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Social Capital[1]

ROSALIND EDWARDS
South Bank University

Broadly, social capital concerns the norms and values people hold that result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships. It is integrally related to other forms of capital, such as human (skills and qualifications), economic (wealth), cultural (modes of thinking) and symbolic (prestige and personal qualities). For example, economic capital augments social capital, and cultural capital can be readily translated into human and social capitals.

In terms of social capital, where people share a sense of identity, hold similar values, trust each other and reciprocally do things for each other, then this is felt to have an impact on the social, political and economic nature of the society in which we live. Thus the concept of social capital has gained a considerable influence in policy-making circles.

One strand of theorising around social capital concentrates on social capital as a set of resources that are linked to membership of a particular social group. The emphasis is on the social networks that provide access to that group's resources, with the outcome being enhanced economic rewards and social power. For example, Pierre Bourdieu's work (1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) focuses on family and group relationships, seeing social capital as the resources that are generated through these. In particular, he sees family as the means by which a range of capital assets are transmitted over time, across generations (see also Allatt 1993). Bourdieu emphasises the way that social capital is constructed and maintained in the interaction between individual agency and a society stratified by social and economic inequalities. His focus on class relations of privilege has been extended by feminists to analyse gendered divisions (for example, Reay 2000; Skeggs 1997).

Other theorists and researchers focus more on social capital as a resource that arises out of people's family relationships and that enables them to increase their human capital, which then enables them to gain greater economic rewards. For example, James Coleman's work (1988a & b, 1990, 1991) sees social capital as inherent in the structure of family relationships, particularly inter-generationally. He is concerned with explaining how children's educational achievement is driven by parental investment, which then radiates out to the community in the form of the generational passing-on of cohesive social and moral norms of trust and co-operation, and sanction, and producing economic efficiency. (See also Amato 1998; Furstenburg and Hughes 1995; Parcel and Menaghan 1993.)

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[1] Material in this article also appears as part of the Sloan Work-Family Encyclopedia at http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpSCent.html

Another strand of social capital work stresses the trust and reciprocity between people that facilitates collective action in terms of economic and political development at regional and national levels. For example, Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000; Leigh and Putnam 2002) sees social capital as a distinct form of 'public good', embodied in civic engagement and having 'knock-on' effects for economic prosperity, rather than an individual good related to human capital. He highlights voluntary associations as creating and sustaining the 'bridging' social capital that enables people to 'get ahead'. The 'bridging' form of social capital refers to co-operative connections with people from different walks of life, and is more valuable than 'bonding' social capital. 'The bonding' form of social capital is based on exclusive ties of solidarity between 'people like us', exemplified by families, and is restricted to enabling people to 'get by'[2]. Francis Fukuyama (1995, 1999) also places a stress on these 'weaker' forms, arguing that in societies where there are strong family and kinship allegiances, these crowd out other social connections and thus constrain economic prosperity.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

A key relevance of ideas about social capital for work-family studies is in debates about whether or not social capital is being eroded in contemporary society or is flowing in new forms, and the links that are made on both sides to changing family life and employment patterns.

On the erosion side, women's increasing labour market participation allied with rising rates of divorce and separation are identified as factors. In addition, there is a divide between work-rich and work-poor families. High rates of unemployment amongst particular social groups within the population, and coalesced in particular areas, can mean that people are socially excluded - gathered or trapped together in social networks that have developed identities and values that fly in the face of dominant norms and comprise a form of social capital that is a threat to social order.

For Coleman, for example, families are the fundamental bedrock of social capital, where children are socialised into the norms and values of society and their human and social capital nurtured and developed. Parents invest in their children with time, affective relationships and the transmission of clear guidelines for behaviour. Rising rates of divorce, mothers' employment and changes in working time, all work against this 'investment'. Where parents are 'absent' rather than physically present with their children, as in single mother or two-earner families, this means that time and attention for children have to be rationed.

At various points in his body of work, Putnam also identifies changing working patterns, including longer travel-to-work time and work-intensification stress, women's rising labour market participation and dual earner households, and market-based child care provision, as possible factors in the decline of social capital, as well as a decline in marriage. Women who were homemakers in the 1950s and '60s were 'our best social capitalists'; the backbone of neighbourhood voluntary associations. In addition, he points to the plight of local communities in which a predominance of work-poor families, and an exodus of middle class families, has eroded social capital, compounding racial and class inequalities.

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[2] The social capital categorisation draws on Mark Granovetter's (1973) arguments about the positive effects of 'weak' ties between people who move in different circles, in contrast to the constraining 'strong' ties between family and friends. Michael Woolcock (2001) has also added the notion of linking social capital to the typology to allow for the capacity to access resources from formal institutions.

There is evidence, however, that the time parents spend with their children has increased, despite the rise in mothers' employment (Galinsky 1999; Gershuny 2000). Indeed, Frank Furedi (2001) suggests that the proliferation of professional advice on parenting skills has meant that contemporary parents are over-investing time and attention in their children, to the detriment of children's ability to invest in their own social capital and other development; and that the traditional informal social capital available to, and supporting, parents in their childrearing has been undermined. Nevertheless, the evidence for the impact of mothers' employment on children in relation to social capital acquisition is at best equivocal (Bianchi and Robinson 1997).

