Does Social Capital Improve the Effectiveness of Public Service? An Insight from Rural-to-Urban Migrants in China

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Abstract

Despite the extensive literature on the effectiveness of public service, measuring it from the user’s side among rural-to-urban groups is limited. Moreover, although rich research has explored the factors influencing the effectiveness of public service, in-depth micro-level analysis is scarcely addressed. The current study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between social capital and the effectiveness of public service in Jiangsu province of China. Overall, the findings revealed that migrant’s social capital positively affects their perceptions of public service provision. Specifically, the structural dimension of social capital plays a role in expanding information channels. In contrast, the relational dimension of social capital works through shared norms and trust, eventually improving migrants’ fairness perception. Notably, these effects are more prominent in education, employment assistance, and minimum livelihood security than in other services. Further, the findings revealed that regional differences are more pronounced in the central part of the study area, where the current public service system is weak. Put differently; social capital can have a more significant effect when the construction of public service is constrained. It is also found that social capital plays a more important role for migrants working in the manufacturing industry than in other sectors. This study has significant implications for policymakers with a new perspective of social capital for improving the quality of public service and making it more available to migrants.

Keywords Social capital · Rural-to-urban migrants · The effectiveness of public service

1 Introduction

Large numbers of laborers migrated from rural to urban areas in China over the last decades and are expected to continue the same in the forthcoming years (Peng & Swider, 2017). This situation triggered urbanization that transformed China from a rural to an urban...
society, with the urbanization rate reaching 64.72% by the end of 2021. In this regard, the equalization of public service delivery is one of China’s most urgent issue faced by rural-to-urban migrants (Chen, 2021). As access to public service is the prerequisite for internal migrations to integrate or adjust to the host society, it is vital that those people could get an equal chance to avail the services (Démurger et al., 2009). In the case of China, the hukou system, a special household registration process administered by the government, sets barriers for migrants to get adequate public service and hampers their settlement decision (Cheng et al., 2014). Referring back to the 1950s, the rural labor force was anchored in the countryside for agricultural production and provided food for the city workers (Afridi et al., 2015). Under this phenomenon, people were divided into two categories or hukou. People who live and work in urban areas were endowed with ‘Urban hukou’ while those in rural areas were given ‘Rural hukou’. Different public service delivery was also tied with hukou variations. In the former days, farmers found themselves in an inferior position to approach education, housing, health care, pensions, social insurance, or other services. When inter-regional migration is less restricted, they still face deprivation compared with native-born residents, as public services are still biased for these populations. For example, health insurance and pension programs provided by urban governments only cover local urban residents. Similarly, the high-quality elementary school is exclusively open to children whose parents had Urban hukou, while those migrants’ offspring only had access to inferior primary schools. The previous studies unveiled that sharp insider–outsider division between migrants and the natives has produced profound negative effects (Knight et al., 2011; Lu & Wan, 2014; Ouyang et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2016). Moreover, unequal access to public services also leads to inequality and conflicts within cities (Treisman, 2007), especially when local authorities lead the provision of these public services. In this scenario, local elites can capture the decision-making process (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000) and grasp public resources for their preferred uses (Reinikka & Svensson, 2004). Further, disparities in wages and return on education between migrants and natives are also found more prominent. Compared to urban peers, migrants receive less pay, work longer hours, and get unfair work contracts (Lu & Feng, 2013). Furthermore, the inequality of public service access among different groups can also greatly impact urbanization and migrants’ integration into local communities.

It has been found that several factors influenced the migrants’ access to public service at a macro-level, such as deficiency in the financial system (Beauchamp & Hicks, 2004; Hodges & Mellett, 2003), provision model (Berens, 2015; Osborne, 2018), administrative ability (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Newman et al., 2017), organizational arrangement (Engen et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2020; Gieske et al., 2020), etc. However, in-depth micro-level analysis is scarcely addressed. First admitted by the 12th Five Year Plan on National Public Service System, the Central government has continuously pledged to grant rural migrants the equal opportunity to public service and make the distribution of public resources more equalized. To attain the goal, the government introduced various measures at all levels, but the gap between the two groups can not be lessend (Chen & Liu, 2018). It reflects the point that government or official channel is not the only way that can be relied on in terms of achieving equalization in public service acquisition. The informal channel, i.e., social capital, can also serve as a tool to help individuals obtain various public services. When moving into a new circumstance, migrants may use personal networks to get recruited and find educational or medical resources for their offspring (Deri, 2005; Piracha et al., 2016).

In the existing literature, the researchers hold quite a different view and used different proxies to measure the effectiveness of public services; for instance, Andrews and Entwistle (2013) examined the public service efficiency from four aspects, i.e., maximization of
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outputs over inputs, the match between demand for services and their supply, the pattern of service delivery amongst different groups of citizens, and the balance between current and future consumption. Andrews and Van de Walle (2013) explored the relationship between a range of New Public Management (NPM) and citizens’ perceptions of service efficiency, responsiveness, equity, and effectiveness in English local governments. Public officials and managers have conducted some other evaluations (Emery & Giauque, 2003; Lægreid et al., 2006). These measurements seem to focus on efficiency-related outcomes or general performance. Judgment of effectiveness, however, requires looking beyond matters of process. Relying on citizen perceptions to evaluate public service performance can bring advantages as it is one of the few ways available to assess service outcomes rather than service outputs. Furthermore, it also helps overcome some criticism about the artificial selection of sets of objective output and outcome indicators in empirical analysis.

