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Social status and social capital: influences on the obtainment of a starters qualification

The influence of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification and the mediating effect of social capital

Michelle Roose

Studentnumber: 6205917

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Utrecht University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Social Policy and Social Interventions
Thesis supervisor: dr. M.A. Yerkes
Second evaluator: dr. R.J.T. van Rijsselt

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Abstract

Objective. In the Netherlands, the focus on education has resulted, among other things, in emphasising that individuals should have at least a so-called starters qualification for being successful on the labour market. Parents' social status can be of influence in the obtainment of a starters qualification, even as the social capital of the individual. This research focuses on the influence of parents' social status on obtaining a starters qualification and the possible mediating effect of social capital. **Method.** This research is based on data of the European Social Survey (ESS). To provide a big enough sample with regards to participants without a starters qualification, a selection has been made of four countries, similar to the Netherlands in regards to welfare state regime and educational system. The participants examined were between 15 and 30 years old. To assess whether there is a relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, mediated by social capital, linear and logistic regressions have been performed. **Results.** The results show a positive association between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. They also show a positive association between parents' social status and structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Also, the mediating effect of cognitive social capital turned out be significant, while structural social capital did not turn out to be a significant mediator. **Conclusion.** This research confirms the unequal chances in obtaining a starters qualification, due to parents' social status and the mediating effect of cognitive social capital. More awareness about the influence of parents' social status on the obtainment of a starters qualification is needed to create equal educational chances for all students. A recommendation would be, to make teachers aware of these mechanisms to provide help to students with parents from relatively low social status.

Key words: Starters qualification, social status, structural social capital, cognitive social capital, ESS, educational chances.

Preface

Hereby I present to you my thesis for the master's program Social Policy and Social Interventions at the University of Utrecht. This thesis is the result of months of hard work, the overcoming of setbacks and staying positive. I have expanded my knowledge in regards to quantitative research methods and the transition from theory to results. I do not think I will perform a quantitative research again anytime soon, but due the improvement of my research skills I will not rule this out for the future.

I want to thank my thesis supervisor, Mara Yerkes. Your critical feedback and supervision sessions always resulted in new insights and improvements. I am thankful for your involvement during the whole process, and your helping hand when needed. Although it was not always easy, your feedback and support enabled me to perform better and learn more.

Lastly, I want to thank my family and friends. Although the process of writing a thesis is a lonely process, you have made this process less lonely with all your support and feedback.

Michelle Roose
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Content

1. Introduction

Education is becoming more and more important for an individual's chances on the labour market (Vrooman, Gijsberts, & Boelhouwer, 2014). A diploma functions as a gatekeeper to certain opportunities in life, but also functions as an exclusion criteria in which people are not granted access to certain jobs if not certified with the 'right' diploma (Vrooman, Gijsberts, & Boelhouwer, 2014). This has resulted in an increase in differences between more and less educated people in the last couple of years (Graaf, 1987; Völker & Elchardus, 2012). Less educated people have a lower life expectancy (7 years shorter than more educated people) and lower participation rates in social activities and politics (Völker & Elchardus, 2012; Vrooman et al., 2014). The importance of education, and the ideal of offering everyone equal opportunities for education and training, is reflected in the meritocratic ideals of modern western societies. A meritocracy is a society in which individuals are judged based on their own merits and hard work, and in which societal success depends on individual talent, skills and effort. Education is important in a meritocracy, because it helps people to develop skills and knowledge (Vrooman et al., 2014; Young, 1957).

In the Netherlands, the focus on education has resulted, among other things, in emphasising that individuals should have at least a so-called starters qualification in order to be successful on the labour market (Traag & Velden, 2008). A starters qualification is obtained when a person has a diploma of upper secondary vocational education (MBO level 2) or upper secondary general education (HAVO or VWO). Almost 40% of the people without a starters qualification do not have a job, of which half receives social benefits (Turkenburg, 2017). Yet not all individuals are equally likely to obtain a starters qualification because educational performance is not only affected by individual achievements (as is stated in a meritocracy), but is also affected by the environment an individual grew up in. Individuals that grew up in a family with parents from a relatively low social status face greater potential social and economic disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1989; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). This shows the importance studying this specific group of people. Little quantitative research on this group exists, as this group forms a small minority in Dutch society (CBS, 2018b). This study changes that by studying the possible mechanisms that can lead to not obtaining a starters qualification.

Besides parents' social status, one other possible factor that can influence the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, is an individual's social network, in particular, in the form of social capital. Social capital refers to the social ties between groups, and the resources an individual can derive from these social ties (Portes, 1998). Research has shown that there is a relation between dropping out of school and social capital (Teachman, Paasch and Carver, 1997). But not much research has been done on people without a starters qualification and their social capital because, again, it is such a small minority. Previous research on this subject has focused on social capital in minority groups based on ethnicity (Verhaege, 2011) in relation to labour market chances (Van Tubergen & Völker, 2011), the social capital of young people in ethnic minority groups (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2007) and the social capital of less educated people (Baay & de Haan, 2015).

Therefore, this study focuses on the influence of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification and the possible mediating role of social capital. The research is

conducted with a quantitative analysis, based on the dataset of the European Social Survey (ESS). People between the age of 15 and 30 with and without starters qualification have been selected. The original focus of this study was on the Netherlands. The decision has been made to conduct data from four European countries, because of the small sample size of respondents without a starters qualification. Despite some differences in educational systems and welfare state regime characteristics, recent existing empirical research has shown that it is possible to compare these four countries based on these characteristics (Bambra, 2005; Bambra, 2007; CBS, 2018a; CBS, 2018b; Hudson & Kuhner, 2009; Yerkes, 2017). This research contributes to better insights in the mechanisms that influence the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, which can lead to more equal chances relating to education and labour.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will outline how parents' social status can be of influence in the probability of obtaining a starters qualification and what the mediating role might be of social capital. First, the concept of social status will be explained. Next, the relation between parents' social status and education, and thus the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, will be discussed in modern day society. The third section discusses the concept of social capital as a resource and will be linked to social status. The theoretical framework ends with an explanation of the potential influence of social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification.

