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Social capital: a strategy for enhancing health?

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Abstract

The idea of social capital is currently being discussed as a source of support for health, though it is often argued that the concept should not be used in an attempt to evolve neutral policy strategies but underlines the need for moral and political debate in health policy. This article, first, supports this argument by indicating the complex and culturally diverse nature of social capital. Its components react with their social contexts to produce a range of variants which differ from each other along several dimensions. Social solidarity and support involve different conventions in different places, with results which need appraisal before they can be supported. The article explores these issues by drawing on ethnographic material illustrating aspects of social relatedness in a variety of settings. Secondly, writers who treat social capital as invariably positive tend to associate it with conditions in the neo-liberal societies of late capitalism, even though they also see it as threatened there. Again examining social contexts, the article locates the reasons for this paradox in the cultures and structures of the societies concerned. Large-scale institutions in the West—including both those required to implement public health measures and those in which the majority of people work—are organised via neo-liberal processes which are not all conducive to the types of social relatedness which the social capital debate seeks to explore. In particular, significant aspects of social trust are difficult to support in neo-liberal organisations. The assumption that social capital can be promoted via social engineering which relies upon these very institutions is thus questionable. This, together with more positive aspects of the debate, draws attention to the need for further research on social relatedness if it is to be supported by public policy.

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Introduction: social relations and social support

The social capital debate draws attention to the social relatedness of human beings and the ways in which this relatedness may affect their health as well as other aspects of their well-being. ‘The undeniable existence of social collaboration and solidarity’ (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001, p. 1), ‘connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000, p. 19), seem important resources for human well-being. Nonetheless, it will be suggested here that solidarity and trustworthiness do not take the same forms in all parts of every

society—even though this does not mean we cannot make any generalisations about them at all. But it may be too soon to regard ‘social capital’ simply as an instrument for improving health; perhaps especially not in societies where large-scale organisations are the norm. It will be argued here that, to the extent that social capital can be identified empirically and is actually good for people, it cannot easily be manipulated in a quasi-technological way. The neo-liberal organisations which form work settings for large proportions of Western populations and which structure the delivery of their health care involve standards and conventions which demand radical modification if they are to promote central features of social capital such as trust. Indeed, some of the features of organisations in contemporary societies and their health-care systems actually appear inimical to enhancing social capital. Sponsoring social

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capital is an ethical and political process, rather than a value-neutral policy decision, and (as Regan & Paxton, 2001 suggest) it inevitably accompanies rather than replacing decisions about distributing material resources.

Since at least the nineteenth century it has been recognised that social circumstances—including the availability of effective public hygiene, warm houses, the capacity to grow or buy good food—have important implications for health. The pathways involved have standardly been thought of as physical ones, even if the reasons for their occurrence and distribution have been socio-political and economic. Now it is claimed that social settings are also important for health in some non-reductionist way—that they have effects on bodily reactions over and above affecting the way bodies are treated in terms of food, exercise, smoking or health care. The idea of social capital has been introduced in this connection. As Shiell and Hawe (1996, p. 241) underline, it is suggested that ‘sense of community’, ‘community competence’ or ‘community empowerment’ contribute to public health. Here some recent work hypothesises the significance for health of psychosocial factors such as relative social rank (Wilkinson, 1996), or (perceived) reward for effort (Siegrist, 1998, 2001). It is not the purpose of this article to deny the significance of factors like these, but they do not capture the idea of social capital itself as a feature of social life. This article examines some ethnographic evidence on different aspects of social relatedness in different socio-political settings, attempting to deepen the discussion of social capital in the context of interest in health (as urged by Muntaner et al., 2000). It suggests that, though it is not possible to specify just one single kind of healthy sociality, the social capital debate does draw attention to significant questions which need to be asked about contemporary society. But speculations about the kinds of relatedness which could enhance good health and/or the good life demand an emphasis on moral and political debate which do not sit well with the increasingly technical and business-oriented practices of modern organisations.

