

What role for social capital in family policy

— and how does it measure up?

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Abstract

This paper describes the recent adoption of social capital into Australian public policy, and perceived potential of social capital for government, business, community and for family life — yet argues that a gulf between social capital theory and empirical understandings of the concept threatens to undermine the realisation of social capital's potential. The paper presents a conceptually sound and theoretically informed measurement framework for empirical investigation of social capital, and sets out a research agenda for interrogating the value of social capital for Australian families, communities, markets and government.

Introduction

Social capital can be understood quite simply as networks of social relations characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity. The essence of social capital is quality social relations. It is the quality of relationships, understood through the use of the concept 'social capital', which affects the capacity of people to come together to collectively resolve problems they face in common (Stewart-Weeks and Richardson 1998: 2), and achieve outcomes of mutual benefit (Lochner et al 1999).

Thus, social capital can be understood as a resource to collective action, which may lead to a broad range of outcomes, of varying social scale. Understanding social capital in this way enables it to be seen in relatively neutral terms. In this light, social capital promises something for everyone — at least in theory. Government, business, the community and family life can all be said to benefit from environments rich in social capital, in ways outlined below.

As is demonstrated throughout this paper, however, the potential benefits of social capital — and the effectiveness of policy facilitation of these benefits — are threatened by a gulf which exists between social capital theory, and the ways in which social capital is typically researched and/or featured in public policy. This gulf may

ultimately result in a failure to realise the benefits of social capital, or even in the destruction of existing social capital through misdirected social capital policy interventions.

Structure of this paper

This paper first outlines some of the potential benefits of social capital for government, business, communities and family life. Next the paper demonstrates via review of the international, and scant Australian literature available, that a gulf exists between social capital theory and empirical understandings of the concept. This gulf, it is shown, has resulted in confusion about the meaning, measurement, outcomes and relevance of social capital and threatens to undermine the realisation of its potential.

In an attempt to bridge this gulf, the paper concludes by presenting a conceptually sound and theoretically informed measurement framework for empirical investigation and understanding of social capital, and sets out a research agenda for interrogating the value of social capital for Australian families, communities, business and policy.

Government-business-community and family: the potential of social capital

Governance and public policy

Social capital discourse has taken off at a time in which Australian public policy is carving out a new style of relationship between government, business, community and family life. To a large extent this new relationship is in line with Third Way politics (Giddens 1998). This 'Third Way' abandons old style left-right divides, emphasizing instead a model of social democracy in which community is central. The motivation for a new style of governance stems largely from a need to redress the perceived imbalance between government, market and community.

In the Australian setting this new style of governance is linked to: the promotion of devolved, 'small' government featuring a shift from government regulation and control of public assets, towards privatisation; a move away from blanket approaches to all, towards local solutions to local problems; and ultimately a shift in responsibility from government, towards an environment of partnerships and social coalitions. Partnerships and social coalitions are based upon principles of community and individual 'self reliance' and mutual obligations.

Social capital plays a central role in the government's social coalition. In the midst of a return to the social, 'social capital' is seen as the glue that holds communities together; as the 'oil' of civil society. In effect, social capital is looked to as enabling of an environment based in partnerships in which government acts as facilitator. Hence it is no surprise that social capital features prominently in current government policy — though not without critique. Some left commentators argue, for example, that the third way may simply legitimise state withdrawal from welfare and service delivery (Brennan 1998).

The business interest

A focus upon partnership promises for business a genuine place within the government — business — community coalition. This context has seen the re-emergence of business as a social contributor, involving an identity shift from marketeer to corporate citizen. New style 'good corporate citizenship' carries with it an expectation of behaviour above and beyond simple philanthropy and charity (Murphy and Thomas 2000). Of course, not all businesses aspire to this role, but among those that do, the rationale, drivers and benefits for this shift are at least three-fold, according to Murphy and Thomas (2000: 138-139):

- *Profitability and durability* — Business operates best in democratic, well-ordered societies, thus business will aim to contribute to civil society (said to be on the decrease, discussed below), rather than undermine it via business for profit only;
- *Expectation* — Business is changing in response to public expectations as well as the expectations of staff that organisations will act in the interests of society;
- *Reputation* — Business is reacting to regain the trust and good reputation it enjoyed prior to the last 30 years or so of public scrutiny which have highlighted corporate fraud and which have led to a decline of trust in business.