2.1. The social distribution: social status

To create a better understanding of the relation between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, it is necessary to discuss what social status is. Social status is the result of the ordering of people based on their social and economic traits, social stratification. Social stratification is shaped by differing access to valuable social and economic resources. People in the most privileged positions have access to more desirable resources (Keiser & Southgate, 2012). Karl Marx is one of the founders of the concept of social status and relates it specifically to economic production or access to material resources (Keiser & Southgate, 2012; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). But according to Max Weber, social status is also shaped by social influences and not only by economic characteristics: '*status is the honour, prestige, or respect that certain people possess because of their lifestyle*' (Keiser & Southgate, 2012, p. 46). Both characteristics are highly related; people with more access to economic resources, usually live a more high-status lifestyle than other people. Nowadays , social status is therefore characterized by people who to a certain extent have similar jobs, education, wealth and income (Keiser & Southgate, 2012; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014).

2.2. Social status: ascribed or achieved?

Research shows that there is a relation between parents' social status and the social status of their children, through education (De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995). In 1967, Blau and Duncan developed a model in which they describe these mechanisms (Blau and Duncan in De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995). Figure 1 shows this so-called *status attainment model* (Blau and Duncan in De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995).

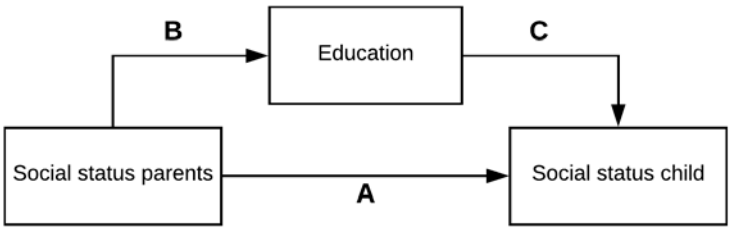

Figure 1: Status attainment model. Source: Blau and Duncan in De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995.

This study focuses on the relation between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. Education in this model is therefore similar to the obtainment of a starters qualification. In the status attainment model, this relation is represented by pathway B. There will be examined, whether the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is ascribed through somebody's background (their parents' social status) or whether the possibility to achieve or not achieve a starters qualification is independent from parents' social status and can be ascribed to hard work and talent of the individual. Pathway C represents the possible consequences of (not) obtaining a starters qualification, such as less labour market opportunities (Herweijer, 2008; Herweijer, 2008; Völker & Elchardus, 2012; Vrooman et al., 2014).

In earlier societies path A was most important; social status was usually directly inherited from parent to child. Parents who had a prominent position in society were able to assign their children to similar positions, even though there might have been other people who were more suitable. This mechanism is called ascription: you get ascribed to a certain position in society that is similar to the social status of your parents. In other words, ascription forms structural barriers for one of lower social status to climb the social ladder (De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995).

But times have changed; modernization theory describes the decreasing role of ascribed characteristics of an individual (gender, ethnicity, place of birth) as determinants of success in life. In relation to the status attainment model, this results in a decrease of pathway A and B and in an increase of pathway C (de Graaf, 1987; De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995; Vrooman et al., 2014). Indeed, this is why modern-day societies are based on the ideal of meritocracy; a society where individuals are judged based on their own merits and hard work. Education is central in a meritocracy. It helps people develop skills and knowledge, but it also functions as a mechanism to distinguish people based on their obtained skills and knowledge (Vrooman et al., 2014; Young, 1957). In relation to this study would this indicate that obtaining a starters qualification is due to an individual's own achievements and is not the result of the influence of the social status of their parents. However, as Young (1957) pointed out, there are also negative consequences of a meritocracy. In meritocratic societies, homogamy increases as people mostly marry people that have a similar social status (Vrooman et al., 2014). This process will lead to a new class-based society, resulting in greater social inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007; Young, 1957).

This downside of meritocracy resulted in a new theory; reproduction theory. Parents with a higher social status have more access to certain resources (one of these resources will be discussed in the next paragraphs). With these resources parents can help their children to perform better at school (de Graaf, 1987; De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995). This means that there will be an increase of pathways B and C in the status attainment model. The social status of the parents would then still influence the social status of the student through education (de Graaf, 1987; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014).

In all, there is consensus in the academic literature on the decrease of the direct influence of social status of parents on the social status of their children (pathway A) (Völker & Elchardus, 2012). Still, there is no consensus about the indirect influence of the social status of the parents on the social status on their children through education (pathway B). Are children performing well because of their own achievements or because of hidden ascription by their parents? Herweijer (2010) holds that there is still a rise in educational mobility; students are able to perform better than their parents at school.

While others claim that we are going back in time to a society based on social status, due to hidden ascription (Völker & Elchardus, 2012). Based on the literature, the following relation is expected:

> **HC:** Individuals with parents from a high social status have a higher probability of obtaining a starters qualification than individuals from parents with a low social status.

2.3. Social capital as a resource

Central in this study is the relation between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. As explained in paragraph 2.1, the differentiated access to resources due to a high or low social status, possibly enables the probability of obtaining a starters qualification.

Bourdieu (1989) developed a theory in which these resources are central. According to him, society is an arena of battle over different positions in the social order, with a higher position relating to more power in society. The division of positions depends on the amount of resources an individual possesses (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). Bourdieu distinguishes three kinds of resources, which he identifies as capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital is characterized by financial possessions, cultural capital by knowledge, cognitive skills and education, and social capital by the strength, amount and quality of an individual's social network (Bourdieu, 1989). Research confirms the existence of a relation between social capital and dropping out of school (Coleman, 1988), which is relevant in examining the relation between social capital and the obtainment of a starters qualification. Therefore, this study will solely focus on social capital, with regards to these resources. Two types of social capital specifically, structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Both will be discussed in the next paragraph. Based on the literature, the following relations are expected:

> **HA_1:** The higher the social status of parents, the more structural social capital an individual has.
> **HA_2:** The higher the social status of parents, the more cognitive social capital an individual has.