One advantage of the social capital debate is that it encourages us to go between the horns of the materialist—psychosocial dilemma which can beset discussions on public health. Lynch et al. (2000, p. 404), opposing psychological idealism, emphasise the primacy of ‘material, institutional and political causes of health inequalities’ (2000, p. 406). But they point out that allusions to relative income, relative status and the like only make sense in the context of complex descriptions of what they actually constitute in the societies concerned. Rightly, therefore, these authors endorse a ‘more’ materialist, not a completely materialist, viewpoint. The falsity of an exclusive dichotomy between the psychosocial and the material is underlined

by Baum’s (1999, p. 177) contention that ideas about social capital ought to be seen ‘as part of a broader project to reduce inequities in society’. We may well argue for the primacy of having enough to eat or warm houses to live in (including the ‘neomaterial’ conditions discussed by Lynch et al. when they point out that material requirements for healthy living may differ from one society to the next). This does not mean it is not important at all in what sort of society this occurs, nor does it entail reducing descriptions of social settings to questions of interpersonal social support or avoiding political decisions about, say, the distribution of income or health care.

Such decisions are inevitably taken or evaded within the contexts of political orientations towards what enhances or endangers human flourishing per se. There is thus no alternative—*pace* the canons of natural-scientific objectivity—to discussing which we prefer. The social capital approach cannot be used to evade this debate (as Muntaner et al., 2000 also stress). Baron, Field, and Schuller (2000), introducing their collection on Social Capital, see the entire discussion as motivated instead by:

a growing concern to revalorise social relationships in political discourse; to reintroduce a normative dimension into sociological analysis; to develop concepts which reflect the complexity and inter-relatedness of the real world (2000, p. 2).

This conception of what the social capital debate ought to do drags it firmly away from the idea that policy and science should be neutral disciplines towards the claim that they should be committed to enhancing health and human flourishing.

Nonetheless, Lynch et al. (2000, p. 404) are not alone when they ask whether the concept of social capital really adds to the claim that ‘A broader economic and political approach to public health is clearly needed.’ They stress that ‘While the concept of social capital has had a meteoric rise in political, economic and public health rhetoric, it remains to be fully defined and understood.’ Here it will be argued that a major reason why social capital can seem so elusive is precisely that it takes different forms in different settings. It does not consist of one psychosocial item which can be detected in numerous places in only slightly different guises. It is not consistent with the available sociological evidence to imagine it as simply a matter of social support, or as reducible to single parameters. If writers investigating social capital concentrate on individual measures such as joining associations, it is because they believe that relational states of affairs can be accessed using these methods. It is still debated among social scientific methodologists whether this is an apt mode of achieving such access (see, for example, Shiell and Hawe’s, 1996

opposition to methodological individualism); but this lack of accord highlights an important feature of social capital discussions—the question how sociality itself should be conceptualised.

It is often claimed that life in Western society has grown more individualised since the period of modernity, starting at around the seventeenth century. Freudenthal (1986) charts parallels between the rise to prominence of the individual in political thought and the development of the concept of the atom in the natural sciences. Though commentators often see this emphasis on the socially discrete individual as morally wrong or politically unfortunate (McPherson, 1962), it may be less our conception of the individual that is at fault than the absence of a correspondingly powerful conception of *society*. After all, when we examine events that took place prior to the seventeenth century, we do not discover that people never behaved selfishly or pursued their private advantage at others' expense. It is not so much that our concept of the individual is mistaken as such, rather that our concept of sociality has not developed in pace with it. During the sixteenth century, social relatedness and cooperation were modelled using the image of the human body, with the king as the head (Greenleaf, 1964). With the development of more complex ideas of public participation, this gave way to other naturalistic comparisons: the idea of the beehive, or various forms of social organism. Much more powerful was the account of sociality in the industrialised world developed by Marx. Though twentieth-century sociologists directed major efforts to addressing persistent problems in visualising relations between individuals and society (Giddens, 1984; cf. Fine, 2001), the decline in influence of socialist models of society left a vacuum in ways to *imagine* the common good (cf. Keat, 2000). It has become commonplace to think about society in a way which contrasts individuals with collectivities (e.g. Hofstede, 1980), where the latter tend to be distrusted. The social capital debate may have the potential to overcome the crudeness of this opposition, if it can return to a more Aristotelian standpoint: individuals do not *contrast* with society, for they can function only within their social contexts, as parts of these contexts. Social contexts themselves can be characterised in terms of different sorts of relationality (Edmondson, 2001; Hwang, 2001), collective and otherwise. But the neo-liberal organisations of the Western world, as of now, stand within a tradition which highlights individuals much more clearly than the relations between them. Within this tradition it can seem natural to take a somewhat mechanistic approach to society and social engineering; one involving procedures which in the end may not be effective in promoting social solidarity.

