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**What Is Social Capital?**

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# What Is Social Capital?

## Abstract

This paper addresses some of the definitional and methodological issues around the concept of social capital. This concept has been appearing more and more frequently across a range of sociological fields of enquiry, yet its meaning is ill defined and its use, in many cases, lacks methodological rigour. A brief literature review of the use of the term is provided, as well as discussion of its meaning and the possibility of measuring its existence empirically. Conclusions are drawn as to the usefulness of the term and the possibilities for improving its methodological and analytical validity.

## Key words

social capital  
civic society  
trust  
networks  
norms  
social inclusion

## Introduction

In her Boyer Lecture, Eva Cox (1995, p. 17) stated: 'Social capital should be the pre-eminent and most valued form of capital as it provides the basis on which we build a truly civil society'. Yet, in an age of economic rationalism, the value of a civil society and of the social strengths which underlie such a society are increasingly ignored in much populist discourse. This is despite the fact that research has indicated an important relationship between stores of social capital and positive outcomes for health (House, Landis and Umberson 1988; Baum 1999), education (Coleman 1988; Teachman, Paasch and Carver 1997), effective governance (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993), sustainable development (World Bank 1999), economic growth (Knack and Keefer 1997) and human wellbeing (Bullen and Onyx 1999; World Bank 1998).

So why is it that such a 'miracle' cure for myriad social problems has not been wholeheartedly embraced by the world at large? Can we really solve the world's problems by saying 'hello' to our neighbours and joining voluntary organisations?

Part of the problem with using social capital as a measure of a civil society is that the term itself, having been coined way back in 1916 by an American social reformer, L. J. Hanifan, has been ill defined, loosely applied and widely interpreted to have currency in numerous different contexts and situations. The term was sporadically used throughout the twentieth century (for example, Jane Jacobs (1964) and Glen Loury (1977) (see Putnam 2000, pp. 19-20)), but really came into its own only in the mid-1980s when Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) used it to examine the social context of education. A decade later, Putnam brought the term to even more prominence when he used it to explain differences in Italian civic engagement (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993) and then turned it onto the American situation to examine the decline in civic and social engagement in that country. Since then, a plethora of articles has appeared, each applying the social capital model to fundamentally different social problems. There appears to be little consistency in the definition, use, application and analytical validity of the concept in such methodological studies.

Many of these studies have used Putnam's (1995b, p. 667) definition as their starting point, that is, social capital as the 'features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives'. Such intangible features are relatively easy to describe, but comparatively harder to measure. Measurement of social capital and its use as an analytical tool for assessing effectiveness of development programs in education, health, civics and economics is affected by the researcher's choice of context within which to examine relationships (family, neighbourhood, region or nation), by the heterogeneous or homogeneous nature of the subject group, by the inclusion of informal as well as formal relationships and by the nature of horizontal and vertical divisions within society. There is also the question of 'bridging' social capital in contrast to 'bonding' social capital, and the difficulties introduced by the problem of detrimental or perverse social capital (c.f. Cox and Caldwell 2000, who say that if it isn't good, it isn't social capital). As some other commentators have also pointed out, much of the reporting on social capital measurement involves circular reasoning: social capital leads to positive social and economic outcomes, and is inferred to exist from the same results (Portes 1998).

There is also some validity to the idea that the concept of social capital is not something which has developed mainly in the last twenty years, but rather is an evolution of the 1970s commitment to 'empowerment' and the 'community capacity' of the 1980s (Labonte 1999, pp. 1-2). It has also drawn on broad based sociological research in the field of social network analysis (Scott 1991). If we consider social capital as something which describes social networks, it becomes a much more accessible concept, and one more deeply embedded in broad based understanding of social issues, as well as one which has not just appeared on the scene but has had ongoing research applications. It seems useful to begin an investigation into the recent applications of the term 'social capital' with a review of its uses in a variety of published sources and studies.

## Literature Review

Leaving aside, for the moment, the sporadic appearance of the term prior to the 1980s, any literature review must begin with the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) defines social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. Actors (individuals) have varying degrees of access to these resources and, within the field of social relationships, struggle to maximise their own access at the expense of others. In this struggle, the possession of 'social capital endows holders with advantages and opportunities accruing through membership in certain communities and it is an important means whereby social inequality and social exclusion are reproduced' (McClenaghan 2000: 568). This competitive nature of social capital is something which many later researchers appear to have conveniently forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Two years after Bourdieu's paper appeared, American sociologist James Coleman reported on the concept of social capital in studies of educational attainment. In his schema, social capital is defined as 'a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether personal or corporate actors – within that structure'

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in the rush to embrace social capital as a useful concept for the formulation of social policy, this aspect of the struggle for power through control of networks and relationships has been ignored or overlooked by almost all later commentators in the field.