On the new social capital side of the debate, attention is drawn to the way that, in a changing social context, people are building alternative forms of social networks, identifying with each other in different ways, and developing trust and reciprocity on this basis (although such commentators do not necessarily use the term 'social capital', see Beck 1992, 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1991, 1992, 1994; Weeks 1995). Diversity in family forms and mothers' increasing labour market participation can be the basis for this alternative resourcing of social capital, as well as different forms of organisational association (Skocpol 1996). Further, it is often pointed out that traditional forms of social capital could stifle innovation, be divisive and oppressive, and maintain inequalities (Beck 1997; Schuller et al. 2000; Levi 1996; Molyneux 2000; Morrow 1999; Portes 1998; Putzel 1997). In order to have shared social values and traditional support systems, some people were marginalized and stigmatised, or pushed into particular confined or limited and pre-determined work-family and other roles on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, or social class.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Social capital is often argued to be a concept that itself 'bridges' disciplinary boundaries, allowing people steeped in anthropological, economic, political science, psychological and sociological traditions to talk to each other (Schuller et al. 2000; Woolcock 2001), and across conceptual areas. For example, links have been made between social capital and the family eco-system model, which focuses on interactions and exchanges between families and other (micro, meso, exo and macro) systems (Hogan 2001). Such systems would include the world of work.

Others point out, however, that the concept and its categories may sound the same across disciplines but, underlying this, either different traditions and assumptions result in social capital taking on different meanings, or liberal rational economic assumptions predominate (Fine 2001a; Furstenburg 1998; Franklin 2002). Indeed, the overall body of knowledge about social capital can be viewed as confused and ambiguous, rather than cohesive. Reflecting this, a substantial part of debate within the field is devoted to what social capital is, how it can be measured and how to increase its stock (Devine and Roberts 2003; Fine 2001b; Fukuyama 1999; Harper 2001; Morrow 1999; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000; Robison et al. 2002; Stone 2001; van Deth 2003; Winter 2000; Woolcock 2001).

A key criticism of social capital theories in relation to work-family studies is that, while mainstream commentators recognise that society is changing, largely in addressing how and why social capital is decreasing, they do not take on board theories of social change concerning the nature of intimate relationships, globalised and 'flexible' labour markets, and geographical mobility. Thus their work tends to go against the grain of social change (Franklin 2002; Winter 2000). Coleman's and Putnam's arguments, for example, can reinforce calls for a socially-engineered return to 'traditional' families and community relationships, rather than recognising that the broader structural conditions (including corporate work- and family-based) for these are in flux. People's interactions with others are shaped by an awareness that these contexts are not stable.

Social change also encompasses increasingly ethnically diverse societies, which in turn can cross-cut with social class inequalities. The extent to which social capital is available to families with limited resources and/or can be converted into economic capital, including that relating to employment and entrepreneurial development, is a subject of debate (for example, Adler and Kwon 2000; Iverson and Farber 2000; Portes and Ladolt 1996; Portes 1998).

There is also a tension in the 'bonding' and 'bridging' discussions of social capital. Putnam, for example, both bemoans the 'breakdown' of traditional families as undermining and leading to a loss of social capital in his earlier work, at the same time as consistently arguing that wider 'bridging' social ties and networks outside of families in the community produce the best sort of 'public'-, rather than 'private'-, regarding social capital. Indeed, Fukuyama (1999) regards rising divorce rates and births outside marriage as potentially promoting beneficial weaker social capital. In relation to work-family issues, there remain questions about, for example, whether or not women's increasing labour market participation undermines social capital generation and sustenance within families and thus communities, or builds bridges into the wider social context in a way that enhances it within families and communities? Perhaps a moot point here is that if social capital researchers look through traditional lenses and in traditional places for social capital, they will not be able to see its new forms. There is evidence, for example, that employed mothers 'bring home' work-related resources that contribute to their children's social and other capitals, and that their employment can encompass a commitment to the local community (Reynolds et al. 2003).

Implications for Practice & Research

Most of the debates about and approaches to social capital make a distinction between social capital as a resource and the outcomes of access to or exclusion from that resource. In other words, social capital is not its outcomes, but the process that produces those outcomes. Research into the issue, however, has tended to focus on the outcomes of social capital, for individuals or for particular communities, regions or nations. It thus runs the risk of producing a tautological relationship - treating outcomes of social capital as its indicator will necessarily find social capital to be related to those outcomes (Portes 1998; Durlauf 1999). There has been far less attention to the content and process of how social capital operates, and the area remains over-reliant on quantitative, rather than mixed, approaches (Devine and Roberts 2003; van Deth 2003). Research tends to focus on individual measurement of family relationships, trust and values, and aggregate measurement of levels of participation in networks and civic life (Schuller 2001), and often uses inappropriate proxies (Stone 2001; Winter 2000). All of this leads to the question of whether or not social capital actually does work in the ways put forward? Crucially, theoretical assumptions about the nature of the relationship between family life and the generation of social capital in the community remain unconfirmed (Stone and Hughes 2000; Winter 2000). Within this, the nature of gender and generational relationships within families is assumed rather than investigated.

Nevertheless, the concept of social capital may well be useful in bringing issues of complex social lives, quality of relationships and a long term view to policy-making (Schuller 2001). It has particular resonance for decision-makers and practitioners developing outreach initiatives that attempt to create social change at family and local levels. In relation to work-family issues specifically, it draws attention to corporate responsibility. For example, Putnam suggests that family-friendly and community congenial workplaces could regenerate social capital to both strengthen families and bring prosperity to communities. Practices concerning work-time patterns and work-life balance, business-community links, and co-worker relationships are thus highlighted and placed on the agenda.

Until the workings of social capital in a changing and multi-layered society are more fully understood, including in relation to work-family issues, however, crossing the 'bridge' from research to policy may well be hazardous.

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Rosalind Edwards is Professor in Social Policy, and Director of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, at London South Bank University, UK. Current projects include: resources in parenting, children's sibling relationships, and access to services with interpreters. Recent co-authored publications include: *Making families: Moral tales of parenting and step-parenting* (Sociology Press) and *Caring and counting: The impact of mothers' employment on family relationships* (Policy Press). Email: edwardra@sbu.ac.uk