Below, we shall briefly explore divisions among exponents of social solidarity which illustrate different

approaches to the question whether social solidarity essentially varies with context or not. We shall then examine different types of social relatedness in different social contexts. Though some of these have been alleged to have positive implications for health, their permutations show that societies can be high in social support in ways which are far from identical. This discussion does not contrast 'good' with 'bad' social support; rather, it interrogates ways in which its components react with their settings to yield contrasting outcomes. We shall then go on to consider problems in the relationship between high communal and interpersonal social support and contemporary liberal society.

Social capital and social context

Writers on social capital differ in their approaches to social context. Putnam (1993), one of the most influential in this field, appears initially, with his contrasting studies of North Italy and the United States, to be interested in context. A first examination of his methods makes it seem that he is not. Still further consideration shows that there is a context to his books, though not precisely the one that initially appears. Putnam claims that there are vital links between sociable cultures and efficiently functioning democracies, across a range of Western settings. In support of this argument he puts forward a notion of social capital which is intended to be relatively unmysterious and to be accessible by measuring individual attributes. His work on Italy uses straightforward measures: associational life, newspaper reading, voting (1993, 91ff.). His subsequent critique of American society sees social capital in terms of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust (Putnam, 1996, p. 56)—undermined, he suggests, by a preference for watching television rather than activities with other people in relatively egalitarian social settings. *Bowling Alone* (2000) operationalises social capital in terms of elements such as time spent on committees of local organisations, voting behaviour, attendance at public meetings, doing volunteer work, visiting and entertaining friends, and regarding other people as honest and trustworthy. These are only intended to be measures of a phenomenon which is in reality more complex, but Putnam tries to keep his measures as close to his conceptualisation as possible. He hopes that he is pointing to a phenomenon which is not intrinsically elusive. In one sense he is not. Helpfulness, volunteering, assuming the best of other people, *are* observable and familiar phenomena. What Putnam does not allow, though, is that they may be observable in different ways, according to different conventions, in different social contexts.

For Putnam, it is generally the case that in civic communities, virtuous circles produce 'social equilibria' with high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civic

engagement and collective well-being'. But there are also 'self-reinforcing' patterns of 'Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation' (1993, p. 177). In the West, declining participation in politics and society is launching us onto a spiral of 'uncivic' negativity. Social connections, with the trust associated with them, are thinning (1995, p. 665). Putnam sees evidence for this in declining figures for joining associations, voting, or reading newspapers (1995, p. 674), not to mention in 'bowling alone'. In contrast, he presents what he sees as the enlightened inhabitants of Northern Italy—describing them in a manner based on tracking the frequency of pieces of individual conduct (rather than ethnographic work: 1993, p. 91). He presents them as informing themselves about matters of public interest (largely through the newspapers—an enterprise which might present difficulties in some countries) and as co-operating in devising reasonable and effective compromises. But buying newspapers or voting can be done by oneself. Even singing in a choir, devising a political compromise, or going bowling can occur as a confluence of individual decisions—as contrasted with decisions taken in terms of a pattern of habits and expectations shared with others. Putnam's subjects seem to behave, in sum, in a strangely context-free fashion. When we try to visualise the type of social capital to which Putnam is referring, we need to imagine ways of behaving which hold together his individual attributes and make them social. But sociality happens mostly off the pages of his texts. If we do try to imagine a form of relatedness which keeps as close as possible to the accounts Putnam does give of his North Italians, they cease to sound like North Italians.

