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Examining the Impact of Social Crises on the Social Capital of Employees in the Oil Industry of Ahvaz

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The main objective of this study is to explore the relationship between social crises in the city of Ahvaz and the social capital of citizens, with a particular focus on employees in the oil industry.

Methods: This research employed an exploratory design based on mixed quantitative–qualitative data. Qualitative findings were used to complement and deepen the quantitative data. The statistical population consisted of all managers, experts, and experienced staff of the Ahvaz oil industry across different organizational levels and positions. Due to the limited number of skilled experts in the company, purposive sampling was applied, and in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants. Both primary and secondary data were utilized. Secondary data were collected through a library-based review of books, articles, and theses. Primary data were gathered through fieldwork and in-depth interviews, following the grounded theory approach.

Results: The findings indicate that factors influencing the emergence of social crises can be divided into primary causes and contextual factors. Prominent explicit or latent causes include social harm, poverty, cultural differences, youth-related emotions and excitements, and social restarts. Contextual factors—while exerting influence on primary causes—play a facilitating role and often appear superficially. These include the penetration of the internet enabling rapid information exchange, the role of virtual social media in content creation and rumor-spreading, the influence of audio-visual media in shaping public opinion, satellite television networks in generating distrust and hopelessness and even organizing protest gatherings, along with mismanagement, policy failures, and dysfunctional governance.

Conclusions: The study demonstrates a significant relationship between social crises and the social capital of employees in the Ahvaz oil industry. Addressing both the underlying and contextual factors of crises is essential for strengthening social capital and mitigating potential disruptions in organizational and community settings.

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Introduction

In addition to human, financial, and economic capital, scholars increasingly emphasize another form of capital known as social capital (Carmen et al., 2022; Portes, 2024). This concept refers to the ties and connections among members of a network that serve as valuable resources, enabling individuals to achieve collective goals through the creation of norms and mutual trust (Salajegheh & Ashrafzadeh, 2014). Over the past few decades, social capital has emerged as one of the most important topics discussed across the social sciences and humanities (Hasanpour et al., 2023). It is not a single construct but encompasses a range of dimensions, all sharing two features: they are aspects of social structures, and they facilitate specific actions of individuals embedded within those structures. Unlike physical or human capital, social capital is generated and developed within social relations (Abdolmaleki et al., 2022).

Social capital reflects shared ideals of solidarity, trust, honesty, and respect among individuals, as well as adherence to values, norms, and ethical principles (Bahripou et al., 2012). It is often defined as a network of relationships and mutual trust that embodies collective symbols and identities. By promoting cooperation and reducing transaction costs, social capital strengthens collaboration in communities (Nikrouy et al., 2025). The strength and effectiveness of social capital depend on the extent to which community members adhere to shared norms and values and their ability to prioritize collective welfare over personal interests (Chetty et al., 2022). Across different cultures and civilizations, norms generate social capital by fostering cooperation among individuals (Fathi & Ebrahimi, 2023). In this sense, social capital, like other forms of capital, provides a foundation for accessing life opportunities and goals and is considered a key determinant of organizational and social success (Almeida et al., 2021).

In today's world, managers increasingly require social capital, sometimes more than physical or human capital, to achieve development objectives. Organizations now prefer leaders who not only value social capital but also embody it. However, employees with high levels of social capital are relatively rare, making them highly sought-after. Senior managers often face challenges in finding individuals with strong social capital (Bahrami et al., 2023). Such individuals are considered scarce resources because they possess greater abilities to solve problems effectively (Feng et al., 2024).

At the same time, crises pose fundamental challenges to established scientific paradigms and drive social and organizational change (Torkzadeh et al., 2023). Scientific revolutions emerge when

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dominant theories fail to respond to critics within an accepted paradigm, eventually giving way to new paradigms based on empirical evidence and logical reasoning (Bornholdt et al., 2011). This paradigm-shift dynamic also applies to economics: different schools of thought respond to economic questions using distinct assumptions and tools, yet crises expose weaknesses in prevailing theories and accelerate paradigm changes in policymaking. For instance, Iran's recent economic crisis—driven by currency fluctuations—highlighted structural deficiencies in policy and governance, undermining the government's ability to finance projects and manage the economy (Chen, 2003).