Based on the above discussion, the current study attempted to bridge the gap by focusing on the link between rural-to-urban migrants’ social capital and their evaluation of basic social services in the southern and central areas of Jiangsu Province, a developed coastal province in eastern China. In this contextual framework, social capital was captured by two dimensions: the structural and relational dimensions. Unlike previous research, a multi-dimensional weighted index on the users’ side is constructed to evaluate it from a subjective perspective. This could enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of public service from an individual’s point of view rather than national policies or servants’ side. As per our knowledge, no research has been conducted before regarding the assessment of rural-to-urban migrants’ social capital and its linkage with the satisfaction of public service in generally and particularly in the context of sampled area.

The remaining part of the paper is as follows: the theoretical framework and hypothesis are first discussed in Sect. 2, followed by the data sources and empirical strategy used in this research in Sect. 3. In the 4th part, the main results of the models are interpreted, along with a mechanism test and heterogeneity analysis. Section 5 presents discussion and implications based on empirical findings. The final section concludes.

2 Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Dimensions of Social Capital

Initially, social capital has been used in diverse situations and contexts (Forte et al., 2015; Lancee, 2010; Loury, 1987; Takenoshita, 2015). It is defined as the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by individuals or social units (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As the theory argues, the network and social ties in which individuals are embedded are vital for one’s socio-economic life (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2005; Putnam, 1997). It constitutes a valuable resource for the conduct of social affairs and provides its exclusive members with collectivity-owned capital (O’Shea & Richardson, 1987). Through interpersonal interactions in participating in economic and social activities, repeated interpersonal interactions lead to the emergence of social norms and social trust. Members of the network join together on the principle of trust and cooperation, which can overcome information asymmetry and promote more standardized and efficient collective actions.

Although researchers agree on the significance of relationships as a source of social capital, they lack consensus on the precise definition of this concept. For instance, Putnam
(1997) focuses on trust and affiliation. Coleman (1988) defines the bonding perspective of social capital as a collective good that results in increased sharing and solidarity among actors in the network collective. Burt (2000) emphasizes the bridging perspective of social capital, which is the external connections outside a social group. Based on Burt’s work, Kilduff and Tsai (2003) further measures social structure in terms of centrality, redundancy, density, strength, and the bridge of structural holes to facilitate the diffusion of information asymmetry. Dufour (2010) believes that social capital consists of financial and informational resources through a relational network providing a competitive advantage. From a multidimensional view, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) characterize social capital into three dimensions, namely relational (e.g., trust, norms, and obligations), structural (e.g., ties and relationship configurations), and cognitive (e.g., shared values and common language). Under this notion, the structural dimension refers to the overall pattern of connections between actors. Crucial facets of this dimension include network ties between actors, configuration, density, connectivity and hierarchy, and appropriate organization, which is the existence of networks created for flexible purposes. In contrast, relational dimension describes assets created and leveraged through relationships. Among the key facets of this dimension are trust and trustworthiness, norms and sanctions, obligations and expectations, and identification.

On empirical grounds, the effects of social capital has been tested in a range of contexts. Research on immigrants’ outcomes has shown that social capital is instrumental in their economic and social adjustment. It is endorsed that social capital is just like other forms of capital (human, physical, financial), which can be used to facilitate productive activity and can be converted into something of value, such as earnings and occupational prestige. Lancceee (2010) explored the effect of different forms of social capital on the likelihood of employment and the occupational status of first generation immigrant men in Germany. Social capital was measured by contact with natives, co-ethnic ties and family-based networks. The empirical results showed that when using panel data, bridging social capital contributed to a better economic position while bonding social capital didn’t. With the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to build a index of social networks, Piracha et al. (2016) found a positive effect of social capital on migrants’ employment outcomes and wages, especially for women. Distinguishing employment into blue and white-collar jobs, social capital was found only affecting the probability of getting a white-collar job. With conceptualize social capital into structural and relational dimensions, growing literature explores the relationship between social capital and entrepreneurial performance, and many of them find significant positive effects. For instance, Peter and Moran (2005) examined the impact of managers’ social capital on their performance. They found that structural embeddedness plays a more substantial role in routine and execution-oriented tasks, while relational embeddedness is more critical in new and innovation-oriented tasks. Likewise, using the data from 170 immigrant family business owners, Tata and Prasad (2015) investigated the role of social capital in assisting business owners in obtaining network benefits and improving business performance. Their findings unveiled that the two attributes of social capital differently influence the network benefits. Specifically, relational social capital influences access to resources and information, while structural social capital only influences access to resources.

