

Bonding, bridging and linking

with social capital

WENDY STONE



“Social capital” is a concept that describes the extent and nature of relationships people have with others, the relationships people have with their communities, and relationships between people and various services, institutions and systems. It is also a concept that can be used to understand the linkages between communities or institutions.

The concept of social capital has been directly linked to broader concepts such as social cohesion, democracy, economic wellbeing and sustainability. It is a concept that has attracted much policy and academic interest in Australia in recent years. Most recently, the concept has been adopted and developed in various capacity building and community development strategies, both nationally and internationally.

Within this context, the aims of this paper are to: briefly to outline what social capital is; examine how different types of social capital are distributed among families and communities; describe how a focus on relationships can relate to capacity building, using examples; and describe some of the principles involved in relationship building in working with families and communities.

What is “social capital”?

Social capital is a concept that can be understood 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 for collective action, which may lead to a broad range of outcomes, of varying social scale.

Social capital can exist in family and community life, and is an important feature of both. It is well known that good quality family relationships are important to a whole range of outcomes for family members, including the development of children. For example, networks of trusting and reciprocal relationships developed among parents around children’s schools, are argued to provide more positive environments for children, and lead to better educational outcomes for students (Coleman 1988). In this way, parents “invest in” and “benefit from” school-based relationships.

It is also argued that families and children can benefit by living in communities that have high levels of social capital, even if they are not themselves directly involved in the civic life of their community. This is referred to as the “public good” aspect of social capital (Putzel 1997; Cox and Caldwell 2000). It is the idea that as well as the outcomes related to the extent to which families and children are themselves con-

nected to local and other communities and engage in civic life, families and children living in highly trusting and well-connected communities can benefit from the positive spin-offs of community cohesion.

Using child development and wellbeing as an example, this can include things such as:

- children growing up in safe, low crime neighbourhoods;
- children being positively influenced by high trust, cooperative relationships in their surroundings; and
- children growing up in well resourced areas, free from poverty.

The distribution of social capital

Recent social capital theory distinguishes between “bonding”, “bridging” and “linking” forms of social capital (Putnam 1998; Narayan 1999; Woolcock 1998). Bonding social capital involves trust and reciprocity in closed networks (in which members of networks know other members), and helps the process of “getting by” in life on a daily basis. “Getting ahead” in contrast, is facilitated through “cross-cutting ties” that take the form of either bridging or linking social capital. Bridging social capital involves overlapping networks (in which a member of one group can gain access to the resources of another group because of overlapping membership). Linking social capital involves social relations with those in authority, which might be used to garner resources or power.



In sum, these different forms of social capital can play different roles. Bonding ties with family, friends and neighbours can act as a social support safety net, whereas bridging ties with people from different networks can provide access to opportunities, and links to institutions and systems can help people and communities to gain leverage and resources. Each of these three forms of social capital is arguably essential to a strong family and strong community (Narayan 1999; Wellman and Wortley 1990; Woolcock 1998).

Australians aged 18 years and over, conducted in 2001, we asked people about their lives, their relationships and their communities. On the basis of that information, we examined the types of relationship “mixes” that people have (for details of this research see Stone and Hughes 2002).

Rather than having equally “strong” relationships across the board, we found people tend to fall into one of four main social capital “types”. These are shown at Table 1.

levels of educational attainment, had significantly lower than average levels of home ownership and/or perceived their neighbourhoods or local areas as being unsafe places in which to live. Additionally, those with informal or limited ties were more likely to have experienced some form of family disruption such as separation or divorce and to live in areas which were economically disadvantaged (Stone and Hughes 2002: 36).

Drawing these findings together, we can conclude that low levels of social capital mirror existing inequalities in some significant ways. At a family level, this means people who need support may have few connections and sources of support to draw on. At a community level, low levels of connections between people can result in highly fragmented communities, or in communities in which, for example, some people are marginalised or excluded from the rest of the community. Conversely, we can conclude that having greater levels of connections (the first and second social capital types above) may be positively related to a host of other factors within both family and community life.