(Coleman 1988, s. 98). The structural element is important here, as in this definition social capital exists in relationships between individuals, not in individuals themselves. Much of his work, therefore, is focused on social capital within the family or household group, rather than at community or national level. Because of his educational focus, much of his work is also directed at the transformation of social capital into human capital, in contrast to Bourdieu's work which concentrates on the transformation of social capital into economic advantage.

Social capital really hit the big time with the publication of Robert Putnam's book (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993) on the role of civic participation in the success or otherwise of Italian regional governments. His definition is the one most often quoted by later writers: 'features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1993, p. 41). In this definition, such features are observed through the involvement of individuals in social groups outside the family or kin group, in particular, voluntary involvement in social groups such as sports clubs and choirs. This change in emphasis from the individual as holder of social capital (Bourdieu) to the group (Coleman and Putnam) marks a subtle but important shift in thinking. Putnam (1995a, 1995b, 2000) then applied his thesis to the American situation where an apparently alarming drop in the rate of civic participation – and, hence, in social capital – as measured through group membership, voter turnout and so on, was noted.

Putnam also noted a number of ancillary features to the concept. In particular, he draws out differences between:

- Horizontally and vertically integrated networks;
- Formal and informal associations;
- Strong and weak ties; and
- Bonding and bridging forms of social capital.

Thus, social capital in Italy is stronger in the north where horizontal ties are stronger, that is, where there is 'widespread participation in group activities, social trust and cooperation'; by contrast, the south is characterised by vertical social relations, consisting of 'a concentration of power by landowners, less social participation and a more individual allocation of opportunities' (Pope 2000, p. 3). Putnam concludes from this data that communities became rich because they were civic, not that they became civic because they were rich (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993). This conclusion has been of particular interest to later researchers who have been interested in improving economic outcomes by building social capital, in contrast to Bourdieu's conclusions which demonstrate that economic structures underlie the development of social capital.

Putnam (2000, pp. 22-3) also makes a distinction between social groups and associations which encourage strong social ties within relatively homogeneous groups ('bonding' social capital) and those which involve relatively weak ties across social divides ('bridging' social capital). Each of these types of social capital can be called upon by individuals according to differing needs and social circumstances. For example, strong social ties within a small group can be utilised in case of an emergency to provide financial assistance or help during an illness. Weak social ties across a broader range of the social spectrum may be of more use when one is networking for job hunting purposes (Granovetter 1973). In all cases, measurement of social capital across and between these groups is based in formal structures of association. Informal networks (neighbourhoods, networks of friends) have less often been surveyed because of the difficulty of measuring such groups (Pope 2000, p. 5).

Also in contrast to Putnam's championing of groups and associations for building social capital – and, hence, financial capital – is the work of Mancur Olson (1982), an economist whose theories are based on the idea that associational membership is disadvantageous for the individual and, conversely, that long-term build up of too many interest groups is inimical to political stability and economic development. Krishna and Shrader (1999) have used this dichotomy to effect in their Social Capital Assessment Tool (SCAT) prepared for the World Bank Conference on Social Capital and Poverty Reduction. They divide social capital into two levels, macro and micro. The macro level (after Olson) involves the institutional context within which formal relationships and structures such as government and the legal system operate. This infrastructural level of organisations is not really used by earlier commentators, although some recent researchers have begun to include such structures in their analyses (for example, Stone 2001, pp.14-15; McClenaghan 2000, p. 570; Lam 1996; Evans 1996; Grootaert 1997). The micro level refers to horizontal organisations and social networks and consists of two strands: cognitive (trust, solidarity and reciprocity) and structural (composition and practices of local level institutions) (Krishna and Shrader 1999, pp. 9-10). This micro level of cognitive and structural social capital, which operates at family, household and community levels, is the one most commonly referred to in methodological research.

Recent work seems to relate back in almost all cases to one of the three definitions given above – Bourdieu's, Coleman's or Putnam's – or to a blend of all three. Winter (2000c, p. 38) proposes the following as a broad definition encompassing the three theoretical positions: 'Social relations of mutual benefit, characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity'.

