How does the welfare state affect social capital?  
A literature study.

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Work in progress (very first draft)
1 Introduction

This paper gives an overview of the theory and empirics regarding the impact of the welfare state on social capital. Its focus is especially on the claims that the welfare state is unfavourable to social capital, that we could expect to see a crowding out effect. While being a complex topic in need of scientific investigation, this is also a relationship easily seized by people with an ideological rather than a scientific agenda. As social capital is generally considered to be something positive, the state should certainly not harm it. If one can argue that the state does damage social capital, this is a good argument for a smaller state. So the discussion about the relationship between the two is being carried out at a junction of science and politics. This mixing of politics and science implies that premises and claims about causality should be the subject of thorough scrutiny. This paper seeks to take a closer look at the literature, to examine whether the claims made are simply claims, or something that could be reformulates as hypotheses about mechanisms having certain consequences.

We define social capital as access to resources through networks or other social structures (for a discussion of how this definition captures the definitions of Coleman (1990), Bourdieu, (1986), Lin, (2001), and Portes (1998), see Finsveen and Van Oorschot (2007)). Social capital is any aspect of a social structure that can help an individual to achieve a goal. Important parts of social capital are on the one hand the resources that can be accessed through persons ego knows, e.g. friends, family, and acquaintances, and on the other hand characteristics of the larger social structure that surrounds ego, such as the norms that are being followed, the organisational structure, the level of trust among strangers etc. In this paper we focus on three domains of social capital, namely 1) contact with family and friends, and informal help given by or received from them, 2) organisational participation and voluntary work, and 3) trust.

Investigating the effects of the welfare state on social capital, as well as probably any other variable, is connected with two main issues demanding caution, namely causality and other factors. Firstly, if a certain characteristic X is present in all welfare states of a given type, and this is not a spurious relationship, it can either be because this welfare state type creates X, or because given X, a certain type of regime is likely to develop. Moreover, a circularity in the relationship is often feasible. If the elderly are no longer taken care of by their children as a consequence of increased physical distance between them (caused again by higher education levels), this will spark a demand for state organised care. The existence of such care, will in turn make it easier to move further away from one’s parents, thereby increasing the need for formal care for the elderly.
Secondly, there is the issue of other factors having an effect on social capital. We need to disentangle effects on the welfare state on changing family patterns net of influences such as individualisation, wealth, urbanisation, industrialisation, and secularisation. To disentangle these effects is in practice a rather challenging issue. First of all these other variables are interrelated themselves, and probably some of them have similar causality issues with the welfare state as the one depicted above. Further, as the number of countries we are able to investigate is fairly limited (as we are focussing on well-functioning democracies in the so called (economically) developed world) the problem arises that countries that are similar regarding design of the welfare state, are often also rather similar on other potentially causal variables, such as religious composition or GDP, and this limits the possibilities for statistical analyses.

After this brief introduction, we are ready to take a look at the literature. We begin by looking at theories about the effects of welfare state design on social capital, discussing what has been claimed and what could have been claimed. In the section following that, we discuss empirical findings related to the theoretical propositions, and in the forth and final section we draw some conclusions. We focus on those needs that can be covered by both the welfare state and as social capital, and wonder what happens to social capital once the welfare state enters the arena.

2 What has been said

Woolcock (1998:157) sees the debate about the relationship between the state and civil society as being one among those who believe that it is a zero-sum game, and those who believe it to be a positive-sum game. This is a useful starting point. The claims we have found about the welfare state having a detrimental effect upon social capital can be divided into two types. The first one centres around substitution, and the second one around passivity. For each of the two arguments, we will discuss the hypothesised relationship centring on two questions, firstly, how the process of influence from the welfare state to the civil society is seen, i.e. which mechanisms are believed to be at work, and secondly, where necessary, whether the mechanisms they point at also will have the results they predict, or if other relevant factors needs to be included in their model to give a realistic description of the relationships.
2.1 Substitution

Substitution arguments hold that the welfare state makes civil society superfluous by assuming its tasks. This is a crowding out argument in a literal sense, the state takes over the place or functions of civil society. Civil society in this context can be anything from voluntary organisations to family relationships. An implicit premise in these arguments is that it is a zero-sum (or even a negative-sum) game, there are a certain number of tasks to be done, and that the only question is who will do them. From this it follows that “as the state waxes, other institutions wane” (George F. Will, cited in Skocpol (1996)).

