiary education). Likewise, although women have less access to non-kin social capital due to their lower participation in paid work than men, women do forge social capital at faster rates than men when they join voluntary associations. These findings illustrate that one way to narrow network inequalities among social groups is to make more equal their access to organizations – schools, workplaces, voluntary associations and the like – that facilitate the formation of social capital.

## **(3) Network inequalities linked to economic inequalities**

The third reason why we should study network inequality is its close link to other forms of inequality, most critically, income inequality. My research shows that having more social capital – such as having ties to university graduates – facilitates better earnings on the job. This means several things: first, accessing social capital is critical for accessing economic capital. Second, since one is closely related to the other, narrowing the 'network gap' between groups will facilitate narrowing the income gap between them.

Governments have sought to narrow the income gap in their respective societies, using large levers such as progressive taxation and various targeted assistance schemes to the poor. In this brief article, I suggest that another lever – at a more interpersonal level – would be to think up strategies to narrow the network inequalities facing social groups, as these have a direct link to economic well-being. To that end, we need to foster a ‘class-integrated’ society so that resources can be shared around, traveling from one person to another, from one group to another, through the network. While much attention has been paid to fostering an ethnically-integrated society in Singapore, more attention could be paid to fostering a class-integrated society - a society where social networks are bringing together people from different class and social backgrounds.