In this study, we followed Nahapiet and Ghoshal’s (1998) framework, but unlike their study, we measured social capital from relational and structural dimensions. The cognitive aspect is neglected for the following reasons. Our study targets rural-to-urban migrants who can speak Mandarin as the general Chinese nine-year compulsory education. In addition, although migrants may vary in ethnic groups, they tend to have similar value
orientations compared with those cross-country immigrants. Under the framework, the structural dimension reflects the source of social capital and is treated as an antecedent to the relational dimensions, while the relational dimension reflects social capital resources (Pearson et al., 2008). Engbers and Slaper (2017) provided a comprehensive understanding of theory and measurement regarding social capital research. Based on the Social Capital Benchmark Study, social capital is categorized into five types: (1) social trust, (2) formal membership and group participation, (3) altruism, (4) informal interaction among individuals, and (5) shared norms. The definition and measurement of social capital used in the current study relate well to the study of Engbers and Slaper (2017) because the essential facets of the structural dimension are consistent with informal interaction among individuals, and the description of the relational dimension follows social trust and shared norms.

2.2 Social Capital and Public Service

The mechanism by which social capital influences the effectiveness of public service for internal migrants has drawn considerable attention. As a society inclined to rely on resources drawn from their ethnic group, migrants in China tend to leave the villages with their friends or acquaintance together (Ang, 2016; Guo & Guo, 2011; Zhou & Lee, 2013), which is quite different from the migration stereotypes in western countries. In the post-migration phase, due to a lack of human resources, material resources (e.g., money, property, and personal possessions), and cultural resources (e.g., skills and traditions), migrants also turn to their familiar social networks where they are involved in for financial, moral or social support (Kazemipur & Abdolmohommad, 2006). They share a relatively common culture, diet habits, and behavior norms. Besides, the network is also easily formed among migrants who work in the same industry. The conceptualization of social capital in terms of relational and structural networks that underpin migrant social networks affects social service access and use (Ryan, 2011). In terms of the structural domain, migrants can benefit from the hometown-related social circle and extend their information source. It increases the efficiency of information diffusion by minimizing redundancy (Elfring & Hulsink, 2007). One of the obstacles migrants face in having social services is that they usually lack certain information. Arriving in a new location, migrants are sometimes in an isolated information situation because of discrimination. Members of the homogenous social group who live longer in the destination city may have more comprehensive knowledge about the public service system. Thus, they can give details of the system to the newcomers and help them understand the contents or regulations given by service providers. In the relational domain, the trust and norm that generated from the closed and tightly knit networks can improve efficiency and promote coordinated actions (Putnam, 2000). Served as a kind of public goods, the opportunism involved in the public service can be effectively reduced by prestige mechanism generated from social networks. This would further narrow the gap of unequal perceptions towards public service. The framework of the current study is illustrated by Fig. 1.

Based on the discussion, the current study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The accumulation of social capital by rural-to-urban migrants helps improve the effectiveness of basic public service.

H2: The higher the level of social capital, the more resources are obtained, and the higher the level of migrants’ evaluation of public service can be obtained.
H3: The higher the level of social capital, the stronger are the norms and trust, and the narrow gap between migrant-native groups in public service, which eventually leads to the higher level of migrants’ evaluation of public service.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Sources

Data used in this study was extracted from a paper-based survey conducted during January to February 2021. A random sampling method was used to gather a sample from Jiangsu Province, China. The Jiangsu province lies between latitude 30°–35° and longitude 116°–121°, covering an area of 41,390 square miles. The southern part covers five cities containing Nanjing, Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou, and Zhenjiang. The northern part comprises five cities: Xuzhou, Lianyungang, Suqian, Huaiian and Yancheng. The left three cities, Yangzhou, Taizhou, and Nantong, belong to the central part. Jiangsu was chosen as the research sites for the following reasons. Firstly, migration makes up almost one third of the total population in Jiangsu province. Even from the national perspective, this figure is still prominent. According to the 7th National Census, Jiangsu has a population of 85,054 thousand persons, among which 23,663,757 are migrants. Regarding migration, migrants from other provinces and within the province account for a similar proportion, i.e., 43.56% and 56.43%, respectively. Secondly, Jiangsu province witnesses both intra provincial migration and extra provincial migration. These are two typical migration types in current China. Nationally, Jiangsu province keeps a leading role in economic development, thus attracting many worker from other provinces. In 2021, the nominal GDP of Jiangsu province reached 11.6 trillion yuan, ranking second nationwide. In addition, the three parts of Jiangsu province, namely southern part, central part and northern part, experiences unbalanced economic development. This results in the migration from developing areas (northern part and central part) to developed areas (southern part). The above two reasons makes Jiangsu a representative in terms of migration research.

The target population was immigrant workers who left their original places and worked in the host cities for at least 6 months within a year. The primary data collection was conducted from January to February 2021. A structured questionnaire was used, which included personal, socio-economic, demographic, and family information. Particularly, close attention was paid to the perception of fairness, demand, and evaluation of public service. In addition, information about social capital, profession, family savings, and expenditure was also gathered.