Focussing on how the state could take the place of social networks, Sheepers et al. (2002) hypothesise that state measures to decrease dependency on the market, known as decommodification, makes people less dependent on their networks. As networks will not by necessary to lean on in the case of a failing market income, people will be less likely to invest in them. Therefore, they expect to find weaker networks in countries with a higher degree of decommodification. This seems to be an attempt to transform the rather crude attacks on the welfare state mainly from the American far political right, as exemplified by Schambra’s (1994:33) statement that “the central project of the modern progressive liberal state is to eradicate civil society, and to transfer its functions to government” into testable hypotheses. Others, (Zijderveld 1999; Karlson 2004) concentrate on the alleged detrimental effect of the state on voluntary efforts, as volunteer work or membership in organisations. Here it is argued that the state, intentionally or unintentionally, has taken the place of voluntary efforts, either by colonizing the voluntary organisations or by taking over fields of service production, making it difficult or impossible for initiatives from the civil society to find a place to invest their energies.

Having recapitulated the arguments, we can look at their causal assumptions and the extent to which important other factors have been left out. For Schambra’s contribution we can be quite short. He delivers badly developed critique on the status quo, offering no explanation as to why the liberal state would want to eradicate civil society. To make such a claim worth considering, a motive is imperative. He seems to have a problem both with the state and modernity (and with keeping them apart), and fails to elaborate on firstly how the pre-modern society he seems to want to return to (if it ever existed) would be organised, or secondly why we can expect its ability to organise moral obligations to be superior to that of the market or the state. For a criticism of such approaches see Wolfe (1989) (Chapter 1).

Scheepers et al. (2002) are clear about the mechanism that could be at work. The upper part of Figure 2 shows their hypothesis. The more a welfare state decommodifies its citizens, the more it makes them able to function in society in the event of a failing income provision through the market, the less economically dependent they become on their networks, and the less they invest in them.
This line of reasoning seems fairly plausible. However, two important points should be mentioned regarding their line of argument. Firstly, while pointing at a basic mechanism believed to be at work, it is still a bit unspecific, not pointing out what exactly is it that we should expect to decline if decommodification increases? Is it the number of family members and/or friends that one keeps contact with that will decline? Is it the frequency of contact? Or is it rather the kind of contact, the quality of the relationship? As network has many aspects, specification is essential in order to formulate precise and testable hypotheses.

Secondly, an important premise for the eventual decline in networks hypothesised to materialise, is that there are not other factors maintaining these networks. This possibility is represented in the figure with the box below the horizontal line. If the need for networks is not (mainly) caused by the need for financial support, but also created and upheld due to other reasons, we will not find the expected decline in need for networks even if decommodification does increase economic independence from networks. Probably, the relationship is modelled too simple. What decommodification in fact does, is to make sure that adults are not economically dependent on each other for survival. That is one of the main objectives of the modern welfare state. This abolishment of economic dependency in relationships obviously affects interpersonal relationships, but how is very difficult to say. A further remark that can be made is that if this effect is hypothesised to rise from decommodification, similar effects should also rise form services provided by the welfare state, such as care to dependents\(^1\). In that context, Künemund and Rein (1999) have argued that in a relationship between parents and adult children, reasons for providing informal help and assistance will most often be oriented at exchange as part of a long term relationship, rather than merely altruistically directed at alleviation of the need as such. Whereas altruistic help can be made redundant by the welfare state, this seems unlikely for exchange based help, implying that the situation cannot be described as a zero-sum game.