The model of 'good corporate citizen' these authors present is founded upon social responsibility, community integration and reputation building. This proactive model of corporate citizenry is encouraged by the state. The Prime Minister's Round Table on Business and Community Partnerships and its associated awards for excellence in community business partnerships, for example, is a public display of this encouragement. The program rewards partnerships which focus upon creative solutions to local and regional 'problems', and which demonstrate qualities of commitment and trust (FaCS 2000: 1)

As well, in addition to the bottom dollar concerns involved with good corporate citizenship, social capital is said to increase business profitability in and of itself by reducing the need for resort to legal contract and regulation in day to day transactions (Bourdieu 1986).

Community concerns

'Community' intersects with discussions of social capital in two distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive ways. The first relates to the 'community sector' — the mostly not-for-profit organisations involved in the day to day delivery of welfare and services. The second concerns the community at large — or what, for the sake of clarity, is referred to here as 'civil society'. Each of these concerns occupies a central position in social capital discourse (though *which* 'community' is in question is often indeterminate).

Volunteering — said to be one manifestation of social capital at work (Lyons and Fabionsson 1998) — is the traditional cornerstone of the community sector. Though the community sector is not made up entirely of volunteers, the input of voluntary work into the delivery of services is critical, especially given state withdrawal from much hands-on service delivery. Trends suggesting a decline in overall levels of voluntary work in Australia, as well as a shift in the nature of volunteering, from regular commitment to participation in one-off events such as Clean Up Australia Day, are thus

matters of concern.

In addition, in a resource-scarce, market-driven environment in which competitive tendering for service delivery funding is mandatory, the way organisations relate to one another itself becomes a focus of concern. Inter-agency trust and cooperation is necessary to ensure the survival of some organisations, and to deliver services most effectively in most communities (ACOSS 1999).

‘Civil society’ is broader than the ‘community sector’, though volunteering is an aspect of it. Civil society is also included in Third Way politics and ‘government-community-business’ partnerships. At a time in which small style, devolved governance is favoured politically, research suggesting the decline of civil society has raised alarm bells, and fuelled social capital debate. The work of Robert Putnam, particularly his (1995) claims about the decline of civic America, has focused attention on active, engaged citizenship.

In terms of public policy in Australia, urgency about reversing the tide of rural community decline in particular, has led to the development of a policy focus upon building ‘community strengths’. Social capital is positioned centrally within this framework, because of its potential to contribute to the development of strong communities, thus:

‘[S]trong family and community networks nurture children, care for those in need, and help people take up opportunities and find work. It’s about neighbours and families helping each other in times of crisis. It also involves the commitment of local volunteers who provide much-needed community services and who work on community projects. It’s about community leaders pulling their communities together in times of change.’ (Howard and Newman 2000: 2)

Social capital and family life

Though not featuring explicitly in the government-community-business triad, current policy sets forth that families are nonetheless critical to the success of this partnership.

In a public policy sense, families have been brought into the social coalition frame via the Howard Government’s (2000) Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The Strategy promotes ‘the family’, along side ‘the community’, as traditional institutions which provide the most effective source and form of social support — and relies heavily on the assumption that these institutions strengthen each other:

‘It is strong family relationships that are the vital building blocks of strong communities. In turn, it is only strong communities that have the capacity to truly engage families in economic and community life.’ (Howard and Newman 2000: 2)

Restated in social capital terms, the policy asserts that families rich in social capital will nourish stocks of social capital within their local communities, and that by living in localities rich in social capital, families will prosper.

Coincidentally, assumptions about the role of families in civil society also feature centrally in social capital literature. In a recent review of social capital and family life, Winter (2000: 5) shows the assertion that ‘family life is a bed-rock of social capital’

features unquestioningly in the work of Putnam (1995), Bourdieu (1993) and Fukuyama (1999) — some of the most influential social capital thinkers. As described by Winter (2000: 5-6):

‘There is a sense in which the role of the family has been idealised ‘as the most productive site of social capital and therefore a pillar of civic virtue and democracy’ (Putzel 1997: 945). The nature of this idealisation is that it is assumed that families will provide models of good relationships and civic virtues (Cox 1995: 28-29).’