Putnam's work is, as a result, attached rather evasively to quantitative attributes. For in reality he is not just talking about any social setting in which people vote or read newspapers; he seems to have a special form of sociality in mind, though he does not describe it directly. His work shows an underlying attachment to a view of liberal society as made up of reasonable individuals who argue tolerantly and search pacifically for compromises, though his measures do not capture this. They are as individualistic as one could get while still being co-operative, like idealised versions of the inhabitants of Oxbridge colleges in the mid-twentieth century. Despite or because of his view of sociality, [Campbell, Wood, and Kelly \(1999\)](#) suggest, Putnam's ideas may have more resonance in America than anywhere else. But it may be that the ideal society informing his work has never existed in the way he envisages.

This reflects a methodological tension to be found throughout the social capital debate. If it is true, as [Baron, Field, and Schuller \(2000, p. 14\)](#) speculate, that policy analysis is attempting to catch up with 'the inter-relatedness of the world', in the sense of responding to

the influences of numbers of complex social settings on what people do, then this is not reflected in the measures Putnam uses, which concentrate on individual behaviour to the exclusion of cultural features. In *Bowling Alone* he lists 14 indicators—joining local organisations, serving on committees, entertaining friends, and so on, and presents himself as assuming that societies which exhibit high levels of these are showing levels of the same thing. (Confining data collection to individual indicators excludes observation of relationships in which other social processes could be observed.) On this account, when friends come to supper you give them pasta in one country and hamburgers in another but you are evincing functionally identical forms of sociality. This is almost certainly not the case. According to anthropologists, sitting on committees and entertaining visitors have vastly different causes and effects in different societies; this point will be expanded below.

The concept of social capital has been criticised elsewhere for underestimating the complexity of social behaviour, implying that the social can be treated in the predictable, practical fashion sometimes attributed to economic forms of capital. It is suggested here that a main source of this underestimation is a failure to understand the *reactivity with context* of processes making up social support. For example, objections have been made to the soundbite quality of the expression on the grounds of its misleading implication that the phenomenon can exist like money, apparently on its own. Thus, [Arrow \(2000, p. 4\)](#) objects to the 'capital' metaphor for implying that whatever social qualities it refers to can be sacrificed now in return for benefits in the future, or transferred freely from one person to another. But the reason it cannot be so transferred is precisely that money is a medium arranged to operate *between* contexts, whereas social support requires context in order to exist at all: it brings to bear local social processes on inhabitants' needs. Putnam is far from the only social scientist who is reluctant to engage with this fully. For [Coleman \(1994, p. 300\)](#), social capital is a set of resources in family and community per se, about which generalisations can be made: it is useful for the development of young people, it establishes trust, mutual obligation, information, norms and sanctions, and so on (306). This attaches 'social capital' to an image of the family domain as 'primordial' ([Coleman, 1991, p. 9](#)), implying that declining family ties necessarily lead to declining social capital. (The early functionalists writing between the two World Wars developed similar ideas in more context-responsive form: see below.) This stance is criticised by [Portes \(1998, pp. 4–5\)](#) for bundling together processes which look related but may be contradictory, and for assuming that 'weaker' ties are always less socially significant than 'stronger' ones. Coleman is, therefore, vulnerable to the criticisms made against Putnam. [Bourdieu \(1997\)](#), on the

other hand, the third theorist usually credited with reviving this term, uses ‘capital’ not to signify something positive at all, but to point to inequalities of resources and power. The metaphor is intended to be shocking and disillusioning, a tool for initiating an analysis of class relationships. Though Bourdieu’s conception introduces a more context-responsive and power-related conception of politics than that supported by Coleman or Putnam, it is intended to have the opposite effect from theirs.

If the application of the idea of social capital to fields relevant to health has as yet been inconclusive, this has much to do with difficulties in taking into account effects of context. This accounts for Campbell’s (2000, p. 190) finding that in attempts to link community capacity with health ‘little consensus exists regarding exactly what is meant by the empowerment of local people, or which community networks and relationships are most likely to promote this empowerment’ even though ‘this is the key goal of most community-based health promotion programmes.’ Proxy measures used in the field probably fail to measure the same phenomenon. Campbell (2000, p. 191) reports that Cooper et al. (1999) are ‘pulling together existing survey questions’ such as ‘involvement in community activities’, ‘availability of facilities for young children’ or ‘personal experience of theft, mugging, break-in or other crime’. Not all these intended proxies necessarily point to the presence or absence of local community participation, which remains in need of elucidation. But the reason that an apparently obvious phenomenon is so hard to track down is precisely its changeability in different settings.