Five cities were chosen as sample cities considering the distribution of immigrant workers in each city. Nanjing, Wuxi, and Suzhou belong to the southern part of Jiangsu Province, while Nantong and Yangzhou belong to the central part. Further, three counties were
randomly selected from each city, and then three communities were chosen from each county. Next, a multi-stage cluster sampling method was employed to select the sample of 10 to 15 migrants from each community. Finally, 524 sample sizes were obtained from the survey and were kept after data cleaning.

### 3.2 Descriptive Statistics

#### 3.2.1 Outcome Variable

The outcome variable in the current study is the effectiveness of public service that cannot be observed directly, so the Five-Likert method is used to capture its characteristics. Specifically, the dimensions embedded within the definition of basic public service include education, employment, medical care, insurance, housing, and other services. The domain with corresponding indicators is shown in Table 1. For each indicator, respondents were

| Table 1 Domains of public services with indicators. *Source:* Field Survey (2021) |
| --- | --- |
| **Domains** | **Indicators** |
| Education | Compulsory education services  
Inclusive private kindergarten services  
National scholarship for high school  
Tuition waiver on vocational education |
| Employment | Entrepreneurial services or business support policies  
Employment assistance services  
Career guidance services  
Vocational skills training and skills identification services  
Employment information and employment policy consulting services  
Migrant workers’ labor rights protection services |
| Medical care | Establishment of resident health record service  
Free health education services  
Vaccination and infectious disease prevention and control services  
Child, maternal, and elderly health management services  
Family Planning services  
Disease surveillance services in the settlement  
Major public health events response services (e.g., COVID-19)  
Food and drug safety services |
| Insurance | Basic pension insurance  
Basic medical insurance  
Maternity insurance  
Unemployment insurance  
Worker’s compensation insurance |
| Housing | Housing security |
| Others | Minimum livelihood security  
Medical assistance  
Childcare and elderly social services |
asked two questions. One is ‘to what extent do you satisfied with the offered service ranging from, 1 to 5 presents ‘very dissatisfied’, ‘a little dissatisfied’, ‘neutral’, ‘a little satisfied’, ‘very satisfied’. The other question is ‘to what extent do you need this kind of service’, and is presented on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, i.e. ‘do not need’, ‘a little need’, ‘neutral’, ‘a little urgent’, ‘in great need’.

Initially, to calculate the total value of migrants’ evaluation of public services, the entropy method was employed, which is an objective way to identify the weight of each indicator. The first step is to identify the weight of the $i$th observations in the $j$th indicator with the following equation:

$$p_{ij} = \frac{x_{ij}}{\sum_{i}^{m} x_{ij}}$$

(1)

Matrix of weights for each indicator can be acquired with results in the first step:

$$P = \left( \begin{array}{ccc} p_{11} & \cdots & p_{1n} \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ p_{m1} & \cdots & p_{mn} \end{array} \right)$$

(2)

where $n$ refers to the number of indicators while $m$ represents the number of observations. Thus, the entropy value of the $j$th indicator can be defined as:

$$e_{j} = -k \sum_{i=1}^{m} p_{ij} \ln p_{ij}$$

(3)

$$k > 0, k = \frac{1}{\ln m}$$

(4)

Moving to the next step, the coefficient of variation of the $j$th indicator $d_{j}$ can be defined as $d_{j} = 1 - e_{j}$. The greater the difference in the value of the $j$th indicator, the more information it reflects. Thus, the entropy weight of each indicator is determined by:

$$w_{j} = \frac{d_{j}}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} d_{j}}$$

(5)

And the total value of migrants’ evaluation of public services:

$$F_{i} = \sum_{j=1}^{n} w_{j} p_{ij}$$

(6)

### 3.2.2 Explanatory Variable

The core explanatory variable is social capital, measured using two dimensions, i.e., structural and relational networks. By following the questionnaire of China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), the current study used the following eight questions to measure social capital (Table 2).

Likewise, the entropy method is used to measure social capital. Typically, this method heavily relies on the value of observations to determine its weights. Among the indicators, the vast majority are discrete variables except for one indicator, i.e., ‘No.of people to
Table 2  Domains of social capital. *Source:* Field Survey (2021)

| Domain                  | Indicator                                                                 | Indicators definition |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| **Structural dimension**| No. of people deal with in the working days                                | 0–4                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 5–9                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 10–19                 |
|                         |                                                                           | 20–49                 |
|                         |                                                                           | More than 50          |
| Membership of hometown association in the working place | Yes                                                                      |                       |
|                         | No                                                                        |                       |
| No. of relatives regularly contact in the working place | None                                                                     |                       |
|                         |                                                                           | 1–3                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 4–6                   |
|                         |                                                                           | More than 6           |
| **Relational dimension**| No. of friends who can lend a hand in the working place                   | None                  |
|                         |                                                                           | 1–5                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 6–10                  |
|                         |                                                                           | More than 10          |
| No. of people who can provide advice in the emergency | None                                                                     |                       |
|                         |                                                                           | 1–3                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 4–6                   |
|                         |                                                                           | More than 6           |
| No. of people who can lend money (more than 5000RMB at a once) | None                                                                     |                       |
|                         |                                                                           | 1–3                   |
|                         |                                                                           | 4–6                   |
|                         |                                                                           | More than 6           |
| No. of people to whom you send blessings during Chinese New Year | Continuous                                                               |                       |

whom you send blessings during Chinese New Year’ is a continuous variable that varies from a minimum of zero to a maximum of more than 500. Heavyweights endowed with this indicator may lead to a biasedness of the total social capital. So to fix this issue, the current categorized this indicator into five groups, assigning a value of 1 to 5, i.e., 0, (0, 10], (10, 50], (50, 100] and more than 100.

