Reviewer's report

Title: Interest in dietary pattern, individual-level social capital, and psychological distress: A cross-sectional study in a rural Japanese community

Version: 1 Date: 20 October 2012

Reviewer: Wesley Dean

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Major Compulsory Revisions

I believe this is a well written and solid first draft, but there are a number of issues that should be addressed before it can be considered for publication. I recommend a revise and resubmit, and I look forward to what I expect will be a fine contribution to the field.

Most importantly, I would like to see a clearly laid out conceptual model that explains why the specific variables (and concepts) you have chosen to measure are associated with depression, including plausible directions for these associations. A diagram would be very useful but I don’t consider it compulsory.

While building the conceptual model, you should more carefully define what you mean by social capital. I am unclear if you are familiar with essential pieces by Bourdieu and Coleman. I’d recommend Alejandro Portes’ excellent review article in the Annual Review of Sociology.

For a short piece see…


Here is a much lengthier account:


And an excellent review piece:


You cite one article by Croezen in your background to assert a relationship between social capital and dietary pattern, but you do not adequately explain the mechanism that links social capital to fruit and vegetable intake, or to interest in dietary pattern. To make this argument I would suggest you familiarize yourself with or show your familiarity with the growing literature on the association of nutrition-related variables (for example: food insecurity, fruit and vegetable
variety, and fruit and vegetable consumption) with interrelated concepts such as social capital, social support, reciprocity, and social exchange.

As part of the conceptual model, I would like you to describe why social capital is tied to dietary interest. I’ve argued that social capital functions in two ways to improve food access. The first pathway is instrumental. Higher levels of social capital entail greater access to resources. The second pathway is through the socialization process. A person’s coexistence with a community of alters who support healthy eating also entails normative pressure to eat healthy which socializes people to value specific dietary patterns, or in your case an interest in dietary patterns. It is through the latter pathway that I would expect social support to increase one’s interest in dietary patterns. To make this claim in general terms, I suggest the Portes review article above. The following are also three especially thoughtful pieces.


As you are focusing on individual level social capital, I would also recommend you consider these three pieces.


I am curious why you measure fruit and vegetable intake and meal frequency, but they do not find their way into the regression models? In your conceptual model, you should explain their relevance to other variables, both dependent and independent. Their relationship with interest in dietary pattern is clear to me, but should be explained. I’m less clear on why they would be directly associated with depression, and maybe that is why you did not include them in your model? If you have a good reason, then keep them, but if you don’t then they make it easy for your reader to lose their way in the weeds. They distracted me from thinking about the relationship between interest in dietary pattern and social capital with stress.
In your conclusion you provide the usual caveat about cross sectional data and causality. I would like this discussion to be more detailed and directly linked to the conceptual model. For example, your model might say that 1) lack of interest in dietary pattern causes psychological distress, 2) psychological distress causes a lack of interest in dietary pattern, or more plausibly that 3) both conditions exacerbate one another. Your causality caveat can then explain that you may not be able to make a causal claim because of your cross-sectional data, but you have found plausible support for further exploration of these three relationships in a longitudinal study...

Finally, by giving further consideration to the extant literature on social capital, depression and diet, I think you can say a bit about how your paper contributes to furthering that literature. I've noticed a few papers about diet and mental health popping up in places like Social Science and Medicine over the last few years and your article could be a fine contribution to that literature if you frame your conclusions in reference to that literature and cite it extensively.

Minor Essential Revisions

Can you say a bit more about interest in dietary pattern? Did you define ‘dietary pattern’ in your survey? I'm not entirely sure if I would know what you meant if I were asked this question.

In Table 1 you have “Educational Background” and in Table 2 you have “Educational Level.” I'd choose one term and use it in both tables. In both tables, I would combine the terms used to describe level. In your paper, it seems as if somebody could graduate from High School in Japan with 10 years of schooling. This may very well be the case, but it is not the case in all countries so it might be good to construct the table in such a way that international readers can see the number of years of education linked to levels of educational attainment. One way of clarifying this might be to write in each table the description of educational attainment such as ‘high school graduate’ followed by the years of education in parentheses.

I also have a question about the conflation of meal frequency and skipped meals in your section on methods. Although much of the work in public health and nutrition does not acknowledge this, any discussion of meals has a normative component. Ideas about how a meal should be composed and when and how often it should be eaten are rooted in social norms and cultural patterns. Your measure of meal frequency is a largely descriptive measure, but describing meals as ‘skipped’ entails assumptions about the ideal number of meals in a particular day. To use number of meals as a proxy for skipped meals calls for an acknowledgement that this approximation is based on an understanding of what the appropriate number of meals is per day among the study population, or a more direct measure such as “how often do you skip meals?” I suspect the former of these claims would be the best option in your case.

How many dimensions usually result when one factor analyzes the Kessler
Psychological Distress Scale? Do your results fall into accord with other findings? What was the alpha for psychological distress with your sample? You don’t really need to go into any detail here, but let us know in a short sentence that your results were business as usual in regard to the scale.

“Groups of foods were shown in the questionnaire and respondents were asked to select the relevant groups of food (multiple answered allowed).” This should be written ‘(multiple answers allowed).’

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests' below