Defining crisis precisely in quantitative or qualitative terms is difficult. Scholars typically rely on its symptoms, yet these may obscure underlying crises. Crises are not simply one-sided threats; in some cases, they emerge as challenges to corrupt structures of power. Distinguishing crises from threats requires attention to factors such as speed, scale, motivation, organization, and leadership. Manifestations such as strikes, protests, riots, uprisings, or unrest may all represent facets of crisis, though ruling elites may dismiss them as mere labels. Crisis motivations vary—ranging from social, cultural, religious, political, and economic to reactive forms—and may overlap or transform into one another. Among the root causes, class conflict, economic demands, and social tensions are particularly significant (Nodez et al., 2022).

Class inequality often generates economic problems, which in turn trigger social crises. These crises impact individuals' behavior, leading to aggression, distrust, noncompliance with organizational rules, shirking responsibilities, and lack of participation. Environmental stressors—such as urban sewage problems affecting both the oil industry and public health—also contribute to crises. Social crises lead to job insecurity, unstable employment, and a sense of anomie among workers (Taleghani et al., 2020). In Iran, demographic shifts, structural inefficiencies, urbanization, globalization, and rising education levels have all intensified social crises. The most critical of these are generational and value-based gaps, which significantly disrupt the social fabric (Akbari & Saffarinia, 2024).

Given these challenges, examining the effects of social crises on the social capital of oil industry employees in Ahvaz is essential. Identifying and analyzing the root causes of crisis-generating factors provides insight into how social capital may be weakened or strengthened within organizational contexts.

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Material and Methods

The present study aimed to develop a sociological model to explain the impact of socio-economic crises on the social capital of employees in the Ahvaz oil industry. Since the primary purpose of applied research is not to generate new theory but rather to test and utilize existing knowledge, this study was classified as applied research. The findings are intended to inform decision-makers and stakeholders. Accordingly, the research design employed an exploratory mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative findings were used to complement and enrich the quantitative results.

The study population in the qualitative phase consisted of managers, experts, and experienced employees of the Ahvaz oil industry at various organizational levels. Given the limited number of highly skilled experts, purposive sampling was used, and in-depth interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. After coding, categorizing concepts, and examining interrelationships, saturation was reached with 20 interviews, as no new codes emerged. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic profile of interviewees

No.	Gender	Education	Age	Work Experience (years)
1	Male	M.A.	35	13
2	Female	B.A.	28	4
3	Male	M.A.	46	17
4	Male	Diploma	33	4
5	Female	B.A.	34	12
6	Female	B.A.	27	3
7	Male	B.A.	36	4
8	Male	B.A.	37	7
9	Female	B.A.	38	8
10	Female	M.A.	36	4
11	Male	B.A.	58	14
12	Female	Associate	24	2
13	Male	M.A.	38	15
14	Male	B.A.	33	4
15	Female	M.A.	28	4
16	Male	M.A.	43	17
17	Female	B.A.	26	3
18	Male	B.A.	33	4
19	Male	M.A.	39	13
20	Female	M.A.	27	5

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In the quantitative phase, the statistical population comprised all employees of the Ahvaz oil industry (N = 42,000). The required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, the minimum required sample was estimated at 381 participants, selected through simple random sampling.

Based on its objectives and nature, this study was analytical, fundamental in scope, and employed a *mixed-methods approach*. The qualitative strand followed grounded theory methodology through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The quantitative strand relied on descriptive and inferential statistics, using a researcher-developed questionnaire derived from the qualitative findings.

Primary data were collected through fieldwork (interviews and surveys), while secondary data were obtained from library resources, including books, academic journals, theses, and reputable scientific databases.

Qualitative data were analyzed using MAXQDA software to code and categorize interview transcripts. Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS-24, applying both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Results

The descriptive findings indicated that 74.2% of the sample were men and 25.8% were women. To examine the normality of the data, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was applied. The results confirmed that the data followed a normal distribution, permitting the use of parametric tests.

Research Question 1: What is the status of social capital in the organization under study?

To answer this question, the first section of the distributed questionnaire (social capital scale) was analyzed. This instrument consisted of 10 items measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high). Each respondent could therefore obtain a total score between 10 and 100. The average score was then converted to a 1–10 index, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social capital. According to the standardized scale, a score of **7** is considered the critical threshold: scores ≥ 7 represent high social capital, while scores < 7 indicate low social capital.