In an attempt to make sense of the family-social capital link, Winter draws upon risk society theory (Beck 1996; Giddens 19**) to suggest that changes in norms governing family life are impacting upon family engagement in civil society, thereby contributing to declining stocks of community level social capital. In this model, the norms of individualism and uncertainty which characterise risk society are hypothesised to work against the norms of trust and reciprocity which lie at the heart of social capital (Winter 2000: 14-16). Though this is a plausible hypothesis, it is as yet untested.

Hence, while Winter has offered one possible interpretation of the family-social capital dynamic, the assumptions made about family life in both policy and social capital literature remain unfounded. Much policy and academic investment has been made on the basis of what are essentially untested, unconfirmed and undertheorised assumptions about the nature of the relationship between family life and social capital generation.

Given the weight of these assumptions, there exists an urgent need for empirical work to clarify the family-social capital, family-community dynamics. This is a point which is referred to again at the end of this paper.

In sum: the potential of social capital

Thus, while there are real gaps in our understandings of the way social capital is generated and maintained through family life, social capital theory nonetheless suggests that networks comprising norms of trust and reciprocity pose considerable potential for government, business and markets, the community and families. Perceived benefits include governance based in social coalition, a social role and maximisation of profit for business, a community sector bolstered by volunteering and inter-agency cooperation and a halt to the apparent decline in civic life.

From social capital’s potential to empirical mayhem

Theoretical understandings of social capital and its potential benefits have, however, raced ahead of much needed empirical work. The lag between social capital theory and research is such that — despite developments achieved in recent research — a gulf exists between theoretical understandings of social capital and the ways it has been measured and ‘put into practice’ in much research and policy to date (Paxton 1999; Stone 2000). The benefits of conceptualising everyday connections in terms of social capital — the ability to analyse the accumulation, transmission and reproduction of social capital — are lost in this gulf.

In a recent review, Stone (2000) identifies four key problems which have led to confusion about the meaning, measurement, outcomes and relevance of social capital. These are: first, that social capital measurement and ‘practice’ is rarely theoretically informed; second, that empirical work rarely understands social capital properly as a resource to collective action; third, that there is a general failure in empirical work to recognise social capital as a multidimensional concept; and finally, that there is a general failure to recognise that social capital will vary by network type and social scale.

Drawing on previous research, this section of the paper demonstrates how each of these four key problems impedes our understandings of social capital and family life, community vitality, business and market economies and policy making and governance. For the sake of simplicity this paper discusses how each of these problems is manifest in just one of the social spheres presented at Table 1. It is readily possible, however, to extend this discussion to fill each of the cells in Table 1, to demonstrate how each methodological problem affects our understanding of social capital across each aspect of social life.

Table 1. Summary table showing examples used to demonstrate four key problems in social capital measurement.

Family	Community	Business/Market	Government
1. Social capital ‘practice’ is not always theoretically informed	Measuring social capital within the family		
2. Failure to recognise social capital as a resource to collective action		Measuring social capital as it relates to civic engagement and civil society	
3. Failure to recognise social capital is multidimensional			Measuring social capital as it relates to economic
4. Failure to recognise that social capital will vary by network type/social scale			

Source: *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project, AIFS (2000); modified Stone (2000).

Problem 1: Social capital research and ‘practice’ is not always theoretically informed.

The implications of a failure to base empirical and policy work in social capital theory are potentially disastrous. Without a conceptual link, social capital can be anything and everything, from a repackaging of existing knowledge and concepts, to complete

misnomer and confusion (as discussed in the example presented below). This represents a serious threat to the validity of the social capital concept — in the same way that the concept ‘community’ was undermined by overuse and all-encompassing application in the 1970s and 1980s.