\(^1\) Whereas decommodification refers to economic independence, welfare states also provide services in some cases where the recipient would otherwise be dependent on his or her network, e.g. domestic help for disabled people. Here, the picture is possibly even more complex. When state organised services substitute services from the receiver’s network, this can either mean that the network stops providing any help, or that it moves on to cover other needs the respondent has. State organised domestic help to the elderly can either mean that the adult children will stop visiting or visit less frequently because it is not necessary, or that they keep coming and can spend all their time on emotional needs, and the small practical needs that would otherwise not be met.
For organisations, it has been argued that the state takes their place, rendering them useless, or colonize them. A theoretical argument why state cannot substitute voluntary organisations is brought forward by Jones et al. (1983). They present a list of functions of voluntary associations, which cannot be taken over by the state. Voluntary efforts will exist and cannot be crowded out by the state, simply because they do different things. For some functions this is a valid point. For example, providing independent information on the functioning of the state is for a state agency impossible by definition, and the first efforts in new policy areas, such as homes for battered wives, are often carried out by volunteers, able to act more quickly than the bureaucratic state. In other fields, however, the state is certainly able to provide a service, and the question is if it thereby diminishes voluntary initiatives in that field. Anecdotal evidence suggest that it can be hard for volunteers to find useful ways of volunteering in such fields. On the other hand we also know of systems of volunteers working in state institutions (e.g. the Dutch health care system), and of organisations running services parallel to governmental ones (the Salvation Army).

Summing up we can state that the zero-sum hypothesis is rather central to this line of reasoning, and that there are several important reasons to doubt this premise, two of the more important being that there are functions the state can not perform, and that time constraints will often be a problem for individuals in caring or volunteer relations, leading them to take on other tasks if the tasks they consider most basic are taken over by other actors.

2.2 Passivity

The other stream of claims about the detrimental effect of the welfare state on civil society is centred around the idea that the welfare state, by taking responsibility for certain issues, damages the long term ability of citizens to deal with similar issues themselves. When the citizens’ problem solving capacities are not being used, they will wither away. As this argument deals with (the future) abilities rather than actions, the zero-sum game is a less useful analogy for these arguments.

Also here, we find the argument in various guises, with radically different styles of argumentation and placements on the continuum from ideology to social science. Where Wolfe (1989) points to the possibility that peoples ability to self define their moral obligations is weakened with lack of practice, Fukuyama (1999) claims that states in certain ways can destroy “people’s spontaneous ability to cooperate”, Leube (2003) argues that the welfare state takes away peoples ability to do anything at all by themselves, making them calculating, lazy, and passive.

In it’s crudest form, as presented by Leube, the claims are too broad and evidently political to be taken seriously. If such a thing as a neutral observer exists, he or she would be able to see that informal help does exist also in comprehensive welfare states. Fukuyama, although a respected political scientist, is also rather vague about the conditions under which the state creates passivity. “When the state undertake activities that are better left to the private sector or to civil society” as well as “if the state gets into the business of organizing everything”, people will loose their
“spontaneous ability to cooperate” (1999:13) The passivity causal chain is rendered below.

**Figure 3 Passivity causal chain**

- The state organises “too much”, takes on tasks better left to civil society
- People become dependent on the state organising these activities
- People loose their ability to organise these activities themselves

This remains a very coarse hypothesis. As it is evident that cooperation still exists, both at work and in the coordination of daily chores among family members, we would like to know in which situations people will no longer be able to cooperate. It is not clear whether he is referring to small issues of practical coordination, such as taking turns cleaning the common staircase of apartment blocks, or to more complex situations as a tragedy of the commons dilemma (for a discussion of such dilemmas, see Ostrom (2000)), or both.

An example of a situation he might be referring to, is long term care for a disabled, sick, or elderly person. If there is no state support for persons in those conditions, their network will have to organise some way of taking care of them. In the face of a state organised alternative, such arrangements become less likely. This seems empirically and intuitively plausible. However, the question what exactly is being lost, which mechanisms are at play, and what their implications are, is not an easy one.