2.4. Social capital and education

As stated above, research has shown that there is a relation between dropping out of school and social capital, individuals that drop out of school are expected to have less social capital than individuals who did not drop out of school (Coleman, 1988; Ferlander, 2007; Teachman, Paasch and Carver, 1997). It is thus relevant to discuss the concept of social capital in explaining why some people obtain starters qualification and others do not. Social capital is the resource an individual can extract from social ties between individuals and groups. A social network consists out of social ties; the connections between an individual and others, such as family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and acquaintances (Ferlander, 2007). The social ties between individuals can result in social support, social support can be divided in three kinds of support. The first is emotional support, which is based on empathy and trust, for

example; motivating someone to do his homework. The second is instrumental support, which involves practical help, for example; paying money for extra homework support. The third is informational support, which includes advice that could help solve a problem, for example; advising someone in which homework assignment he needs to do first (Ferlander, 2007).

According to Portes (1998), a division can be made between social capital on the individual level and on the collective level. Social capital on the collective level, is mostly studied by political scientists. This approach does not only emphasize the importance of social networks, but also social capital as a resource of norms, trust and exercise of sanctions (Engbersen, 2003; Ferlander, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). On the individual level, social capital provides opportunities, due to access to and embeddedness in social networks. This approach is labelled as the network approach and is mostly practised by sociologists and anthropologists. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate whether social capital is a property of individuals or collectives. Nonetheless, social capital can be beneficial or harmful to both the individual and the collective, and therefore be property of both (Engbersen, 2003; Ferlander, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Although the individual is central in studying the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, it is thus difficult to subscribe social capital as something that is solely related to the individual level or collective level. This implies that it is important to keep both approaches in mind during this study.

Social capital is formed by two central aspects: the structural aspect and the cognitive aspect. (Ferlander, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Structural social capital refers to behaviours and actions of individuals within the network, such as group participation and civic engagement (Ferlander 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Cognitive social capital is characterized by norms of reciprocity and trust. Norms of reciprocity and trust are often defined as an exchange of social support. Although most scholars view the social network as the core element of social capital, it is argued that the network would collapse without reciprocal norms and trust (Ferlander, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Both structural and cognitive social capital have consequences for the individual and collective (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). For example, a student has a group of friends he or she meets with often (structural social capital). They can help each other by doing homework together and motivating each other (cognitive social capital). This can eventually lead to structural better school performances and the obtainment of a starters qualification. Although the emphasis on social capital has been mainly on its positive outcomes, social capital could also have negative outcomes (Portes, 1998), but given space limitations this aspect of social capital is not included here.

With regards to the social status of the parents, parents with a higher social status have more resources to create possibilities for their children to participate in certain groups and to derive more social support and social trust from these groups. Based on the previous paragraphs in regards to social status and based on the literature on social capital and education mentioned in this paragraph, the following relations are expected:

HB_1: The higher the social status of parents, the more structural social capital an individual has, the greater the probability they will have a starters qualification.

HB_2: The higher the social status of parents, the more cognitive social capital an individual has, the greater the probability they will have a starters qualification.

Concluding, this research expects that it is likely that there is a relation between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. But the relation is potentially also mediated by social capital of the individual, as a higher social status results in more access to resources such as social capital. This leads to the following conceptual model based on the relations between the different concepts used in this study (Figure 2):

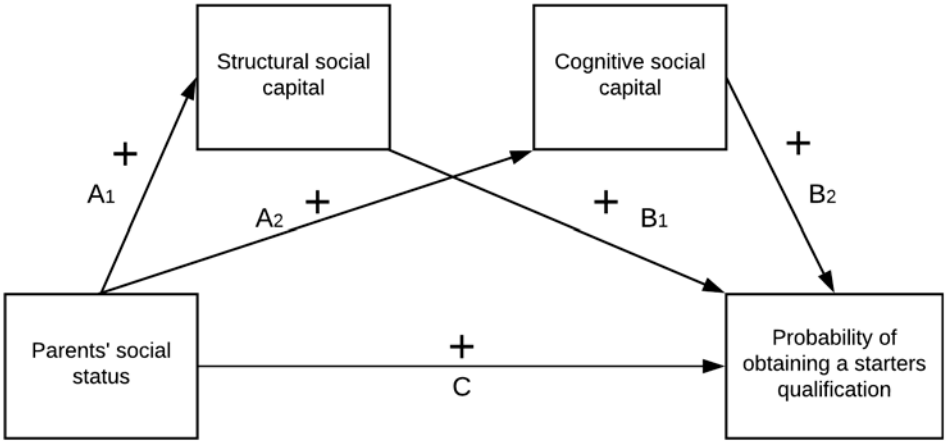

Figure 2: Conceptual model

2.5. Research question

The **central question** that will be answered in this study is: *What is the effect of parents' social status on an individuals' probability of obtaining a starters qualification and to what extent is this effect mediated by the social capital of the individual?*

To answer this question in a structured manner, different sub questions have been formulised. The first sub-question is essential in studying the relation between parents' social status and obtaining a starters qualification. Hereafter, this research examines the relation between the social status of the parents and social capital. Lastly, this thesis examines to what extent the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is influenced by structural and cognitive social capital.