As Winter (2000) demonstrates, an example of these problems can be found in Coleman’s (1988) research on family based social capital. Coleman argued that social capital within the family is vital to children’s educational outcomes and thereby their future economic capital. However, Coleman’s measures of social capital are far from proximate indicators of the two key components of social capital, as theoretically understood: networks and norms. Coleman uses the ratio of parents to children in the household as a measure of the family network, and uses the frequency of discussions parents have with children about personal matters as a measure of the strength of norms of cooperation within the family. While he finds that the ratio of parents to children has an important effect on children’s educational outcomes, as Winter (2000:7) says, ‘Coleman elides between a parent child ratio variable and a family structure variable’ and therefore ‘confounds measurement of the parent-child ratio with all of the associated characteristics of sole parenthood, such as lower educational levels and poverty’. Furthermore, the frequency of discussions with parents about personal matters is a quantitative measure, ignoring the *quality* of parent-child interaction. It is not therefore a proximate measure of the norms of trust and reciprocity within the family.

The problems with Coleman’s (1988) measures of social capital have been replicated in the work of other researchers who followed him. Furstenburg and Hughes (1995) also confound social capital with family structure by using the presence of a biological father or step-father as a measure of social capital. However, unlike Coleman (1988), they find that the presence of a biological father or step-father is inconsistently related to children’s outcomes (Winter 2000).

These examples illustrate how research on family structure and family interaction can be repackaged as research on family social capital. They also illustrate how a failure to link empirical work to social capital theory can result in contradictory research findings and claims.

Problem 2: Failure to recognise social capital as a resource to collective action

Failure to recognise that social capital, properly understood, is a resource to collective action results in one of the most serious flaws in both social capital research and policy work to date.

In measurement terms, understanding social capital as a resource to action leads immediately to the need to distinguish between measures of social capital (networks, trust and reciprocity) and measures of its outcomes (action and its consequences). It is necessary to recognise empirically that understanding whether or not a social resource is available is different from understanding the consequences of having that resource or accessing that resource (Paxton 1999; Putzel 1997; Stone 2000). As Newton (1997: 578) states, social capital ‘may indeed generate valuable goods and services ... but we should not assume that it does, and we should not include such goods and benefits as part of the definition’.

Numerous social capital studies have used outcomes of social capital as indicators of social capital. While outcomes may or may not be valid indicators of social capital, these studies are rarely supported by direct empirical investigation of the relationship between the core components of social capital and the indicators they use. This raises the further tautological problem that research reliant upon an outcome of social capital as an indicator of it, will necessarily find social capital to be related to that outcome. Social capital becomes tautologically present whenever an outcome is observed (Portes 1998; Durlauf 1999).

A key example of the failure to separate measures of social capital from its outcomes is the common use of community or civic engagement as an indicator of the social capital of a particular community. Community based social capital is more than simply voluntary work or civic activity. Rather, voluntary work and civic activity may be *outcomes* of social capital (maintained by strong norms of trust and reciprocity), and at best *indicators* of social capital. However, neither can be *assumed*. Voluntary work or civic activity may be carried out in complete isolation from other individuals and thereby bear no relation to the size of people's networks or the quality of the relationships in those networks. As well, voluntary work and other forms of community engagement cannot be assumed to be outcomes of social capital, as "... such action could have been mandated or forced through violence" (Winter 2000:8).

Support for the theoretical and empirical distinction between social capital and its outcomes can be found in Hogan and Owen's (2000) recent study which found that social trust — a core component of community level social capital - was *not* related to various forms of 'active citizenship'. In other words, their study included people who were both civically active and distrusting of others, and vice versa. This may be quite obvious when one realises that there may be as many motives for civic activity (eg, self interest and fear) as there are outcomes of civic activity (eg, community division).

Problem 3: Failure to recognise that social capital is a multidimensional concept

Networks, norms of trust and norms of reciprocity represent the key components of social capital. Identifying *each* of these empirically is essential because social capital is a multidimensional concept. Despite this, numerous social capital studies rely upon unidimensional measures of the concept, often with scant empirical or conceptual regard to the relationship between that dimension and other key elements of social capital, nor to the 'representativeness' of a given dimension of social capital of the concept as a whole.