Firstly, it could be that the lack of practice damaged the ability of the helpers to coordinate their actions, that it were the organisational abilities that got lost. This, however, seems unlikely, as these skills will be in use for other purposes in work and leisure as well. Secondly, it could be the very ability to care for others that disappears. This also seems unlikely. A third and more likely candidate for disappearing is a feeling of responsibility and the related willingness to help. If people believe that it is their responsibility to act in a certain situation, they probably will, whereas if they do not, they will be much more reluctant to intervene. So what is being lost is not the actual ability to arrange matters, but the idea that it is one’s own responsibility to do something about a given situation or problem. Possibly, the passivity argument is better rephrased as questions about responsibility. Is it so that if the state takes on responsibility for some areas, people will stop taking responsibility in others? Will increasing welfare state regimes lead to irresponsible behaviour of citizens and need for more programs to ameliorate the consequences of this behaviour? These are interesting and challenging questions for further research.
2.3 A positive relationship?

In one domain of social capital, the welfare state has not been accused of detrimental effects. Probably owing to the high scores in the Scandinavian countries, in research on trust, the dominating hypotheses have focused on a positive effect of a strong welfare state on interpersonal trust. Well known in this area is the work of Rothstein and his associates (Rothstein 2001; Rothstein and Stolle 2003; Kumlin and Rothstein 2005), arguing that needs and means tested social security benefits are detrimental to interpersonal trust because the process of allocating these benefits is likely to cause untrustworthy behaviour. It is in the recipients interest to distort the truth, and as the street level bureaucrats know this, they will treat claimants with suspicion. This experience will then be projected onto other fellow citizens, leading more people to believe that the generalized other can not be trusted.

Other approaches focus on the idea that a larger welfare state reduce differences. Large differences, cleavages or polarisations in a society reduce trust (Delhey and Newton 2003). Through its influence on the level of conflict, differences and cleavages, the welfare state will influence trust. Similarly, Larsen (2006) argues that the existence of a culturally distinct underclass is detrimental to interpersonal trust. Members of such a class can be conceived by the majority as exploitative players, players who have nothing to loose by breaking the rules of cooperation, and therefore as less trustworthy persons. Larsen argues that in the Scandinavian countries there is no culturally distinct underclass. This is due to the universal welfare policies that does not identify a group of “those in need”, and to the very generous benefits to the potentially poor, enabling them to uphold a standard of living close to that of the majority. Uslaner (2003) argues that economic equality in a country is the most important factor behind interpersonal trust. Rothstein’s work also supports this tradition in pointing out the stigmatizing effects of means/needs testing.

As for the focus on cleavages and differences, the mechanism supposed to be at work seems clear. If there are less conflicts or differences in a society, it will be more likely that respondents state that most people can be trusted, as they can assume there are less people with other interests. The hypothesis of detrimental effects of means/needs testing has been tested on Swedish data only, and an effect has been found of contact with such benefits. An interesting question for further (comparative) research is how the presence of means/ and needs testing affect the trust levels of the part of the population not receiving such benefits. As they will also know it is beneficial to cheat the system, the non receiving group in countries with a larger extent of means/ needs tested benefits, should exhibit lower trust levels than corresponding groups in countries with less testing.

3 What we know

In this section we move on to compare the evidence from different studies that have of the relationship between welfare state characteristics and social capital. The following studies are included:

• Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis and Gelissen (2002) using data from the Eurobarometer 37.2 survey for citizens over 60 years of age in 13 European countries.
• Kääliäinen and Lehtonen (2006) use the ISSP 2001 data
• Daatland and Lowenstein (2005) use data from the OASIS project among urban populations aged 25+.
• Delhey and Newton (2005) have 55 countries as their units of analysis. They regress country characteristics on the percentage of citizens in countries stating that most people can be trusted (WVS 1990-1996).
• Scheepers and Te Grotenhuis (2005) use data from Eurobarometer 40.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Social capital</th>
<th>Welfare state measure</th>
<th>Relationships found</th>
<th>Relationships not found</th>
<th>Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Contact with friends</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
<td>Social security spending (+). Scandinavian regime (+) as opposed to Continental, Southern, or Central-East.</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime as opposed to Anglo-Saxon regimes.</td>
<td>Percentage protestants (-), income inequality (-), GDP (+).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheepers et al. 2002</td>
<td>Contact with friends (60+)</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime (-) as opposed to Liberal or Latin Rim regimes.</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime as opposed to Conservative-corporatist, or former East Germany.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Importance of family</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
<td>Social security spending (+). Scandinavian regime (-)as opposed to Anglo-Saxon, Southern, Central-East, or Continental.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Percentage protestants (-), income inequality (+).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheepers et al. 2002</td>
<td>Contact with family (60+)</td>
<td>Percentage of GDP spent on social security benefits or pension provisions</td>
<td>Percentage spent on social security or pensions (-).</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaariainen and Lehtonen 2006</td>
<td>Scale for bonding social capital (average contact frequency + number of friends)</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime (-) as opposed to Southern.</td>
<td>Scandinavian regimes as opposed to Liberal, Conservative or Transitional regimes.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Welfare state measure</td>
<td>Relationships found</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaariainen and Lehtonen 2006</td>
<td>Giving informal help to someone outside household last 12 months</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime (+) as opposed to Southern</td>
<td>Scandinavian regimes as opposed to Liberal, Conservative or Transitional regimes.</td>
<td>Controls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boje and Strandh 2005</td>
<td>Having done voluntary work for a friend or relative</td>
<td>Country dummies</td>
<td>Swedes (+) as opposed to Britons or Hungarians</td>
<td>Swedes as opposed to Dutch, Czech, Rumanians and Bulgarians.</td>
<td>Controls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Results from studies of different countries, (separate models for each country, differences not tested for significance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Social capital</th>
<th>Rank ordering countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kunemund and Rein 1999</td>
<td>Elderly people having received informal help (3 types measured) or borrowed money from their children and their families</td>
<td>Germany, Japan, great Britain, Canada, USA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daatland and Lowenstein 2005</td>
<td>Aged 75+ and defined as being in need of help and actually getting it from the family</td>
<td>England (49%), Spain (48%), Norway 43%, Germany (389%), Israel (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Welfare state measure</td>
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<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Number of active organisational memberships</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaariainen and Lehtonen 2006</td>
<td>Number of active organisational memberships</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boje and Strandh 2005</td>
<td>Having done voluntary work for a non-profit organisation</td>
<td>Country dummies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Number of passive organisational memberships</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.4 Results from studies of interpersonal trust (regression analyses with several regimes/countries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Social capital</th>
<th>Welfare state measure</th>
<th>Relationships found</th>
<th>Relationships not found</th>
<th>Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
<td>Total social security spending (-), Scandinavian regime (+) as compared to Anglo-Saxon, Southern, Continental and Central-eastern regimes.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Percentage protestants (+), income inequality (-), GDP (+).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaariainen and Lehtonen 2006</td>
<td>Index for interpersonal trust</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime (+) as compared to Liberal, Conservative, Southern, and Transitional regimes.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhey and Newton 2005</td>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
<td>Income inequality, government social spending</td>
<td>Income inequality (-)</td>
<td>Government social spending</td>
<td>Protestantism (+), ethnic fractionalisation (-) (in most models)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.5 Results from studies of other indicators (regression analyses with several regimes/countries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Social capital</th>
<th>Welfare state measure</th>
<th>Relationships found</th>
<th>Relationships not found</th>
<th>Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Institutional trust</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
<td>Total social security spending (+), Scandinavian regime (+) as compared to Anglo-Saxon, Continental, Southern, and Central-eastern regimes.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Percentage protestants, income inequality, GDP (all n.s.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Oorschot and Arts 2005</td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Total social security spending as a percentage of GDP and regime type</td>
<td>Total social security spending (-), Scandinavian regime (-) as compared to Anglo-Saxon, Southern, and Central-eastern regimes.</td>
<td>Scandinavian regime as compared to Continental.</td>
<td>Percentage protestants (+), income inequality (-), GDP (+).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheepers and Te Grotenhuis 2005</td>
<td>Donated money to the poor or socially excluded</td>
<td>Regime type</td>
<td>Liberal regime (+) as compared to Social-democratic type, Conservative-corporatist type, or Latin Rim type.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1 Results

