

# Review of: "Corralling a Chimera: A Critical Review of the Term Social Infrastructure"

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"Social infrastructure" is in vogue or at least it seems that way. Joshi and Aldrich's review article offers a timely accounting of the ways in which the concept is used in multiple scholarly literatures. Insofar as I have focused on Klinenborg's (2018) discussion of social infrastructure, I have neglected or otherwise been unaware of much earlier and wider ranging appearances of the concept. Joshi and Aldrich are to be commended for documenting these origins and tracing their trajectories into the present moment. Indeed, the review deepened my understanding of the history of the term as well as the diversity of its uses. They identify that the term appears in five distinct categories of scholarly conversation: Education, Healthcare, Housing, Transportation, and Networking Places. I tend to agree with Joshi and Aldrich that this divergence is cause for scrutiny and reason to take pause and consider the ultimate utility of social infrastructure as an analytical concept, both at the present moment and into the future.

I appreciate Joshi and Aldrich's effort to be both comprehensive and systematic in constructing the sampling frame of literature for the review. Using a variety of indexing services increases confidence that the search for relevant literature is exhaustive. What's more, this approach also revealed what I found to be surprisingly early uses of social infrastructure in different academic conversations, with initial uses appearing in the 1960s. Joshi and Aldrich also narrow the set of literature for consideration by removing references in which a clear definition of social infrastructure could not be discerned. This strikes me as a worthwhile step of separating the wheat from the chaff. At the same time, it also makes me wonder what those dozens of references might have to say about the use of the term, social infrastructure. In this instance, a content analysis of these residual references could further serve the authors' objectives. I also found the graph illustrating the frequency of references over time in each of the categories to be an effective way of visualizing the divergent applications of social infrastructure and their trajectories. The graph also invited me to ask additional questions about the gravity of the different uses of social infrastructure, which might be ascertained by a citation analysis. Which approaches seem to have more or less traction in their respective conversations? Are there articles that are being cited across different categories of use? That is, are certain references operating as a boundary object for the different literatures? Or have these approaches operated separately? My curiosity is piqued and I think this is a sign that Joshi and Aldrich's review is pushing the conversation forward.

Through their critical review, Joshi and Aldrich argue that social infrastructure is being deployed in ways that cast the concept as overly broad. The authors' review of uses in each category frequently identify that "social infrastructure" is defined in a way that stretches the meaning of the term to include one or more other concepts, such as education or

transportation infrastructure. This, Joshi and Aldrich argue, stretches the concepts too much, so much so that it risks encompassing nearly everything, and therefore puts the concept in jeopardy of meaning nothing analytically useful. They provide compelling support for this by pointing to the ways in which different and established concepts are being grouped together under the umbrella of social infrastructure, which weakens the foundation for finer-grained discussion. In this, it's easy to see how social infrastructure is at risk of becoming an unclear idea.

In response, Joshi and Aldrich propose fixing the meaning of social infrastructure on the category they refer to as “networking space,” which involves “locations where people can interact to build relationships and strengthen community ties.” This definition mirrors Klinenberg's (2018) approach to the concept and it's one that I would choose to champion too. At the same time, Joshi and Aldrich's mention of a piece by Ono (2022) hints that social networking sites that people can access through computers and smartphones may also be an important part of social infrastructure. This is a departure from Klinenberg's and other's use of the term (e.g., Latham and Layton 2022). This raises an important question about whether social infrastructure as networking space must be a physical location or whether it can encompass virtual sites for interaction. Advancing understanding of this question seems like a fruitful path forward to develop the analytical capability of social infrastructure that Joshi and Aldrich are rightly calling for.

## References

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