- **Sub-question 1:** *To what extent is the probability of obtaining a starters qualification determined by the social status of the parents of an individual?*
- **Sub-question 2:** *To what extent is the social capital of an individual influenced by the social status of the parents?*
- **Sub-question 3:** *To what extent is the probability of obtaining a starters qualification influenced by structural social capital and cognitive social capital?*

3. Research design

3.1. Research strategy

To answer the research question it is necessary to retrieve data about (1) parents' social status of individuals without a starters qualification (2) the structural and cognitive social capital of people without a starters qualification. Quantitative research measures will be used to find associations between different factors. These research methods do not focus on underlying structures that are possible explanations for these associations (Bryman, 2001).

In performing this research, the dataset of the European Social Survey (ESS), round 8 – 2016, has been used. This is the most recent dataset at the moment of writing. The ESS is a cross-national survey that is conducted every two years in more than 30 European nations and aims to measure the attitudes, beliefs and behavioral patterns of diverse populations. The sample of the ESS must be representative of all persons aged 15 and over that resident within private households in the nation. Respondents are selected randomly and the sampling frames consist of individuals and households. To ensure comparability, all countries have to use probability sampling. This entails that everyone above 15 years old has the chance to be selected. Once a respondent is selected he or she cannot be replaced by anyone else. The ESS has developed standards to ensure the quality of the data collection.

3.2. Participants

Respondents without a starters qualification were underrepresented in the Dutch dataset of the ESS, resulting in a small sample size that was too small to use for quantitative research. Based on similarities with the Netherlands with regards to welfare state regime and educational system, three other countries have been selected: Austria, Belgium and Germany (Bambra, 2005; Bambra, 2007; Hudson & Kuhner, 2009). Out of the complete ESS dataset of 2016, the data of these four countries have been selected and merged into a new dataset. Hereafter, the respondents have been selected based on their age. The age at which someone is considered 'adult' is changing, with the transition to adulthood taking place at an increasingly older age (Mooren, Kruip & Stroucken, 2015). Therefore all youth aged 15-30 have been selected, as until age 30, social capital and parents' social status are likely still relevant for the question of whether or not someone obtains a starters qualification. Furthermore, all cases with missing values, with regards to the variables mentioned below, were excluded from the dataset to prevent any bias. The original sample size with the selected countries of (n=8309) resulted in n=1078.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Dependent variable

Starters qualification. An individual obtains a starters qualification, if a diploma of upper secondary vocational education or upper secondary general education is obtained (Traag & Velden, 2008). Whether or not an individual has a starters qualification, is measured with a binary variable whereby 0 is not obtained a starters qualification and 1 is obtained a starters qualification. Starters

qualification is measured based on the educational levels specific to each country: Netherlands: 'Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs 1' educational level or lower; Austria: 'Abschluss der Polytechnischen Schule bzw. Einer einjährigen mittleren Schule' educational level or lower; Belgium: 'Getuigschrift van de eerste graad secundair onderwijs 1' educational level or lower; Germany: 'Mittlere Reife, Realschule / MSA / Polytechn. Oberschüle' educational level or lower, with no diploma in the 'Beruflicher Ausbildungsabschluss' (European Commission, 2017; Nuffic, 2016; Nuffic, 2015A; Nuffic, 2015B; UNESCO, 2012). A more extended explanation about the selection of these educational levels can be found in Appendix 1.

Some of the respondents without a starters were still in education. The probability of them obtaining a starters qualification is plausible. Measured with the question: *Doing last 7 days: education*, people without a starters qualification but still in education got excluded from the dataset. Of the respondents did 12.5% not have a starters qualification.

3.3.2. Independent variable

Parents' social status. Parents' social status is conceptualized as: people who to a certain extent have similar jobs, education, wealth and income (Keister & Southgate, 2012; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). Social status of the parents is measured using occupational information from both the father and the mother. These variables were measured as ordinal whereby 1=lowest occupational status (farm worker) and 9=highest occupational status (professional and technical occupations)[1]. By taking the average of the father and the mother's occupational status, these variables were subsequently computed in a continuous variable. There are various manners by which social status can be measured (Keister & Southgate, 2012) this will be addressed in the discussion part. A principal component analysis was conducted on two items with varimax rotation. Both items cluster around the same factor, with both factor loadings of .858 and in combination explained 73% of the variance. Furthermore, the parents' social status subscale had sufficient reliability with an Cronbach's alpha of .640 (Field, 2013). Parents' social status subscale scores from 1 until 9 (M=5.52; SD= 2.016).

3.3.3. Mediating variables

Structural social capital. Structural social capital is conceptualized as: behaviours and actions of individuals within the network, such as group participation and civic engagement. (Ferlander 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Structural social capital is measured using the following items '*How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues?*', '*How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matter?*' and '*Take part in social activities compared to others of same age?*'. These items are computed in a continuous variable and represent the group participation that is representative for structural social capital. The values of the items have been standardized in z-scores where after the average is taken and a subscale of structural social capital is formed. A principal component analysis was conducted on three items with varimax rotation. All three items cluster around the same factor, with factor loadings above .680, and in combination explained 53% of the

[1] The questions are rescaled 1→ 9 and 9 → 1.

variance. Furthermore, the structural social capital subscale had a low reliability with an Cronbach's alpha of .555 (Field, 2013), which is addressed in the discussion. The structural social capital subscale scores from -2.79 until 1.91 (M=0.03; SD= 0.720).

Cognitive social capital. Cognitive social capital is conceptualized as follows: perceptions of norms of reciprocity and trust within the social network (Ferlander 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). Cognitive social capital is measured using the following items: '*Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful.*', '*Most people try to take advantage of you or try to be fair.*' and '*Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for themselves.*'. These variables are measured with an 10-point Likert-scale from 'totally agree' (1) until 'totally disagree' (10). These items are computed in a continuous variable and represent social trust and social support within social networks that are representative for cognitive social capital. The average of the items for each case is taken to form the subscale of cognitive social capital. A principal component analysis was conducted on three items with varimax rotation. All three items cluster around the same factor, with factor loadings above .680, and in combination explained 67% of the variance. Furthermore, the cognitive social capital subscale had a sufficient reliability with an Cronbach's alpha of .751 (Field, 2013). Cognitive social capital subscale scores from 0 until 10 (M=5.73; SD= 1.604).