Figure 2 demonstrates the distribution of migrants’ evaluation of public service based on the level of their social capital. It is clear from the picture that people with a high level of social capital have a relatively high evaluation of public service. The comprehensive total score reaches 0.73, which is much higher than those in the middle and low groups, scoring 0.56 & 0.40, respectively. This indicates a positive relationship between migrants’ social capital and their evaluation of public service.
3.3 Model Specification

In the current study, the Tobit model proposed by Tobin (1958) for modeling limited dependent variables is employed. This approach is an expansion of the Probit model. Normally, the Maximum Likelihood Estimate method is used instead of an OLS method to achieve unbiased estimators. Because the outcome variable is calculated by the Entropy method and the value ranges from 0 to 1, the Tobit model is employed to deal with censored data. The following equations are used to model the Tobit method:

\[
\text{score}_i^* = f(Q, \beta_i^*) + u_i \quad (i = 1, 2, \ldots, n) \tag{7}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{score}_i &= 1 \quad \text{score}_i^* \geq 1 \\
\text{score}_i &= \text{score}_i^* \quad 0 < \text{score}_i^* < 1 \\
\text{score}_i &= 0 \quad \text{score}_i^* \leq 0
\end{align*} \tag{8}
\]

The model \(\text{score}_i^*\) denotes the \(i\)th respondent’s evaluation of public service. The vector \(Q\) expresses social capital, demographic characteristics, household characteristics, professional situation, etc. The vector \(\beta_i^*\) represents parameters to be estimated and \(u_i\) is the error item.

4 Key Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 portrays the characteristics of the respondents and their households. The results show that sampled migrants are about 40 years old, about 70% of respondents are male, and 76% are married. Those who get The Party membership occupy less than 5% of the
sample. Each sampled family’s parents have one child on average. The statistics further depict that most participants (49.05%) have a middle-school education. Migrants with college or university-level education are only 20.72%. The annual household income is averaged at 115,618 yuan.

The average time migrants leave rural areas and work in the city is around ten years in the study areas. The majority of them work in a company or factory containing no more than 200 people. The company scale they were recruited was relatively evenly distributed throughout the sample. Limited by human capital resources and social capital, they keep their current job as long as possible. In this case, the sampled migrant

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**Table 3** Descriptive statistics of the respondent and their households (n = 524). *Source:* Field survey for this study (2021)

| Variables                      | Definition                                                                 | Percentage | Mean     | Std. deviation |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------|----------------|
| Effectiveness of public service| Comprehensive value by entropy method                                      | Continuous | 0.5860   | 0.1827         |
| Social capital                 | Comprehensive value by entropy method                                      | Continuous | 0.5624   | 0.1495         |
| Age                            | Year                                                                      | Continuous | 40.1831  | 11.4726        |
| Gender                         | Male                                                                      | 69.77      | 0.6977   | 0.4597         |
|                                | Female                                                                    | 30.23      |          |                |
| Work experience                | Year                                                                      | Continuous | 9.5960   | 8.6802         |
| Education                      | Primary                                                                   | 10.46      | 2.5076   | 0.9355         |
|                                | Middle                                                                    | 49.05      |          |                |
|                                | High                                                                      | 19.77      |          |                |
|                                | College/university                                                        | 20.72      |          |                |
| The party membership           | With the party membership                                                | 4.56       | 0.456    | 0.2089         |
|                                | Without the party membership                                             | 95.44      |          |                |
| Marital status                 | Married                                                                   | 75.86      | 0.7586   | 0.4284         |
|                                | Unmarried                                                                 | 24.14      |          |                |
| Demand for public service      | Times                                                                     | Continuous | 0.5994   | 0.1597         |
| Job experience                 | Times                                                                     | Continuous | 2.5361   | 1.2849         |
| Company scale                  | Less than 10 people                                                       | 23.19      | 3.7738   | 2.1726         |
|                                | 11–20 people                                                             | 13.12      |          |                |
|                                | 21–30 people                                                             | 11.60      |          |                |
|                                | 31–50 people                                                             | 8.56       |          |                |
|                                | 51–200 people                                                            | 18.06      |          |                |
|                                | 201–500 people                                                           | 9.32       |          |                |
|                                | More than 500 people                                                     | 16.15      |          |                |
| Vocational training            | With training                                                             | 52.66      | 0.5266   | 0.4998         |
|                                | Without training                                                          | 47.34      |          |                |
| Spouses live in the same city  | In the same city                                                          | 41.63      | 0.4163   | 0.4934         |
|                                | Not in the same city                                                     | 58.37      |          |                |
| Children                       | No. of children                                                          | Continuous | 1.1977   | 0.8546         |
| Annual income                  | Household total annual income                                            | Continuous | 11.5618  | 9.6858         |
| Demand for public service      | Comprehensive value by entropy method                                      | Continuous | 0.5994   | 0.1597         |
workers only change jobs twice on average. Roughly 52% of people in the study area have received various forms of vocational skills training. Around 41% of them live together with their spouse, while the other sampled couples live apart.