A quick glance at the results reveals that one should be careful drawing firm conclusions. Looking at the results for the five regressions on bonding social capital, results are mixed. This can be due to different operationalisations of the dependent or independent variables, different populations (Scheepers et al study those aged 60 years and older), or different variables included in the models. No results are found in all analyses. All analyses using regime types found significant differences between the Scandinavian and the southern regimes, but in one case (contact with friends in the study by Van Oorschot and Arts) the Scandinavians are those having the most contact with their friends, whereas in the other three studies, it is the Southerners who have the most contact with friends, score higher on scale for bonding social capital, or attach more importance to family. It should also be noted that for our purpose, the combining together of several measures (contact frequency with family, contact frequency with best friend, and number of friends) in the study by Kaariainen and Lehtonen, is not ideal.

Regarding the provision of voluntary help, one study finds that more informal help is being given in Scandinavian regimes than in southern regimes, and no differences between Scandinavians and other regimes, whereas the other study finds a difference between Swedes and British. The finding from the first study of no difference between Scandinavian and a) conservative or b) transitional regimes is supported by a) the lack of difference between the Swedes and the Dutch, and b) that no difference are found between Swedes and the four transitional countries in the second study.

Looking at organisational memberships and voluntary work for organisations, results are again somewhat hard to interpret. The only robust finding is a higher level of involvement among Scandinavians than among southerners. Other differences are either insignificant in one of the studies, or goes in different directions. (citizens of Transitional regimes are less likely than Scandinavians to be involved in organisations in three of the analyses, but more likely to be active members when controlled for social security spending, percentage protestants, income inequality and GDP.)

Regarding trust, the findings are more robust. The Scandinavian regimes score higher than the others with or without controls, the effect of income inequality on trust is negative. Total social security spending is not significant in one study, and has a negative impact in another (when controlled for regime and income inequality).

4 Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at the theoretical and empirical literature dealing with the relationship between the welfare state and social capital. We have found that while there is a substantial literature on the relationship between the welfare state and trust, there is much less literature with a focus on the relationship between welfare state and networks, informal help, or voluntary participation. Regarding this last question, not
only the limited amount of literature, but particularly the meagreness of the arguments are striking. Even when part of scientific publications, the ideas about a relationship are often made in passing, and the mechanisms expected to be at work are not well developed. “The welfare state” is supposed to damage “networks”. Exactly which welfare state transferral or service that is supposed to damage which aspect of the networks (frequency of contact with family, frequency of contact with friends, number of friends, access to informal help, substantial meaning of the relationships), for whom (all inhabitants, those receiving a certain benefit, men, women), and, importantly, how, is not elaborated upon.

The empirical evidence about the relationship does not allow us to draw any firm conclusions. This could be a consequence of the lack of theoretical refinement. As the theory is general, so are the empirical tests thereof, resulting in the choices for certain indicators for the independent or dependent variable receiving little attention or deliberation. The mixed results could then be explained by the fact that the studies all measure slightly different things.

The lack of well developed theories that can be scientifically tested is problematic considering the political importance of the subject. Therefore, further theoretical reflection is much needed. Zooming in closer, focussing on the very aspects believed to be causal in a process, seems a promising way ahead. With more theoretical refinement, empirical tests will be less blunt tools, as choices can be made among more precise indicators of welfare state characteristics currently available, e.g. from Lyle Scruggs’s Comparative Welfare Entitlements Dataset.
Literature