3.3.4. Control variables

Three demographic control variables are selected; gender, ethnicity and country. Existing literature shows that the division of social capital and school performances are influenced by gender and ethnicity. In general boys of minority groups drop out of school more often and females seem to possess less social capital than males (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Lin, 2008). Gender is measured with a binary variable whereby 0=male (reference category) and 1=female. Ethnicity is also measured with a binary variable whereby 0=belongs to a majority ethnic group in country of descent (reference group) and 1=belongs to a minority ethnic group in country of descent. For country, a dummy variable has formed for each country with as reference category The Netherlands.

3.4. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics. The sample size consists out of 1078 respondents, of which 514 (47.7%) are male and 564 are female (52.3%). Almost all respondents belong to an ethnic group which is considered the majority in their country of descent (90%), the other 10% is considered a minority in their country of descent. Also, 18.6% from the respondents is from The Netherlands, 28.6% from Austria, 29.0% from Belgium and 23.7% from Germany.

In controlling for whether the sample is representative, the amount of people without a starters qualification is taken into account. The concept of a starters qualification is only used in The Netherlands as the minimum level of education an individual should have to be successful on the labour market (Traag & Velden, 2008). This standard is not used in other European countries. The standard that is used to measure young people that are in a vulnerable position with regards to education and

employment is NEETs. NEETs are the amount of people between the age of 15 and 25 that are not in employment, education or training (NEETs). The amount of NEETs differs across European Union countries. The average of NEETs in The Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and Germany is 6.5%. In The Netherlands is 51% of the NEET's not in possession of a starters qualification (CBS, 2018a; CBS, 2018b). When assuming that in the other countries the amount of people without a starters qualification is similar to that of the Netherlands, based on their similar welfare state regimes (Bambra, 2005; Bambra, 2007; Hudson & Kuhner, 2009), the percentage of people without a starters qualification would be 3.25%. In comparison with the sample size of this study would this suggest that this sample is not representative (12.5%). This is addressed in the discussion.

Table 1. Variables used in the analysis: means and standard deviations (n=1078)

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean or %	SD
Gender *(ref. male)*	0	1	47.7%	
Ethnicity *(ref. majority)*	0	1	90%	
Country *(ref. the Netherlands)*	0	1		
The Netherlands			18.6%	
Austria			28.6%	
Belgium			29.0%	
Germany			23.7%	
Structural social capital	0	10	5.73	1.60
Cognitive social capital	-2.79	1.91	0.03	0.72
Parents' social status	1	9	5.52	2.02
Starters qualification *(ref. no starters qualification)*	0	1	12.5%	

3.5. Analytic strategy

The data will be analysed with different statistical analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics version 24. According to Baron & Kenny (1986) there are four steps in establishing mediation. First, a significant effect of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification has to be established (sub question 1). This effect will be examined with a logistic regression. A logistic regression is needed, because of the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable 'the probability of obtaining a starters qualification'. If a significant effect is concluded, there may be a possible mediation. Second, a significant effect of parents' social status on structural social capital and cognitive social capital has to be established (sub question 2). This effect will be examined with a linear regression. Third, a significant effect of structural social capital and cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification has to be established, while controlling for parents' social status (sub question 3). This effect will be examined with a logistic regression. Perfect mediation is shown when the relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is insignificant in this model. But perfect mediation usually does not happen. Therefore a fourth and last step is probably needed, that will be performed with a Sobeltest. If the

Sobeltest is significant for both structural social capital and cognitive social capital, it means that parents' social status significantly affects the probability of obtaining a starters qualification via structural social capital and via cognitive social capital.

3.6. Control assumptions regression

When using linear regression analyses, several assumptions must be met. Concerning multicollinearity the assumption has been met, with tolerance values not below 0.2 and VIF values not exceeding 10. Analysis for the residual statistics shows that the assumption has been met, with Durbin-Watson statistics nearby 2, 2.051 for structural social capital and 1.811 for cognitive social capital. The scatterplots and P-P Plots show that the dataset has met the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity, they do not show patterns, skewness or kurtosis. For both the linear and logistic regression, analysis for the residual statistics show multiple outliers that exceed critical values. The implications will be addressed in the discussion.

4. Results

To assess if there is a relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification and to examine if this relationship is mediated by structural social capital and cognitive social capital, nine models were analysed. Gender, ethnicity and country have been taken into account as control variables.

4.1. The relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification.

Table 2 assesses whether there is a relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, by performing a logistic regression. In line with the expectations, the findings show that there is a significant positive relation (OR = 1.27, Wald = 25.3, p<.001). In other words, individuals whose parents have a higher occupational status are more likely to have a starters' qualification. Model 1 only explains a small part of the variance (R^2_N=4.5%) and offers little predictive value. In the second Model, control variables were added. The effect of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification stays significant in the second Model (p<.001). The control variables gender and ethnicity do seem to influence the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. Females have a 1.7 times higher probability to obtain a starters qualification than males, and individuals from majority groups in the country of descent have a 2 times higher probability to obtain a starters qualification than individuals from a minority group in the country of descent. This implies that the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is lower for males and individuals from minority groups in the country of descent.