### 4.2 Overall Effects of Social Capital

Table 4 shows the results of the Tobit models. In Model 1–1, only the core independent variable, social capital, is added. Model 1–2 to Model 1–4 represents stepwise regression.
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introducing demographic, professional, and household characteristics as control variables. Overall, the results indicate a significant positive association of social capital with the evaluation of public service. The effect size significantly increases with the improvement of the comprehensive social capital level.

As far as migrants’ characteristics are concerned, the increasing working years in the city and the increased demand for public service positively influence one’s evaluation of public service. The coefficients of these two variables show expected signs. These results align with the previous studies, revealing that migrants are inclined to access more diverse public services with the increased demand (Akinloye Akinboade et al., 2012; Winters et al., 2014). More public services such as education, health care, and insurance are obtained to meet the demand, leading to a higher level of satisfaction. Similarly, as migrants live longer in the cities, they tend to understand better the mechanism and contents of public service, which is conducive to their involvement in the public service. These observations imply that newcomers should be given more care concerning their public service demands compared to migrants who have settled in the host cities for some time. Upon moving to a new place, they can hardly establish new social networks with local people or extend their original social networks to a wider range of working ties or family relationships.

In the professional domain, no significant effect has been found between migrants’ working experience, the scale of the company they are working for, vocational training experience, and their perception of public service. This reflects the point that most migrants are employed in the informal sector, which provides them limited social care. Under this context, the oral and short-term agreement is more common than fixed working contract. Only basic services, such as pension and unemployment insurance, are guaranteed even for those working in the formal sector.

In household characteristics, the results show that the number of children is positively correlated with satisfaction of public service. Households raising more children are driven to obtain public service. Moreover, as the demographic dividend vanishes gradually, the Chinese government has refined the public service system, especially concerning education and medical care. These reforms are likely to increase migrants’ satisfaction.

4.3 Mechanism Test

Results in Table 4 confirmed the first hypothesis that the accumulation of social capital by rural-to-urban migrants helps improve the effectiveness of essential public services. In this section, the two paths of how social capital influences the effectiveness of public service are also portrayed. In other words, this part empirically tests hypotheses 2 and 3.

To fulfill this objective, Sobel Test is used in addition to the traditional stepwise OLS regression to test the two paths proved in the theoretical framework. Sobel (1982) pointed out that the Sobel test normally relies on the results from OLS regression. To make the Sobel test applicable to results from the Tobit model, the Tobit model and OLS regression results are compared. It is observed that social capital plays an essentially positive role in improving migrants’ satisfaction with public service. The scale of this marginal effect is relatively close, 0.671 in the Tobit model and 0.693 in OLS regression, respectively. Additionally, the marginal effect of other controlled variables also showed significant effects. In this case, the results from OLS regression are primarily used.

To test the two paths embedded in the mechanism, two mediators are used. One mediator is “the number of friends in the ethnic group, migrants are often in contact with.” And the other is “perception of fairness in public service,” that is used to verify the mechanism
of narrowing the access gap to public service. This variable is measured on Likert-scale and calculated by using entropy method to a total value. The findings are reported in Table 5, which demonstrates the relevance and significance of different pathways of the social network.

For the first mediator, information channel is characterized by ‘numbers of friends in their ethnic group migrants often contact with.’ Geopolitically based relational ties and networks are the main information for migrants. In the destination city, mutual communication

| Variables | Model 2–1 Evaluation of public service | Model 2–2 Num. of friends often contact with | Model 2–3 Evaluation of public service |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Social capital | 0.7147*** (0.0433) | 3.0561*** (0.2250) | 0.6315*** (0.0499) |
| Num. of friends often contact with | | | 0.0272*** (0.0083) |
| Individual characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Professional characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Household characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Observations | 526 | 526 | 526 |

Results of Sobel test

| Coef | Std.Err | Z    | P-value |
|------|---------|------|---------|
| Sobel | 0.0833  | 0.0262 | 3.1770 | 0.0015 |

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Table 6 Mediating effect of narrowing the gap of public service acquisition between migrant-native groups

| Variables | Model 3–1 Evaluation of public service | Model 3–2 Fairness perception toward public service | Model 3–3 Evaluation of public service |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Social capital | 0.7147*** (0.0433) | 0.0959** (0.0460) | 0.6586*** (0.0341) |
| Fairness perception toward public service | | | 0.5850*** (0.0323) |
| Individual characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Professional characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Household characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Observations | 526 | 526 | 526 |

Results of Sobel test

| Coef | Std.Err | Z    | P-value |
|------|---------|------|---------|
| Sobel | 0.0561  | 0.0271 | 2.0690 | 0.0385 |

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01
provides information for migrant workers privately and informally. The number of friends in their ethnic group migrants often contact their information channel. With stepwise regression, estimations of Model series 2 show significant findings. The mediator variable is added in Model 2–3, and the coefficient declined from 0.715 to 0.632 with no significant change. The mediating effect is endorsed as the p-value of the Sobel test is found to be less than 0.05, and the mediating effect accounts for 11.65% of the total effect. This finding implies that migrants with more friends or acquaintances experience a higher satisfaction level with public service.