For example, a lot of research has examined the link between social capital and economic capital, and between social capital and human capital. As previously mentioned, Coleman (1988) argued that family based social capital is vital to the transfer of human capital from parents to children, and ultimately therefore to children's future economic success. However, while research has consistently found that social trust is closely related to education (a form of human capital) and income (a form of economic capital) (Putnam 1996, Onyx and Bullen 2000, Hughes et al 2000, Hogan and Owen 2000), the findings are less clear on whether education or income relate to the other dimensions of social capital, such as the size of people's networks (Onyx and Bullen 2000:13), and this has been explored less empirically. Therefore, while it is likely that economic and human capital matter in social capital terms, it is not clear

how they relate to the different dimensions of social capital or to the concept as a whole. As Newton (1997: 575) suggests, to fail to conceptualise social capital's dimensions in separate terms is ultimately likely to 'muddle empirical questions'. Unless the separate dimensions of social capital are identified, we are unable to ask questions about how these dimensions operate empirically. Inability to pose empirical questions about the nature of the interaction between the separate dimensions of social capital severely limits our understanding of the concept as a whole.

Problem 4. Failure to recognise that social capital will vary by network type and social scale

By definition, social capital is not restricted to particular network types or social scales. For example, the literature identifies social capital in small local communities (Putnam 1993), at the level of nation states (Knack and Keefer 1997), and within informal networks of family, friends and neighbours, among others (discussed in more detail below).

In the empirical literature, much conceptual confusion has arisen because researchers attempt to match a dimension of social capital measured in one network (or social scale) with a different dimension of social capital measured in a different network (or social scale).

For example, in one of the most informative empirical investigations of social capital as yet undertaken, Onyx and Bullen (2000) attempt to match institutional trust with different dimensions of social capital measured on a different social scale. In this study, the association between confidence in government and a series of items relating to the extent of individual's local and informal networks (such as neighbourhood, family, friendship and work connections) is tested. Because no association is found, Onyx and Bullen (2000) conclude that social capital is more about immediate and personal relationships than distant and formal relationships with institutions. They further claim that independence from government is important for social capital to develop. However, the logic of social capital may well be applied at the institutional level. It may be that institutional trust relates to whether or not one has institutional connections (for example, their parents work for the government), and the quality of their engagement with these institutions (for example, whether in their encounters with police, the legal system, welfare agencies and so on, they have been treated with respect or disdain).

Summary — the potential of social capital undermined

In summary, for the concept of social capital to be a useful theoretical, empirical and policy tool, it is important to avoid these four key problems. First, social capital measurement and 'practice' needs to be theoretically informed. Otherwise, anything and everything is labelled as social capital, and old ideas and concepts are simply repackaged in a new guise. Second, social capital needs to be understood as a resource to collective action. If we wish to determine whether social capital produces a range of other desirable social and economic outcomes, such as active communities, we must avoid the tautological trap of conflating social capital with social action. Third, empirical work must recognise that social capital is a multidimensional concept. We must understand how the various dimensions of social capital inter-relate and relate to the concept as a whole before we can understand how they relate to other outcomes of interest. And finally, we must recognise that social capital will vary by network type

and social scale. A dimension of social capital in one network may not correspond with a different dimension of social capital in another network, or with outcomes which may be measured on a different scale again.

A theoretically informed measurement framework

The final section of this paper presents a theoretically informed measurement framework for understanding social capital, and describes how this is positioned in the conceptual model developed for investigating social capital and family life in the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Measuring social capital

Table 2 presents the key dimensions of social capital in measurable terms. As per the definition of social capital, above, it identifies networks and norms of trust and reciprocity.

As mentioned above, social capital is not restricted to particular network types. The literature identifies social capital in local and other community networks (Putnam 1993), at the level of nation states (Knack and Keefer 1997), and, albeit less commonly, within families (Coleman 1988; Amato 1998; Furstenberg and Hughes 1995; Furstenberg 1996). Putnam (1998:vi) distinguishes between informal and formal networks, or what he terms formality of civic engagement. Informal ties include those held between family, kin, friends and neighbours, whereas formal ties include ties to voluntary associations and the like.