Table 2. Total effect of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification

	Model 1		**Model 2**	
	B (SE)	***OR*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**	***B (SE)***	***OR*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**
Constant	**.718* (.246)**		**.703* (.356)**	
Parents' social status	**.238*** (.047)**	1.268 [1.156, 1.391]	**.226*** (.048)**	1.254 [1.142, 1.377]
Country *(ref: Netherlands)*				
Austria			.534 (.323)	1.706 [.906, 3.213]
Belgium			-.439 (.277)	.645 [.375, 1.110]
Germany			-.234 (.298)	.432 [.442, 1.419]
Gender *(ref: male)*			**.526* (.194)**	1.693 [1.158, 2.474]
Ethnicity *(ref: majority group)*			**-.699* (.263)**	.497 [.297,.833]
R^2 Nagelkerke	.045		.099	
$\chi 2$	5.306		9.176	

*p<.05; *** p<.001

4.2. The relationship between parents' social status and structural and cognitive social capital

Because of the significant effect between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, there may be a possible mediation caused by structural and cognitive social capital. The next step in establishing mediation, is to assess whether there is a relationship between the social status of parents and the structural social capital and cognitive social capital of individuals, two addition analysis were conducted by performing a linear regression.

Table 3 shows the result of the analysis with structural social capital, while Table 4 shows the result of the analysis with cognitive social capital. The findings are in line with the expectations and show that a higher parents' social status results in more structural social capital ($p<.001$) and in more cognitive social capital ($p<.001$). This implies that the higher the social status of the parents, the more structural and cognitive social capital their children have. However, both Models only explain a small part of the variances, Model 3 ($R^2 = 1.8\%$) and Model 5 ($R^2 = 1.3\%$). When controlling for country, gender and ethnicity, the effect of parents' social status on structural social capital (Model 4) and cognitive social capital (Model 6) stays significant.

Table 3. The direct effect of parents' social status on structural social capital.

	Model 3			**Model 4**		
	B (SE)	**β**	***B*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**	***B (SE)***	**β**	***B*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**
Constant	**-.234*** (.063)**			-.152 (.085)		
Parents' social status	**.048*** (.011)**	.134	[.027, .069]	**.044*** (.011)**	.123	[.023, .065]
Country *(ref: Netherlands)*						
Austria				**-.145* (.065)**	-.091	[-.273 , -.018]
Belgium				-.039 (.065)	-.025	[-.166, .087]
Germany				-.018 (.068)	-.010	[-.150, .115]
Gender *(ref: male)*				.015 (.044)	.010	[-.071, .101]
Ethnicity *(ref: majority group)*				-.111 (.073)	-.046	[-.254, .033]
R^2 (ΔR^2)	.018 (.017)			.026 (.020)		

*p<.05; *** p<.001

Table 4. The direct effect of parents' social status on cognitive social capital.

	Model 5			Model 6		
	B (SE)	**β**	***B*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**	***B (SE)***	**β**	***B*** **95% CI [LL-UL]**
Constant	**5.231*** (.142)**			**5.497*** (.182)**		
Parents' social status	**.091*** (.024)**	.114	[.044, .138]	**.079* (.023)**	.099	[.033, .125]
Country *(ref: Netherlands)*						
Austria				.160 (.140)	.045	[-.114, .434]
Belgium				**-.688*** (.139)**	-.195	[-.961, -.415]
Germany				-.188 (.145)	-.050	[-.150, .115]
Gender *(ref: male)*				.162 (.094)	.051	[-.473, .097]
Ethnicity *(ref: majority group)*				**-.849*** (.157)**	-.159	[-1.158, -.540]
R^2 (ΔR^2)	.013 (.012)			.091 (.086)		

*p<.05; *** p<.001

4.3. The mediating role of structural and cognitive social capital

Because of the significant effect of parents' social status on structural social capital and cognitive social capital, two steps remain in verifying a mediation effect of structural social capital and cognitive social capital. First, the effect of structural social capital and cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification has to be examined, while controlling for parents' social status will be examined. Where after the Sobeltest will indicate whether the mediating effect is significant.

Table 5 shows that structural social capital has no significant effect on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, while controlling for parents' social status. The effect of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification stays significant. This is not in line with the expectations: there is no indirect effect from structural social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification. In other words, the relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is not mediated by structural social capital.

Table 5. Indirect of structural social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, while controlling for parents' social status.

	Model 7		**Model 8**	
	B (SE)	**OR 95% CI [LL-UL]**	***B (SE)***	**OR 95% CI [LL-UL]**
Constant	**.748* (.248)**		**.728* (.358)**	
Parents' social status	**.232*** (.048)**	1.261 [1.149, 1.384]	**.221*** (.048)**	1.247 [1.135, 1.370]
Structural social capital	.132 (.128)	1.141 [.888, 1.465]	.159 (.129)	1.172 [.910, 1.510]
Country *(ref: Netherlands)*				
Austria			.556 (.324)	1.744 [.924, 3.292]
Belgium			-.438 (.277)	.645 [.375, 1.111]
Germany			-.238 (.298)	.788 [.439, 1.414]
Gender *(ref: male)*			**.523* (.194)**	1.688 [1.154, 2.467]
Ethnicity *(ref: majority group)*			**-.687* (.263)**	.503 [.300, .843]
R^2 Nagelkerke	.047		.102	
χ^2	8.020		10.053	

*p<.05; *** p<.001

Table 6 shows a significant positive effect of cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, while controlling for parents' social status. Also, the indirect effect from cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is significant if performing the Sobeltest (z=2.468, p=.016). This is in line with the expectations. In other words, the relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is partially mediated by cognitive social capital. Still the goodness of fit test turns out to be slightly significant (p=.042). This would indicate that the model is a poor fit of the data. This will be addressed in the discussion.

Table 6. Indirect of cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, while controlling for parents' social status.