Strengthening relationships as part of capacity building

That individuals, families and communities experience uneven levels of social capital, and that these relate in systematic ways to various indicators or risks of disadvantage, has implications for the ways in which policy and services are delivered to families and communities. Strengthening bonding, bridging or linking relationships may be critical for building family and community capacity, linking families to services and supports, improving safety nets for prevention and early intervention, and for empowering family and community members.

Three brief illustrations of how this can be undertaken, while working with families and communities, are set out below.

The first of these is an example of how trust, a critical part of good quality relationships, can be strengthened.

Table 1 Social capital typology, based on individual measures of social capital within informal, generalised and institutional realms (N=1,506)

Social capital types	Per cent of cases
Social capital rich	19.3
Strong norms, civic connections	56.3
Informal only, or social capital limited	18.1
Social capital poor	6.4

Source: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Survey, 2001.

As well, since different types of relationships provide particular types of support, it follows that the overall balance of different forms of social capital may also be important. For example, it is argued that “too much” bonding or inward looking social capital may undermine the development and maintenance of bridging and linking ties (Putzel 1997; Cox and Caldwell 2000).

The “bonding”, “bridging” and “linking” social capital framework provides a useful way for thinking about the various different types of relationships that people have at any point in their life. It also highlights the fact that different families and communities will have different “mixes” of these types of relationships. That is, some people have strong family and friendship relationships (bonding social capital), whereas other people may be more involved in community groups (a form of bridging social capital) or know many people in various organisations and institutions (linking social capital).

Indeed, recent findings from research being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies highlight differences in the distribution of these types of social capital. In a national random survey of 1,506

The first type includes people who report having extensive numbers of ties, and highly trusting relationships across all of the bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital. We call these “social capital rich”. The second type comprises people who have limited networks of family and friends, but who are involved in civic and community life (bridging social capital). The third type report having stronger bonding ties (family, friends and neighbours), but limited connections outside these networks. We describe this type as “informal only” or “social capital limited”. Finally, a smaller but significant number of people can be described as belonging to a type that we call “social capital poor”, as they have few connections to family, friends or neighbours, and limited civic and institutional ties.

We also found that these social capital types related in systematic ways to various other characteristics of families and communities, and to some personal characteristics such as health, education, and financial wellbeing. In particular, we found those who belonged to the third or fourth social capital types – those with *limited* or *low* levels of social capital – were most likely to report having poor health outcomes, least likely to have high

Illustration 1: *Building trust*

This example is about a circus program run for children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, and for young mothers, older women, or women who have experienced domestic violence. Training is run separately for children and women.

Through learning a wide range of fun and challenging circus skills, the program aims to build physical competence and self esteem, develop positive peer interactions and strengthen relationships, and to strengthen the relationships between workers and clients. The program builds personal strength, trust and relationships. People learn to be trusting, and to be relied upon, while at the same time developing skills, experience and confidence.

For children, the program aids the development of friendships, more positive relationships with families, and more constructive relationships with workers.

Similar positive results occur for women. Women themselves report increased self esteem, strengthened relationships with family members, and new connections, including with women they would not associate with normally.

Ultimately, the program creates positive opportunities in non-threatening ways. Bonding, bridging and linking social capital are formed.

The second example is about building connections between people, based on inclusive and participatory delivery of services.

Illustration 2: *Building connections*

In this example, maternal and child health services provide new parent groups for first time parents. These run over several weeks, and provide an educational focus on feeding, safety in the home, settling techniques for new babies – and a strong and active support function.

Here, as well as learning new skills and receiving professional support to help cope with the challenges within the first few months of a baby's life; within trusting environments, parents build support groups and friendships that are often sustainable beyond the life of the formal support program. In many cases, even up to one and two years later, women's groups that form through these services can still be meeting on a regular basis, and friendships become strong and supportive.

While women involved may talk of benefits for the children, they can also gain significant benefits for themselves in terms of confidence as a parent, social contact and support.

Not only do new parents form links with services that are trusting, but they can also develop strong bonding and bridging links that provide sustainable support.