Moving forward to the next mediator, the results in Table 6 unveiled that fairness perception towards public service played a partial role in improving migrants’ satisfaction with public service. The mediating effect takes up to 7.85% of the total effect. In the existing literature, some researchers pointed out that intermediate mechanisms should be identified directly by analyzing the effects of independent variables on mediators (Frazier et al., 2004). Taking this alternative method as a sensitive test analysis, the results from Model 2–2 and Model 3–2 are directly compared. The results show that social capital has a significant positive effect on the two mediators, “numbers of friends in their ethnic group, migrants often contact with” and “perception of fairness on public service”. This result, together with the results from mediating effect model, verifies that social capital impacts migrants’ satisfaction by widening their information access and narrowing the access gap. However, it is worth noting that the proportion of mediating effects in total effects is relatively low, leaving further research to explore.

### 4.4 Heterogeneity Analysis

Table 4 shows the widespread impact of social capital on the effectiveness of public service. An in-depth analysis reveals how the effect varies under different contexts. Heterogeneity across different public service categories is shown in Table 7. The findings reveal that, comparatively, medical care, social insurance, and residence are not significantly affected by migrants’ social capital level. The social capital only positively influences migrants’ experience in education, employment, and other kinds of public service. Taking a close look at the attribute of each service content, elementary education and support for pioneer service are essential for one’s long-term development (Brueckner et al., 2020; Table 7 Migrants’ evaluation of public service in different services

| Variables               | Model 4–1 Education | Model 4–2 Employment | Model 4–3 Medical health | Model 4–4 Insurance | Model 4–5 Residence | Model 4–6 Others |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Social capital          | 0.1520*** (0.0504)   | 0.0873*** (0.0054)    | 0.0183 (0.0417)          | 0.0674 (0.0579)     | 0.0478 (0.0701)     | 0.0985* (0.0576) |
| Individual characteristics | Controlled          | Controlled            | Controlled               | Controlled          | Controlled          | Controlled       |
| Professional characteristics | Controlled          | Controlled            | Controlled               | Controlled          | Controlled          | Controlled       |
| Household characteristics | Controlled          | Controlled            | Controlled               | Controlled          | Controlled          | Controlled       |
| Observations            | 526                  | 526                   | 526                      | 526                 | 526                 | 526              |

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01
Creusere et al., 2019), while medical care, insurance, and housing services are equity-oriented (Hanratty, 2017). Thus, the results further indicate that improvement in migrants’ social capital makes the provision of developmental public service more effective. On the contrary, no obvious effect is found in equity services, and it infers that social capital improves migrants’ experience by amending sources of information (Chuatico & Haan, 2022). However, information asymmetry is rare in terms of medical care, insurance, and housing, and the factory or company migrants working for, play a leading role in providing this service.

Likewise, the regional heterogeneity results are reported in Table 8. The results show that social capital significantly influences migrants’ evaluation of public service in both regions. A more significant effect is seen in the central region than in the southern area, given that municipal governments provide public service in China due to a fiscal decentralization reform. Thus, the public service provision is highly dependent on regional economic progress. In the study areas, the southern part is more economically advanced than the central part, leading to a higher public service system. Compared with migrants in the central part, people who move to the southern part can benefit more from the existing public service system without using their social capital. These results further indicate that migrants’ social network plays a better role when the public service provision is underdeveloped.

The further analysis highlights differences across occupational groups (see Table 9). As the sampled respondents working in the transportation industry are only 15, which failed to meet the estimated demand for the econometric model, these 15 observations are thus

| Variables | Model 6–1 Manufacturing | Model 6–2 Construction | Model 6–3 Wholesale and retail | Model 6–4 Service |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Social capital | 0.7303*** (0.072) | 0.6566*** (0.0679) | 0.6702*** (0.1269) | 0.5910*** (0.1115) |
| Individual characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Professional characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Household characteristics | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled | Controlled |
| Observations | 148 | 165 | 51 | 94 |

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01
removed. Similarly, another 53 observations were also abandoned, resulting from the deficiency of occupational classification (respondents chose ‘others’ in the questionnaire and did not leave detailed information). In this case, Model Series 4 only includes 458 observations. Models 6–1, 6–2, 6–3, and 6–4 stand for manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and service industry, respectively.