	Model *9*		**Model 10**	
	B (SE)	**OR 95% CI [LL-UL]**	***B (SE)***	**OR 95% CI [UL-LL]**
Constant	-.527 (.367)		-.439 (.489)	
Parents' social status	**.213*** (.048)**	1.237 [1.127, 1.359]	**.215*** (.048)**	1.239 [1.128-1.362]
Cognitive social capital	**.251*** (.057)**	1.258 [1.150, 1.436]	**.207 * (.061)**	1.230 [1.091-1.387]
Country *(ref: Netherlands)*				
Austria			.551 (.326)	1.743 [.916-3.282]
Belgium			-.305 (.281)	.737 [.426-1.278]
Germany			-.197 (.299)	.822 [.457-1.477]
Gender *(ref: male)*			**.505* (.195)**	1.658 [1.132-2.428]
Ethnicity *(ref: majority group)*			-.502 (.273)	.606 [.354-1.035]
R^2 Nagelkerke	.079		.118	
$\chi 2$	4.599		16.024*	

*p<.05; *** p<.001

Concluding, shows Figure 3 the results of the analysis' which are outlined in the Models above. In establishing mediating, the four steps of Baron & Kenny (1986) are performed. The different pathways represent the relations between the variables and shows their coefficients and significance. Cognitive social capital shows to have a mediating effect on the relation between parents' social status and the probability to obtain a starters qualification.

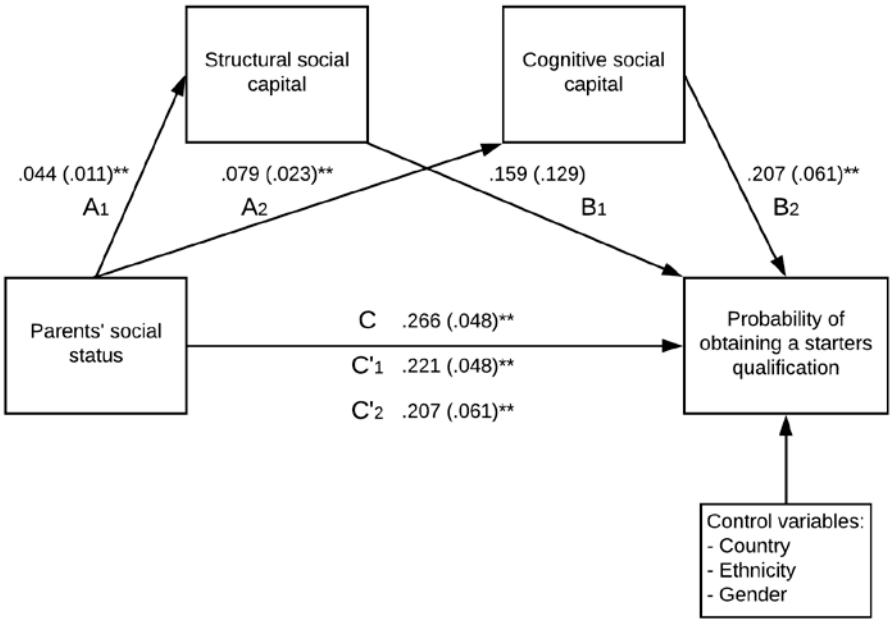

Figure 3. Conceptual model with results.

5. Conclusion

This research studied the influence of parents' social status on obtaining a starters qualification and the mediating role of structural and cognitive social capital. It is necessary to examine the mechanisms that influence the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, to prevent young people dropping out of school before obtaining a starters qualification, which negatively effects the individual and society. Also the influence of parents' social status needed to be examined, to determine whether we can speak of a meritocratic society. The research question addressed in this thesis was: *What is the effect of parents' social status on an individuals' probability of obtaining a starters qualification and to what extent is this effect mediated by the social capital of the individual*

First, the relation between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification has been examined (sub question 1). As expected, a positive association was found between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification (de Graaf, 1987; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014; Völker & Elchardus, 2012). In other words, a higher social status results in a higher probability of obtaining a starters qualification. As a result of this effect, there may be a possible mediation caused by structural and cognitive social capital. Second, the relation between parents' social status and structural and cognitive social capital has been examined (sub question 2). As expected, a positive association was found between parents' social status and structural social capital and cognitive social capital (Bourdieu, 1989; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). In other words, a higher social status results in having more structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Lastly, the effect of structural social capital and cognitive social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification has been examined, while controlling for parents' social status to determine whether there is mediation (sub question 3). This effect somewhat differed from the expectations, there is no mediation of structural social capital on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, while controlling for parents' social status. But cognitive social capital partially mediates the effect of parents' social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification (Coleman, 1988; Ferlander, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015A). There are two possible explanations for the deviation of the hypotheses. First, structural social capital turned out to have a low intern validity and therefore contains more variance. Second structural social capital and cognitive social capital are theoretically different, but do not exist without each other. There needs to be an interplay between structural social capital and cognitive social capital within a social network, to achieve both. Future studies should focus on more valid operationalization of structural social capital, so the effect of both aspects of social capital can be studied.

Concluding, the relationship between parents' social status and the probability of obtaining a starters qualification is partially mediated by cognitive social capital and is not mediated by structural social capital.

6. Discussion

Before discussing the recommendations, two limitations of the model are important to note. The mediation model of cognitive social capital was of poor fit, it is possible that there are models that provide a better representation of reality. Also, the explained variance is in almost all models low, the had sample multiple outliers, and the sample was not representative for the population because of the relatively large amount of individuals without a starters qualification. The implication of these limitations is that the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population.

The second limitation concerns the operationalization of social status, structural social capital and cognitive social capital. This study measures the social status of parents by their highest occupational status, the variable is measured as continuous, while each occupational status was divided into a category. The division in categories is difficult, because it is subjective to decide which occupation belongs to which category. Future research may consider to measure social status in two categories, for example blue-collar and white-collar. This decreases the amount of categories and makes it easier to interpret results for each category, instead of interpreting results as ‘ lower social status’ or ‘higher social status. Furthermore did structural social capital miss the aspect of civic engagement and did cognitive social capital miss the aspect of social support in its operationalization. These are the consequences of the limitations an existing dataset has. Future research should try to include these aspects to provide more in-depth insights on the mediating effect of social capital.