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Table 2. One-sample t-test results for social capital

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	p-value	df
Social Capital Score	380	6.713	1.428	0.733	-3.913	0.000	379

As shown in Table 2, the mean level of social capital among employees in the Ahvaz oil industry is moderate to low, significantly below the critical threshold.

Gender Differences in Social Capital

To compare levels of social capital between men and women, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

Table 3. Independent t-test results for social capital by gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t	df	p-value
Men	282	6.358	1.369	-1.376	9.051	378	0.000
Women	98	7.734	1.060				

The results indicate a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between male and female employees, with women reporting higher levels of social capital.

Age Differences in Social Capital

To investigate differences across age groups, a one-way ANOVA was performed.

Table 4. One-way ANOVA results for social capital by age group

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	390.153	4	38.347	23.181	0.000
Within Groups	345.620	375	1.654		
Total	734.773	379			

The results show a significant effect of age ($p < 0.001$), indicating that social capital levels vary meaningfully across different age groups.

Educational Differences in Social Capital

A one-way ANOVA was also used to test for differences across educational levels.

Table 5. One-way ANOVA results for social capital by education

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	188.948	4	47.237	30.291	0.000
Within Groups	584.786	375	1.559		
Total	733.774	379			

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The analysis revealed a highly significant relationship ($p < 0.001$) between educational level and social capital.

Employment Type Differences in Social Capital

Differences in social capital across employment types were also examined with one-way ANOVA.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA results for social capital by employment type

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	172.785	4	43.196	26.955	0.000
Within Groups	600.949	375	1.603		
Total	773.734	379			

The results suggest significant variation in social capital by employment status.

Work Experience Differences in Social Capital

Finally, social capital was compared across groups with different years of service using one-way ANOVA.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA results for social capital by work experience

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	175.062	4	43.766	27.414	0.000
Within Groups	598.672	375	1.596		
Total	773.734	379			

The results confirm a significant relationship between years of service and social capital ($p < 0.001$).

Qualitative Results

To address the qualitative research question, a qualitative research approach was employed, and data were collected through in-depth interviews. The following section presents the analysis of the interview data in response to the guiding question of the study:

What factors influence social capital during social crises?

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The interview transcripts were coded using MAXQDA software. The identified codes, along with selected participant quotations as supporting evidence, were organized into five thematic categories (Tables 8–12).

Table 8. Content Analysis of the Definition and Dimensions of Social Capital

1.	Social capital is generated through the formation and establishment of values, norms, traditions, customs, and rules in a spontaneous manner within reciprocal social relations. → *Facilitating active participation in social capital* (Frequency = 22, p = 0.000)
2.	Social capital is linked to diverse pathways, particularly the dimensions of health and social security. → *Pathways of social capital in relation to health and security* (Frequency = 5, p = 0.000)
3.	Social capital entails emotional support and other affective dimensions such as respect, kindness, and behavioral regulation. → *Emotional support* (Frequency = 8, p = 0.001)
4.	Social capital represents a collective attribute of social groups rather than individuals, encompassing shared experiences, trust, and proper relationships. → *Collective resource in social capital* (Frequency = 17, p = 0.002)
5.	Social trust constitutes a dimension of social capital achieved through psychological mechanisms and adequate support. → *Social trust* (Frequency = 12, p = 0.000)

Table 9. Content Analysis of Crises Affecting Social Capital (Crisis Definition)

1.	Crisis is a broad concept that applies to individuals, groups, systems, actions, behaviors, and even organizations. → *Application of crisis* (Frequency = 24, p = 0.003)
2.	Crisis refers to unstable and uncertain conditions. → *Crisis definition and unfavorable conditions* (Frequency = 12, p = 0.026)
3.	A social crisis emerges when societal problems jeopardize normal functioning. → *Emergence of social crisis* (Frequency = 26, p = 0.000)

Table 10. Content Analysis of Crises Affecting Social Capital (Crisis Impacts)