Fukuyama's work on the idea of trust as an underpinning for economic success uses the broadest application of the idea of social capital:

Social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it. It can be embodied in the smallest and most basic social group, the family, as well as the largest of all groups, the nation, and in all other groups in between. Social capital differs from other forms of human capital insofar as it is usually created and transmitted through cultural mechanisms like religion, tradition, or historical habit (Fukuyama 1995, p. 26).

In a more recent work, he broadens his definition still further, but adds an interesting coda regarding the beneficial nature of social capital, describing it as 'an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals' (Fukuyama 1999, p. 1). What is more useful in this later article is Fukuyama's analysis of the problem of how to measure social capital; the two more common approaches being counting memberships of groups and associations and surveying levels of trust and civic engagement (for example, Inglehart 1999). Fukuyama's (1999, p. 9) contribution to this debate is to suggest a third possible measure, applicable to private companies, which is to compare their economic worth before and after take-overs by other companies, since the take-over company is putting a value on its own social capital as measured by its ability to provide better management. The utility of this measure in a social science rather than economic context would appear to be rather limited.

Winter's (2000a) edited collection provides a useful summary of the concept as it is currently being used in the Australian context. In his review article on definitions, he draws attention to two crucial issues. The first is the broad application of the concept in fields of research as diverse as economics, public health, sociology, education and

child development. The research agendas, methodologies and directions of these diverse fields contribute to the fragmentation of the social capital concept and definitions. The second is the fundamental issue of the ontological status of social capital across two dimensions: whether it exists as the property of individuals or of groups, and whether it can be limited to beneficial or 'common good' outcomes. Winter avoids making a decision on these questions by employing a generalised definition: 'Social capital refers to our social connectedness, the way we interrelate with one another' (Winter 2000b, p. 15).

Cox and Caldwell (2000, p. 47), in the same volume, take the view that social capital is something which is by definition mutually beneficial – the dark side of social capital they call 'solidarity' but not social capital per se. In this definition, 'bad social capital' is an oxymoron. The problem with this type of moral definition is that it precludes the possibility for rigorous and objective analysis of relationships to determine their social capital status. My belief that a relationship is 'good' has no more methodological validity than your belief that the same relationship is 'bad'.

This situation is explicitly addressed by Hogan and Owen (2000, p. 79) in the next paper: '[w]hile it is impossible to have a theory-free concept of a social phenomenon, loosely controlled functional definitions of the kind deployed by Coleman invite conceptual imprecision by failing to offer a clear distinction between what social capital *is* and what it *does*'. The paper offers a precise if wordy definition/description of seven broad aspects of social capital (Hogan and Owen 2000, pp. 81-8) and goes on to offer a measurement tool for one of these aspects, namely, trust. Measuring other social capital indicators seems more problematic.

One other very important reference for social capital in the literature is the work of the World Bank. Social capital is one of four indicators in its wealth accounting system (Winter 2000c, p. 17) and as such is frequently referred to in writings on development and poverty: 'Social capital is defined [by the World Bank] as the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of societies that enable people to coordinate action to achieve desired goals.'

The World Bank Social Capital Initiative sees social capital as 'the internal social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that governs interactions among people and the institutions in which they are embedded'. Therefore, like physical, natural and human capital, sustainable growth cannot take place without social capital (World Bank 1998, p. i). The problem with this definition is that it seems closer to an understanding of 'cultural difference' in an anthropological sense, rather than being focused on the relationships and networks which characterise social capital definitions in more homogeneous contexts.

## **Problems with the Concept of Social Capital**

Much of the use to which social capital has been put as a research tool has been predicated on the understanding that, as in Putnam's definition ('social organisations ... for mutual *benefit*' [emphasis added]), social capital is A Good Thing. This, of course, raises the problem of what is to be done with 'networks, norms and trust' which are demonstrably not in the interest of wider society, even if they may be of benefit to particular individuals engaged in them. Such relationships may be evidenced in groups such as America's Ku Klux Klan, Britain's National Front, the Italian Mafia and countless other racist, sexist, homophobic and fascist organisations. Nor is it always easy for those in a pluralistic society to distinguish between organisations which act in a beneficial way for society at large (for example, charities conducted by the Catholic

Church) and those which support exclusionary and conservative/reactionary social attitudes (for example, the Catholic Church).