This research contributes to social sciences literature and society in a broader sense. Quantitative research studying individuals without a starters qualification is rare in academic literature. By merging datasets of four countries based on similar welfare state regimes and educational systems, this research aimed to fill that void in the literature. Also, this research confirms that the social status of parents influences the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, mediated by cognitive social capital. Even though the meritocratic ideal is endeavoured for in modern society, this research confirms that there still is a strong influence of parents’ social status on the probability of obtaining a starters qualification, thereby stunting this ideal. Educational chances are still ascribed and not only a result of one’s own talent and effort. During policy-making processes, government institutions ought to be aware of the influence of parents’ social status if meritocracy is indeed strived for. As we have seen, not everyone starts at the same position, some individuals start with a backlog. The national government needs to work together with municipalities to create awareness among teachers about this unequal start, so that teachers can monitor this and provide extra attention if needed. Interesting also is the mediating effect of cognitive social capital. Teachers may try to provide children from lower social status with more social support and encourage their social trust, to eliminate the backlog and to provide everyone with fair chances in life.

7. Literature

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix 1: Educational systems

Central in this study is the probability that an individual does or does not obtain a starters qualification. A starters qualification is a Dutch standard; A starters qualification is obtained if a person has a diploma of upper secondary vocational education (MBO level 2) or upper secondary general education (HAVO or VWO) (Traag & Velden, 2008). This implies that it is necessary to compare the educational systems of Austria, Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands to find an educational program in each country which is similar to upper secondary vocational education (MBO level 2) in The Netherlands.

UNESCO has developed a framework to classify educational activities, The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). ISCED classifies education programmes by levels of education and fields of education. This results in the division of 8 levels of education. Furthermore, the educational programs in European countries all encompass a structure of four educational programmes (European Commission, 2017; UNESCO, 2012). These programs will be discussed and aligned with the comparable ISCED level, to outline the content of the educational programmes and to draw a comparison between the educational level of a starters qualification in The Netherlands and a similar educational level in Austria, Belgium and Germany.

The first program (ISCED 0) is early childhood education and care, which focusses on the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children outside the family context. The second are primary and secondary education programmes (ISCED 1-3), these programmes focus on fundamental skills in reading, writing and mathematics and provide a foundation for core areas of knowledge, personal and social development. Furthermore do these programs prepare individuals on future education and employment. The third are post-secondary non tertiary programmes (ISCED 4-5), which are developed to prepare for tertiary education and for labour market entry. They provide students with professional knowledge, skills and competencies and are often occupational specific. The fourth and last are tertiary level main programmes (ISCED 6-8), which are developed to provide the student with academic and professional knowledge, skills and competencies. The programmes are usually theoretical based, with practical components (European Commission, 2017; UNESCO, 2012). According to this classification scheme, an individual obtains a starters qualification if graduating for an educational programme on ISCED level 3 (MBO level 2, HAVO or VWO). Individuals that do not have a starters qualification are at most graduated for an educational programme at ISCED level 2, that focusses on fundamental skills and prepares for future education and employment.

Table 7 shows what the comparable educational programmes are in Austria, Belgium and Germany based on the educational programmes in the ESS dataset and the comparison of Dutch diplomas with foreign diplomas made by Nuffic (Nuffic, 2016; Nuffic, 2015A; Nuffic, 2015B).

Table 7. No starters qualification: maximum educational programmes.

COUNTRY	ESS QUESTION	EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME / ESS NUMBER	ISCED LEVEL
THE NETHERLANDS	Highest level of education, The Netherlands	Middelbaar Beroeps Onderwijs 1 (ESS 5)	2
AUSTRIA	Highest level of education, Austria	Abschluss der Polytechnischen Schule bzw. Einer einjährigen mittleren Schule (ESS 4)	2
BELGIUM	Highest level of education, Belgium	Getuigschrift van de eerste graad secundair onderwijs 1 (ESS 4)	2
GERMANY	Highest level of education, Germany: höchster allgemeinbildener Schulavschluss	Mittlere Reife, Realschule / MSA / Polytechn. Oberschüle (ESS 4)*	2

Note: *Only ISCED 2, if student did not obtain a diploma in Beruflicher Ausbildungsabschluss

With regards to the operationalisation of the variable starters qualification, a new binary variable is created whereby 0 = not obtained a starters qualification and 1 = obtained a starters qualification. A selection has been made based on the educational programmes mentioned in table 1. These educational programmes have been set as the maximum level of education in which an individual did *not* obtain a starters qualification. An exceptional case was Germany because the selection purely based on *Mittlere Reife, Realschule / MSA / Polytechn. Oberschüle*, was not enough. It is possible that after finishing this educational programme respondents would follow another educational programme in the 'Ausbildungsabschluss', in which students learn professional knowledge, skills and competencies, that are usually occupational specific. This results in a higher ISCED level. Therefore, only the respondents that classified 0 on the question: *Highest level of education, Germany: höchster Ausbildunsabschluss*, were selected. The selected respondents without a starters qualification, got classified 0 on the starters qualification variable. The other respondents, that have a starters qualification got classified 1. This resulted in N=135 respondents without a starters qualification and N=943 with a starters qualification.

8.2. Appendix 2: Correlation matrix

Table 8. Correlation matrix (pearson correlation)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Startersqualification	1,000								
2. Social status parents	,156**	1,000							
3. Structural social capital	,051	,134**	1,000						
4. Cognitive social capital	,156**	,114**	,148**	1,000					
5. Gender	,093**	,017	,005	,063*	1,000				
6. Ethnicity	-,107**	-,087**	-,181**	-,181**	,040	1,000			
7. Country - Austria	,103**	-,073*	,147**	,147**	,086**	-,054	1,000		
8. Country - Belgium	-,014**	-,037	-,215**	-,215**	-,048	,086**	-,405**	1,000	
9. Country - Germany	-,019	,065*	,017	,017	-,083**	-,070*	-,353**	-,357**	1,000