Forms of sociality stemming from shared ways of life

It has sometimes been remarked that societies high in some forms of social solidarity may seem low in some democratic virtues (e.g. Edmondson, 2001). The reason for this is not that social capital is a phenomenon with two faces, good and bad, but that social solidarity is built from a collection of processes which are highly *reactive* with their settings. These processes can vary among many dimensions. Here, we shall explore some examples which suggest that social solidarity differs in societies in which relatedness stems from shared local conventions and where it does not, and in societies where individualism is high and where it is not. But societies with dominant local conventions also differ in the kind of social solidarity they generate—as do societies high in individualism. Lastly, the high trust generated by some types of social solidarity can have very different effects.

The nature of social relatedness was an explicit concern among students of society in America in the opening decades of the twentieth century. In this context the anthropologists Arensberg and Kimball (2001 [1940,

1968]) were despatched from Harvard to Ireland in the 1930s. They explored a world of small, subsistence-based farms where work was carried out by hand, and small towns where the cosmopolitan values of the twentieth century remained unknown. Their ethnographic work explored a society high in social solidarity, though its lack of individualism excludes it as a model for contemporary settings. These authors deliberately used participant observation in order to research reciprocal relationships directly. They focused on social relatedness itself, rather than using standardised enquiries about individual behaviour. Thus, Arensberg and Kimball (2001, p. 61) stressed that their subjects’ existence could not be made comprehensible outside the daily context which provided for their material, social and emotional survival. *Family and Community in Ireland* emphasises that individuals’ decisions, feelings and beliefs all made sense as emanating from these local contexts. It describes the ‘absolute coincidence of “social” and “economic” factors within single relationships’: as between fathers and sons, for instance, who would work together in all their daily activities. Just as the father was the owner of the farm, so he retained practical and emotional dominance over his son. Family relations stretched, directly or indirectly, throughout the entire social and economic life of the entire countryside and the small towns within it. Behaviour at market or in running shops could always be understood in terms of the habits, views and feelings of the family and community. This illustrates what it is like to live in a society where relationships are perceived as more salient to decision-making than individuals.

Arensberg and Kimball (2001, p. 160) believed that the form of life they observed in the West of Ireland had a health impact. Pointing out, on the basis of census returns, that Ireland at that time had the best survival rates in Europe, they advanced a psychosocial explanation for this. For them, older people ‘live long because they have much to live for. In their own sphere of life, they are honoured. They have power’ (2001, p. 162). This is not a health impact we would now imitate; in this power relationship, younger members of a family are entirely subservient to older ones. Also, the authors are describing a society in which individuals had limited liberty to make choices about their lives (even if, as anthropologists, they are sceptical about the genuineness of much of what is now thought of as freedom). Conceptions of social appropriateness, of sexuality, of time itself were linked to communal forms of living in ways which would appear alien in contemporary urban settings.

Nonetheless, it begs too many questions to describe traditional or semi-traditional societies like this one merely as evincing an ‘older, economically harmful or inefficient’ form of trust (Fukayama, 1995, p. 159). Individuals could, in this setting, trust their society not

to impose economic developments on them to their disadvantage—a rather significant social benefit. Arensberg and Kimball (2001, p. 262) remark that in Clare in the 1930s change happened ‘surprisingly quickly’. But it occurred insofar as it could fit local ways of behaving, in a way which allowed most of those affected by it to adapt it to their own lives. Similarly, new skills and talents brought recognition to their owners only insofar as they were useful within the communities concerned. Economic change in general adapted to local ways of behaving. Customary habits, opinions and values were not merely abandoned to tune in with new economic or technological demands. This allowed the society to absorb constant change from economic and technological sources without undermining established relationships. Moreover, individuals moving from place to place—like the young men and women sent into town to be apprenticed as shop assistants—could rely on the familiarity and protection of values familiar to them from home. It is not suggested here that this is a form of social solidarity we should now imitate. But this is a setting which allows us to understand *relationality* better, and to observe its transforming effects on social solidarity.