The results revealed a strong positive association in all four business areas. Among them, improvement in social capital has the strongest effect in the manufacturing industry ($\beta = 0.697$), while the weakest effect is found in the service industry ($\beta = 0.575$). It is believed that traditional manufacturing workers are mostly assembly line workers with less social contact in their daily work. So there is more room for improving their social capital to increase their satisfaction with basic public services (Sofi et al., 2016). On the contrary, service industry migrants have more daily contact with people outside their ethnic-oriented group or place of origin and get more comprehensive access to information and opportunities. In this way, social capital can have a limited effect on public service acquisition.

5 Discussion

Most developing countries generally experience internal migration and inadequate public service provision. As demonstrated in the literature, unequal access to basic public service harms migrants’ settling down and integration in the host places, subsequently affecting economic development and social stability. As institutional meagerness in the public service system is hard to improve in the short term, it is crucial to identify factors contributing to lifting public service effectiveness at the individual level. According to the results, the positive association between public service and social capital is viewed in light of social capital theory. Regarding the mechanism, the results confirmed that social capital works through two dimensions, structural and relational dimensions. Based on the Sobel test and mediating effect, it is found that the structural dimension of social capital broadens migrants’ information channels and provides them with more information about public service acquisition. The relational dimension of social capital improves migrants’ fair perception of public service provision. This evidence is in line with Deri (2005), who also found that social networks can provide detailed institutional information regarding the public service system and reduce the search costs of locating an appropriate service site. And even alter the demand for services by affecting the perceived efficacy of available services. There is also an interesting comparison of how this effect differs across regions, migrants groups, and public service content. Concerning regional differences, the results signified that social capital had a larger effect where the public service system is weaker. It can be explained that there is no need for migrants to utilize their social networks in areas where a strong municipal government provides public service. This is coherent with Sanogo’s (2019) finding that devoting revenue to municipalities enhances access to public services. The empirical evidence favoring the heterogeneous effect of social capital in different public services also has some relevant implications. It is more useful for migrants to employ their social networks to get educational services for their children and employment opportunities than other services, such as health care, residence, and pensions. These findings are consistent with many previous studies (Chuatico & Hann, 2022; Rayn, 2011; Sofi et al., 2016).

We have reached these conclusions by defining social capital from two dimensions: relational and structural. It is appropriate to our ends, but other classifications may produce different results. Thus, future researchers can extend the current work by employing other
class schema concerning social capital. Additionally, due to time and budget constraints, we only studied partial areas in Jiangsu province so that future studies can introduce more sites and even expand the research to an international scope. In this regard, different migration patterns can be observed and compared, for instance, across multinational immigration. This may provide an opportunity to see the subtle differences in how people with heterogeneous migration patterns use social capital to obtain public service. Also, the current study only employed cross-sectional data, which limits a long-term analysis. Further research is constructive if panel data is available.

The current study proposes recommendations for the government and policymakers based on the empirical findings. Firstly, to improve the effectiveness of the current public service system, it is necessary to pay more attention to migrants’ social networks besides focusing on the institutional aspects. Government and non-official organizations should work together to provide internal migrants more opportunities to communicate and interact with natives, especially those from different places. In this regard, German is a good example to follow, where policy-makers implement measures to improve personal networks in immigrant communities. These activities include park clean-ups, community-cohesion events, etc. Secondly, priority should be given to migrants working in the manufacturing industry as their social resources are more limited, especially in the Chinese context. From the national perspective, 27.3% of migrants work in the manufacturing industry. Thirdly, governments must improve public service in certain areas, such as medical care, insurance, and residence, as social capital plays a relatively weaker role in these services. Our results have implications for migrants in other developing countries, particularly those with specific public service policies similar to those used in China.

6 Conclusions

During the last decades, many researchers have identified social capital as a key factor contributing to helping migrants integrate into the host society. As an important dimension, access to basic public service and migrants’ evaluation of it set a base for determining their integration into city life. Although a rich body of research has been conducted in various contexts, i.e., in Canada, America, and Nordic countries, within the European continent, little attention has been drawn to Chinese rural-to-urban groups. Therefore to fill this gap, the current study examines the relationship between social capital and the effectiveness of public service in China by using data gathered from rural to urban migrants.

The findings indicated that social capital affects public service effectiveness, measured by the migrants’ evaluation. The two dimensions of social capital, relational network and structural network, are believed to affect the effectiveness of public service through two channels: expanding information sources and creating a sense of fairness. The information from the co-ethnic social group in the host society can help rural-to-urban migrants access more public services. Additionally, the norms and trust generated from their social network accelerated common actions and improved their fair perceptions of the public service system. Equally notable was the finding that these effects are partially contingent upon the regional socio-economic conditions. This means that the current level of public service does not necessarily guarantee a higher level of social capital can bring, e.g., in the Southern part of the research area, where the cities are advanced, the level of public service is higher than that in the Central part; social capital can play a limited role in improving migrants’ experience. This work also presents novel evidence that the strong linkage
between social capital and the effectiveness of public service is more prominent in certain areas, such as medical care, pensions and minimum livelihood security. At the same time, the effect is weaker in other public sectors.

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**Declarations**

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