It is sometimes argued that social capital differs from other forms of capital because it leads to bad results like hate groups or inbred bureaucracies. This does not disqualify it as a form of capital; physical capital can take the form of assault rifles or tasteless entertainment, while human capital can be used to devise new ways of torturing people. Since societies have laws to prevent the production of many social 'bads', we can presume that most legal forms of social capital are no less 'goods' than the other forms of capital insofar as they help people achieve their aims (Fukuyama 1999, p. 2).

It is important, then, to be aware of the following four indicators of negative social capital:

- Exclusion of outsiders;
- Excess claims on group members;
- Restrictions on individual freedoms; and
- Downward levelling norms (Portes 1998, p. 13).

These limitations are particularly important in the analysis of social capital within subgroups that make up a larger heterogeneous (multicultural) society, such as exists in contemporary Melbourne. Assessing the level of social capital within particular ethnic groups and between individual members of such groups and the wider society is a critical issue, as 'relatively homogeneous associations in heterogeneous societies may strengthen trust and cooperative norms within an ethnic group, but weaken trust and cooperation between those groups' (Knack and Keefer 1997, p. 12).

Trenchant criticism of the social capital concept is also offered by Stephen Leeder (1998), Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney:

While social capital appears to be built up by participation in social life, campaigners on the right can use the idea as an excuse to send women back to the kitchen in bare feet, accumulating social capital for and through the family by their devoted contribution to child production and care at home. The World Bank has taken the idea of social capital to its heart and may be using it in distorting its investment conditions required of developing countries. Conservative governments may invoke it in an argument to return the care of chronic patients to families, for as they assume more responsibility for looking after their own ill, surely good things will spin off – social capital surpluses – for society. This is a mistaken and inverted view of the nature of social capital which should be there as a structural and contextual feature and not yet another demand placed on those with the least resources. So the term social capital has serious potential drawbacks.

'Communitarian advocacy is a legitimate political stance: it is not good social science' (Portes 1998, p. 19).

Caution must also be applied to the examination of indicators and the problem of measuring social capital. There are four important factors which must be taken into account in any attempt to assess holdings of social capital:

- Social capital indicators lack clear definition;

- Collective social capital is not the same as individual social capital;
- Presence of social capital may not always result in positive outcomes (*pace* Cox and Caldwell);
- Solutions based on an individualised notion of social capital may not work or may reinforce inequality (Pope 2000, pp. 7-8).

Thus, it is crucial to develop methodologically rigorous measurement tools to assess levels of social capital and determine its comparative existence across social groups and within groups over time

## Measuring Social Capital

It can be seen from the foregoing brief overview of the uses of, and difficulties with, the concept of social capital that it generally lacks methodological rigour and a broadly agreed upon context and application. There have been attempts to apply social capital analytically, however, and to introduce some measure of theoretical validity to its use. One of the earliest application of the concept in an analytical situation was Coleman's work, later replicated and expanded by others such as Teachman, Paasch and Carver (1997) in the field of education. In this work, social capital was seen to reside within families and was used to explain differences in educational attainment which could not be simply reduced to other variables such as race or socioeconomic position. For example, Teachman's research demonstrates a negative relationship between attending a Catholic school and likelihood of dropping out before graduation. This situation is explained by the greater social capital held by families who belong to the same religious group as well as having children attending the same school.

In a similar vein, Putnam's (1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2000) work on the civic involvement of Americans looks at the decreasing associational membership of citizens and correlates it with a decrease in trust in government, voter turnout, religious participation and volunteering. Since all these activities can be seen to have a basis in social trust, norms and network behaviours, the decline in their popularity can be attributed to a decline in stocks of social capital (by Putnam's definition). However, as Levi (1996, p. 1) points out, however, Putnam doesn't explain the mechanisms by which civic associations create social capital, especially in its guise of interpersonal trust.

Very similar work has been done in the field of health research. House, Landis and Umberson don't use the term 'social capital', but their work on the link between social relationships and health is theoretically identical to that described by Baum on the implications of social capital for health promotion, that is, people with stronger social networks (or social capital) have better health outcomes than those without. A recent mental health promotion draws very strongly on the same material in its promotion of 'social connectedness' as part of a strategy called 'Together we do better' (VicHealth n.d.).

The work done by Bullen and Onyx (1999) in New South Wales is useful in that it at least attempts to define some of the qualities which inhere in social capital. Their survey of five communities uses a measure of social capital consisting of eight factors:

- Participation in local community;
- Proactivity in a social context;
- Feelings of trust and safety;
- Neighbourhood connections;

- Family and friends connections;
- Tolerance of diversity;
- Value of life; and
- Work connections.