If we wish to search for a semi-traditional society like that of County Clare in the contemporary world, perhaps as close as we can come is Connemara in the West of Ireland, which retains much social solidarity based on a shared local way of life. (For further comparisons between the forms social solidarity takes in approximately the same place at different times, see Young & Wilmott, 1957; Cattel & Evans, 1999). But Connemara does differ sharply from the world described by Arensberg and Kimball; notably, inhabitants are no longer connected by shared economic activities. Their houses are scattered through the bare countryside—‘marginal’ land according to today’s criteria—and they work, often, in nearby Galway or offering ‘bed and breakfast’. This is, though, a society which certainly displays some characteristics exemplifying Putnam’s ‘virtues of patience and practicality and reasonableness’ (1993, p. 38), as well as other features extolled in the parallel debate on communitarianism. Citizens are definitely thought of as neighbours; they can routinely expect to be visited in hospital or that family funerals will be attended (Edmondson, 2001). They do perform some common activities together—in church-going, or sporting or family events. Their interaction is characterised by what Putnam terms civility (1993, pp. 117–118) and Barber (1984, p. 219) terms ‘reciprocal empathy and respect’. It takes place in an overall atmosphere in which courtesy prescribes egalitarian social manners, whatever the real distribution of power and wealth may be. There is great attachment to consensus as a framework for reaching public decisions (Edmondson, 1998, 2001), which also meets Barber’s specifications for strongly democratic settings.

Woolcock (1998, p. 186) draws attention to the distinction between ‘embedded’ and ‘autonomous’ social relations, but often they can both appear in the same social place, for communal support and a lively self-interest can coincide. The interpersonal social support to be found in contemporary Connemara does not extend to sacrificing personal interests to engage in public works, such as sweeping the streets or repairing trackways after storms. In the summer of 2001, the relics of St Therese of Lisieux were exhibited throughout Ireland. They were eagerly awaited in Connemara, as elsewhere, and people wished local streets to look their best—but they put pressure on the Council rather than sweep them themselves. This is not the active engagement in joint public life envisaged by communitarian writers. Moreover, people in West of Ireland communities do not usually take an actively participatory approach to government, as Putnam recommends, nor are they encouraged to do so. The authority of parish councils relates to local festivals and sport, or ‘making representations’ to County Councils in support of mending the roads or improving water quality. Though this is a form of life which retains much in the way of communal support, it does not take place among individuals who are enlightened and sovereign in the way described, for instance, by Putnam.

Nor do these individuals support all the universalistic principles considered to embody justice in urban societies. This system of priorities can be seen reflected in a conversation in Connemara (field notes 1991), in which participants were indignant that someone who lived in a neighbouring county had been appointed as a teacher in a local school. The complaint was not that this was morally or politically unfair but, which is more interesting, that it was irrational. It was thought ridiculous to move people about the country just because some had better qualifications than others. If a local person did not meet standards, the appropriate response would be to improve that person’s work—not import someone else. In contrast, in more urban settings it is taken for granted that universalistic criteria and economic imperatives come first. It appears irrational not to appoint the best qualified person, or for that person not to move locality in search of better work. Attachments to locality or to other people have less authority as reasons for structuring personal or public life than do reasons related to work and efficiency. Similarly, Mauthner et al. (2001) find that some rural inhabitants of the North of England or Scotland expressly seek economic activity which can be fitted round the obligations of family, and indeed lead less stressful lives than others of their subjects as a result of doing so. Thus, even if their short-term rationality can seem questionable, the practices of relational societies sometimes have the advantage of long-term rationality, as in cases where social cohesiveness allows effective,

bottom-up monitoring of shared natural resources (Ostrom, 1990) and precludes ‘tragedies of the commons’. Social solidarity, in all these settings, is transformed by the relational practices into which it fits.