1.	During a social crisis, all those trained as professional social workers or community helpers influence social capital. → *Impact of crisis on social workers* (Frequency = 21, p = 0.000)
2.	A key psychological consequence of adverse events is stress. → *Mental health impact* (Frequency = 31, p = 0.000)
3.	Mass media play a critical role during crises and serve as one of the most important sources of information. → *Role of mass media* (Frequency = 29, p = 0.001)
4.	Given the population's vulnerability to natural hazards and environmental incidents (case study: Ahvaz oil industry staff), fostering social capital and enhancing citizen participation significantly improves program implementation and planning for industrial development. → *Environmental hazards and risks* (Frequency = 15, p = 0.001)

Table 11. Content Analysis of Economic Factors Generating Crises

1.	Unemployment is one of the most alarming economic challenges affecting social capital and represents the root cause of many social problems. → *Unemployment* (Frequency = 30, p = 0.000)
2.	Financial crises and the bankruptcy of economic units can cause substantial losses at both micro and macro levels. → *Corporate bankruptcy* (Frequency = 25, p = 0.023)
3.	Economic crises impact government budgets primarily through reduced foreign exchange revenues and exports. → *Financial crisis and government budget* (Frequency = 20, p = 0.002)

Table 12. Content Analysis of the Role of social media in Crises

1.	Social media disseminate news and events rapidly and accurately, thereby enhancing interpersonal connections. → *Superior media role* (Frequency = 16, p = 0.001)
2.	Promoting interpersonal, group, and democratic interactions is a key function of social media platforms. → *Enhancement of interpersonal interaction* (Frequency = 24, p = 0.004)
3.	Cultural foresight and media management foster more effective social relations. → *Cultural management* (Frequency = 29, p = 0.002)

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Discussion

This study investigated the overarching hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between social crises and the social capital of employees. To test this, three sub-hypotheses were examined. First, the results confirmed that economic crises significantly affect the social capital of employees in the Ahvaz oil industry. This finding aligns with the works of Bahrami et al. (2023) and Carmen et al. (2022). The evidence suggests that social capital plays a critical role in shaping mental health, as it encompasses trust, reciprocity, and supportive networks that buffer the effects of stress and uncertainty. Prior studies in both developed and developing countries highlight the importance of social capital in promoting well-being and social stability, even among vulnerable groups such as migrants (Fathi & Ebrahimi, 2023; Nikrouy et al., 2025; Nodez et al., 2022).

Second, natural and environmental disasters were shown to have a substantial impact on employees' social capital. As the literature indicates, such hazards disrupt natural and social systems, with long-term consequences for community cohesion and trust. Social capital—through trust, reciprocity, collective participation, and shared norms—can act as a shield against the destructive consequences of disasters, facilitating effective recovery and reorganization. This reinforces the argument that social capital may be even more crucial than physical or financial capital in ensuring resilience and sustainable development (Chetty et al., 2022).

Third, social media platforms were found to influence the dynamics of crises and their effects on social capital. While social media can foster participation, information exchange, and collective action, it also carries risks such as misinformation, rumor-spreading, and manipulation of public opinion. These dual effects highlight the need for more deliberate strategies to harness the positive potential of digital networks while minimizing their destabilizing consequences. The findings parallel previous studies emphasizing the transformative role of modern communication technologies in redefining social relationships and collective behaviors.

Overall, the results point to the multifaceted role of crises—economic, environmental, and digital—in shaping the level and quality of social capital among oil industry employees. Strengthening social capital, therefore, emerges as a critical strategy for enhancing organizational resilience, supporting employee well-being, and sustaining productivity in the face of recurring crises.

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Based on the findings, several recommendations can be drawn. First, policy-makers and senior experts should regard the results as both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of social capital, applying them to interventions targeting employee well-being. Organizations should also design incentive systems—both material and non-material—to promote more active participation among oil industry employees. Furthermore, future studies should expand the scope by including broader samples across different industries, employ advanced statistical methods such as structural equation modeling, and consider mediating variables like age, education, and employment status. These approaches would enhance the generalizability of findings and provide a deeper understanding of how social crises interact with social capital in various organizational contexts.

Like any study, this research faced certain limitations. First, not all participants were fully cooperative in responding to the survey questions, which may have affected the comprehensiveness of the data. Second, the results are specific to the oil industry in Ahvaz and may not directly generalize to other sectors or regions. Finally, the reliance on a five-point Likert questionnaire for data collection represents an inherent methodological limitation, as it may not fully capture the complexities and nuances of employees' perceptions of social capital under crisis conditions.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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