The usefulness of this is that questions can be framed so that comparative results can actually be measured as a broad holding of social capital. The difficulty is that the measures do not co-vary, so that comparisons must somehow be made between, for example, a society which is high in levels of local participation and feelings of trust and safety but low in tolerance of diversity (for example, a country town) with a society which is low in local participation and feelings of trust, but high in tolerance of diversity (for example, an inner city suburb). While this schema goes some way towards setting a framework for analysis, it lacks a solid theoretical underpinning which would lend it broader analytical validity.

Other recent Australian research uses similar measurement tools. The Australian Bureau of Statistics is working towards incorporating social capital measures into its community surveys, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies has recently published on measures of social capital within the Australian community (Stone 2001). Like Bullen and Onyx, both these attempts use survey and questionnaire techniques to assess levels of trust, neighbourliness and networks of relationships as they are held by individuals and then aggregate these data to provide assessment of group-wide stocks of social capital. While such measures can be internally coherent, they cannot provide comparative material for other studies that use even slightly different survey tools.

Of course, one way around this problem is to design large-scale surveys which apply the same questionnaires to diverse communities in numerous countries. The World Values Survey (Inglehart 1999) and the SCAT developed by Krishna and Shrader (1999) for the World Bank are two examples of such projects. In particular, this latter study is useful as it begins to address the underlying issues of what social capital is, where it resides and how best it can be used, increased, distributed and analysed.

An even more comprehensive attempt to unpack the variables of social capital has been undertaken by Michael Woolcock (1998), working in the area of economic development. His elegant yet comprehensive framework classifies the variety of dimensions which can be assessed as comprising social capital, taking into account many of the aspects touched on but not fully elaborated by earlier writers. His scheme acknowledges that social capital has four aspects: micro and macro level relationships (what other writers have described as formal and informal relationships), seen in economic terms as vertical integration or top-down effects; and autonomy and embeddedness relationships (what other writers have described as weak and strong ties or bridging and bonding capital), seen as horizontal integration or bottom-up effects. These four aspects combine to explain four dimensions in which social capital can be seen to exist, and within which it can perhaps more easily be measured and assessed. These dimensions are summarised thus:

	<b>Micro</b>	<b>Macro</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Linkage (extra-community networks)	Organisational integrity (institutional coherence)
<b>Embeddedness</b>	Integration (intra-community ties)	Synergy (state-society relations)

Woolcock goes on to describe the situations which result from social groups having lower or higher levels of each dimension. For example, he describes a group which is high in integration but low in linkage as suffering 'amoral familism' (that is, family before all). A group with high linkage but low integration is in a situation of 'anomie' or lack of norms (too much freedom, not enough community). A group with low levels of both integration and linkage suffers 'amoral individualism' (for example, homeless people in a modern urban environment). Similar examples are present for variance in levels of organisational integrity and synergy. The value of this framework for analysis of the effectiveness of social capital is that it describes social capital as something to be optimised rather than something to be maximised (Woolcock 1998, p. 158). It also avoids the problem of having to locate social capital in particular and exclusive levels, such as individual or family or neighbourhood or society. This arrangement is able to encompass all the levels, but tease them apart enough so that their complex interrelationships can be assessed and interpreted.

## Conclusion

It can be seen from the foregoing discussion that the concept of social capital is neither new nor well understood. It suffers as an analytical tool from a lack of precision in definition and application. It is often the subject of circular reasoning, whereby its consequences or outcomes are confused with social capital itself. Appropriate levels for analysis of social capital have usually been ignored and the question of whether it exists in individuals or groups is unresolved. The context of investigations ranges through families, education, communities (physical and virtual), work and organisations, democracy and governance, collective action and economic development (Winter 2000c, p. 17). There are those who use the term only if its outcomes can be assessed as contributing to an undefined (and undefinable) sum total of 'social good'. Despite these problems, the use of the term and the concept of social capital is increasing in academic and public discourse at an exponential rate.

Analytical rigour of the type introduced by Woolcock is a step in the right direction for researchers who wish to refine social capital into an incisive and powerful measurement tool. It is clear that it is not a simple concept, nor is it a synonym for 'trust' or 'networks' or even 'norms'. It inheres in the functional relationships between people within families, communities, neighbourhoods, workplaces and polities, as well as between members of these diverse social groups. Assessing the relationships across such a range of groups is complex and time consuming. Nonetheless, it is critical for an understanding of social capital as a complex, multifaceted dimension of human social life.

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