Social solidarity in less relational societies

Ethnographic evidence from contemporary societies which are rich in social support not only highlights diverse forms of social life, as we would expect from the interactivity between components of social capital and their contexts, but also shows that this support can develop in societies which conspicuously lack the organic relatedness of examples like those above. Bang and Sorensen (2001), for example, describe citizens in Copenhagen they term ‘Everyday Makers’, people with a newly ‘alternative’ approach to life who combine individuality and commonality in new relations of self-governance and co-governance. These, they say, offer ‘a new challenge for democracy from below’ (2001, p. 149) to be found in just those social locations where Putnam (1995) perceives only individuals ‘bowling alone’. Bang and Sorensen, like their respondents, identify a type of political action in the social interaction of everyday life. They see families who take control over their kindergartens or local newspapers as performing political actions, solving concrete problems in daily interaction with self-conscious strategic effort. This is a ‘democracy from below’ in which other people are taken seriously as capable and knowledgeable partners in action. It is ‘A story of engagement where you involve yourself politically in an unconventional manner for solving problems for your neighbourhood’ (2001, p. 151). Often it involves disengagement from and distrust of state power. ‘Everyday Makers typically want to do things by themselves, where they are, on their own terms and for their own purposes’, showing minimal interest in party politics (2001, p. 153). Organising small events in housing estates in connection with immigrants is not, for them, a way of putting pressure *on* politics, but *doing* politics. For these authors, Putnam’s conception of public political life is too conventional. They see the Everyday Maker as committed not to common norms but to accepting diversity and argument (2001, p. 159). Trust itself looks different here: ‘a political culture of trust’ involves accepting ‘profound disagreements and struggle’ (pp. 156–7). The people Bang and Sorensen describe devote their lives to trying to influence human destiny for the better; but they are inimical to the political norms associated with social enlightenment by conventional political science.

In a second instance where individuality and social support combine, Hajer (cf. 1995, 2001) describes a very different type of situation, one in which social capital initially appears low to non-existent but where community solidarity forms in response to state action. He

takes his example from a Dutch rural area, populated by heterogeneous people—farmers conscious of the declining value of their traditions of agricultural practice, city-dwellers with weekend cottages, professionals who have settled in the country to work from home, others with no employment allegiance at all. These people interacted little and appeared to have little in common until the Dutch government announced that, to fulfill international environmental obligations, it intended to take this part of the countryside and ‘return it to nature’—flooding farmland won from the sea, allowing woodland to spread beyond its accustomed boundaries, and replacing agriculture with ‘custodianship’ of nature. This policy decision created a community in opposition to it. Hajer stresses that whereas we usually envisage communities as extant in a social environment and trying to influence it, in this case it was a policy decision which created a community. In this instance, relationality did not cause participation; participation led to relationality.

Blends of high and low forms of trust

Examples such as these suggest that trust itself takes different forms in the context of different types of social solidarity: other people may be trusted to share modes of adopting social change, to visit one in times of personal trial, to be fearless and open in argument, or to help devise strategies against government policy—never, of course, to do *all* these things. (Uslaner, 2001 also comments on the range of people who are trusted in different settings.) An instructive case is that of the former German Democratic Republic, a setting characterised by both high and low trust. There, people often genuinely engaged in community activities; but this took place within an overall framework of compulsion. There were large-scale provisions for childcare, found by many to be supportive; but mothers were obliged to work rather than trusted to choose. Crime was low, so that one could trust fellow-citizens not to assault one in the street; but draconian anti-crime measures were in place as deterrents. On the basis of qualitative interviews it seems that in many respects everyday social trust was high, especially where people banded together to resist official expectations and procedures. Social relatedness itself seems to have been experienced as important, in the sense that, when choosing what to do and how to do it, what other people were doing formed a significant part of the decision. People appear to have spent about an hour a day talking to their neighbours; they habitually spent free time with them at street parties or barbecues. In many workplaces, the first activity in the morning involved sitting drinking coffee with colleagues, which was not seen as intrinsically time-wasting, and colleagues habitually assisted each other to solve small domestic problems (partly because of difficulties entailed

in more commercial transactions). In contrast to the conventional sociality endorsed by the State, this constituted oppositional social support in compensation for its shortcomings (Edmondson, 2000) (Edmondson/Rau field notes 2000–2001). But precisely this everyday trustfulness made it easier for the authorities to install their network of spies.