(Scott 2000a, 2000b)

The third example is about building on existing relationships to develop and strengthen others, while at the same time developing other capacities.

Illustration 3: *Developing community space*

This example is about using existing structures and contacts within a community, to build family and friendship bonds, strengthen and enhance community ties, and reach people who may not usually engage with a service or program.

In this example, schools are used as key sites for engaging with the community. Community spaces within schools are used as central meeting places for people in the community, including parents and non-parents. Many different types of activities can be offered and hosted at these centres, that can become community hubs. For example, play groups and other children's activities can act as a way to bring parents together. Using school-based community spaces to hold training and skills development, bringing people together and at the same time enhancing skills, can lead to bonds, bridges and links.

Where families or communities are at risk, these community environments can provide a place where people can gain assistance, advice, and form support networks. The outcomes can be stronger families and communities.

Building social capital: practices and principles

To sum up, the concept of social capital now features centrally in early intervention and prevention strategies, and in philosophies underlying the delivery of services that aim to strengthen families and communities. At the same time, there is increasing awareness among the community sector and service providers about their capacity to facilitate social capital among "clients", by ensuring that the practices of service delivery are "social capital friendly". This means providing services in a way which not only meets immediate client and family needs, but is also participatory, respectful, inclusive, and which might facilitate bonds, bridges and linkages between clients and other members of the community, which are sustainable beyond the bounds of the service itself.

For agencies working with families and communities, this requires: time and resources; commitment; being inclusive; sharing power and responsibility; being local; having respect; and being trustworthy.

The framework offered by social capital may also be useful for ongoing evaluation and reflection within programs, projects or agencies. As set out above, social capital offers a way of thinking about different types of relationships, and the distribution of these relationships among families and within communities. Understanding the extent of bonding, bridging and linking ties available to families and communities, and how these can be enhanced, can provide a useful way to monitor the impact of programs on people's lives. At a minimum, concepts such as social capital remind us of the importance of social relationships as an important part of sustainable family and community wellbeing.

To demonstrate, this article concludes with an excerpt taken from the work of the Benevolent Society, Sydney. It is an example that demonstrates how principles based in social capital can guide the ways that agencies can work with families and communities to bring about positive, sustainable change.

An illustration: Social capital in practice

"Bonding, bridging and linking provide us with a framework for assessing our current work and where we might change our approach in order to meet our objective of building social capital. Historically, it's probably fair to say that we've been reasonably good in the area of bonding – about strengthening the bonds with families and a close network through our services.

While the bonding component of our work remains important, we're increasingly looking to see how can we create more bridges and links for individuals, families and communities. Our assumption is that in doing so we will create more social capital and in turn more resilient individuals, families and communities. Our starting point is to use the strengths of individuals, families and communities as the basis for creating bridges and links within and across communities.

So within this social capital and community engagement framework we can begin to ask whether our work is:

- Creating trust?
- Increasing the networks enjoyed by individuals and families?
- Building opportunities for civic participation?
- Facilitating cross-institutional cooperation?"

(Hampshire and Smeaton 2001)

Note

The illustrations used in this article are based on good practice examples of how social capital can be built. Illustration 1 is based on a program run by the Benevolent Society, Sydney (see Hampshire and Smeaton 2001). Illustration 2 is based on the work of home visiting and parenting programs, such as those operating in Victoria's maternal and child health services, and described by Scott 2000a, 2000b. Illustration 3 is based broadly on several programs that now exist in Australia that link families and schools, including the Schools as Community Centres program within the Families First initiative in New South Wales, and the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program in Victoria.

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See also

A collection of literature, projects and resources about social capital in diverse communities internationally, hosted by the World Bank at: www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital

And, the ongoing work being undertaken on social capital at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, through its *Families, Social Capital & Citizenship* project. All research papers are available in full text on the web at: www.aifs.gov.au

At the time of writing, **Wendy Stone** was a Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Wendy has recently taken up a position as Assistant Research Director at the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). This is a paper based on her presentation to the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop.

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