As social capital comprises norms of trust and reciprocity across a range of networks, it is important to recognise in empirical research that norms of trust and reciprocity, or at least the ways in which these norms and associated behaviours are manifest (and measurable), are likely to vary across different network types.

Broadly speaking, the literature identifies three main types of trust (though these are frequently referred to under different names). The first is trust of familiars. This type of trust exists within established relationships and social networks. The second type of trust is generalised trust. This type of trust is a trust extended to strangers, often on the basis of expectations of behaviour or a sense of shared norms. Third is civic or institutional trust, which refers to basic trust in the formal institutions of governance including fairness of rules, official procedures, dispute resolution and resource allocation.

We can expect that norms of reciprocity will also vary according to network type. Finch and Mason (1993), for example, show that reciprocity among family and kin is an ongoing process which may take many years to realise, and that the norm of reciprocity within family and kinship groupings enables uneven levels of exchange, delayed exchange and indirect exchanges (favours for others) to occur. Among networks involving less regular and long-term exchanges as those which may occur within families, reciprocity may be less flexible and less robust.

Table 2. Key dimensions of social capital: networks of social relations characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity.

Networks of social relations	Quality of social relations: norms
<p>Informal networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family household • Family beyond the household • Friends/intimates • Neighbours <p>Formal networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associations/group based relations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - antenatal - child care - education - sport/leisure - music/arts - church - charity - voluntary - self help • Work based <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - colleagues - associations • Institutional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - state 	<p>Norm of trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social trust <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —familiar/personal —generalised • Civic/Institutional trust <p>Norm of reciprocity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-kind v in lieu • Direct v indirect • Immediate v delayed

Source: *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project, AIFS (2000); modified Stone (2000).

In order for social capital to be properly understood within any of these network types, a measurement or policy framework must take into account the existence of networks of social relations, the extent to which these are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity, and — if relevant — the ways and extent in which social capital relates to other outcomes.

A research agenda: social capital and family life

In order to inform upon the social capital and family life, the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project employs the principles set out in this paper. The project is designed

to investigate two types of question concurrently. The first concerns the extent to which families are engaged in the community, economy and polity. The second concerns the unique contribution of social capital in facilitating, maintaining or even undermining this engagement (for example through familism over communitarianism). The overarching research question to be addressed is whether social capital is as important to effective economic, political and community engagement as the literature suggests.

Through understanding social capital empirically as networks characterised by trust and reciprocity, the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project is able to investigate whether relationships within families, communities, businesses and markets, and between citizens and governments are rich in social capital or not, how they are reproduced within a given sphere, and how social capital may be transmitted to other spheres (for example the extension of family level social capital into social capital at a community level).

By examining the existence of social capital across a range of network types *along side* patterns of family engagement, the project is able to determine the extent to which social capital in any of these spheres influences patterns of engagement. In addition, the research design enables investigation of the interplay of social capital and engagement across these spheres (for example, what is the effect of social capital in one sphere upon a person's engagement in the economy, such as the labour market, as opposed to the polity, such as through income support receipt?).

The general point here is that because of the theoretically informed basis of the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project, the project is able to provide policy makers and academics with a valid and empirically informed understanding of social capital and family life. In this way, policy makers will know, for example, whether their faith in social capital is founded, whether their actions and spending to facilitate social capital are working, and whether social capital is contributing to desired outcomes, as the ways of measuring, monitoring and understanding social capital 'on the ground' are valid. Family life, as a result, may be enhanced.

Conclusion

This paper has described the perceived potential of social capital for families, community life, the economy and market, and for governance. It has described the way social capital has been embraced and implemented in public policy to date. Drawing on recent work of the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Society* project, the paper has demonstrated, however, this potential is undermined by the vast gulf which continues to exist between theoretical and empirical interpretations of this concept. To conclude, the paper has set forth a measurement framework and research design for investigating social capital in family life. The adoption of a theoretically informed measurement framework and conceptually clear research or policy design by anyone with an empirical or policy interest in the value of social capital, it is argued, is essential if any of the potential benefits of this concept are to be realised at all.

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