Social solidarity, it appears, is made up of components which interact with each other and which also blend with aspects of their settings to produce specific socio-political results. But they also reveal a common feature with interesting and problematic implications. These very different forms of social solidarity share a concern with particularity, with responsiveness to special cases, which poses problems for the universalist neo-liberal values of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Social capital in neo-liberal contexts

To interrogate the concept of social solidarity is not to belittle the concerns of writers like Putnam or Coleman. Moreover, their concern was shared by some earlier anthropologists, who located its origins much earlier than they do. Both Arensberg and Kimball (1965) and their supervisor, Lloyd Warner, perceived a trajectory from the start of the twentieth century in which interlinked forms of social life diminished on the local level, families diminished both in the size of their effective networks and their importance for survival, and in which individuals—far from simply becoming more free—became exposed to ever-advancing economic forces penetrating their lives. From this point of view, we now live in a condition of depleted sociality. In ‘Western’ society, economic criteria are often self-evidently paramount both in public decision-making and in individuals’ feelings of self-worth, values such as efficiency and effectiveness are seen as intrinsically significant, speed is preferred to duration, technique to experience. Time, in particular work time, is expected to be packed full of effort, with demonstrable results; the demonstrability is sometimes more important than the action. Activities like leaning over walls talking to neighbours, crucial elements of social solidarity in some settings, carry comparatively little weight. Modern social contexts, while they—importantly—support forms of social solidarity which can be organisationally administered, such as pension rights or unemployment benefit, undermine others.

Investigations of social capital among people inhabiting ordinary social settings show that they often have little time for personal work in community affairs. Campbell, Wood, and Kelly (1999) (see also Higgins, 1999 with regard to Canada) explored commitment to community in Luton, England (the location of the ‘embourgeoisement’ study of the 1960s by Goldthorpe

et al., 1968 which traced a transitional stage in working-class life away from communal towards an instrumental attitude to work). According to them, their respondents show ‘a strongly individualistic outlook’ rather than strong involvement in community:

the multiple demands of day-to-day contemporary life...as well as the multi-faceted demands of caring for a family—meant that they had little time, energy or interest in involvement in voluntary organizations or in community affairs... Furthermore, people emphasized that they had little faith in the power of ordinary people to exert any influence over any aspect of local or national government, and thus took no interest in these (Campbell, 2000, p. 193).

This discrepancy between public policy and this reality has widely discussed consequences. In particular, late twentieth-century ‘care in the community’ policies overestimated the extent to which ‘supportive community networks’ existed at all or were able to provide health-related care and support for people who had been institutionalised (Campbell, 2000, p. 192; cf. Barnes, 1997; Dalley, 1988).

At least two developments are taking place here. On the one hand, some social connections are being replaced by economic, administrative and technocratic criteria, with consequences deplored by many commentators. Fine (2001, p. 33) contends that ‘capital is a highly invasive form of production’ which ‘tends to subordinate non-capitalist forms of economic activity and incorporate them into its domain, thereby redrawing the boundaries between economic and social production’—though this can lead to decommodifying some activities, for instance by incorporating them into the welfare state, as well as to commodifying them. On the other hand, supportive networks are actively devalued by some practices which are central to modern neo-liberal organisations and whose criticism is a complex enterprise. It is true that communal societies’ use of forms of surveillance built on social capital can appear to us highly controlling, as in the person-to-person supervision of resource use (Ostrom, 1990) or the framing of any activity in a public space as a legitimate topic for comment (Edmondson, 1998). In contrast, however, administrative practices in contemporary societies often interrogate their members’ activities in ways which are intended to be productive but which have the effect of undermining social trust: ‘The history of evaluation is the history of fear’ (McGillivray and Walker, 2000, p. 201). Strathern (2000) explores the implications of evaluating performance evaluation in public employment. Originally justified as a means of ensuring that people are doing what they are paid to do, this not only functions in place of trust but is effectively eliminating its social role. Neo-liberal organisations are

relatively effective at supporting values which can be defined in a context-free fashion, such as many forms of equality and justice, but less effective at responding to particularistic practices which are crucial to social support and social learning.

Genuine dilemmas occur here. The trust, authority and discretion explored by Strathern are central to social solidarity in its many different forms; yet regulations which are also necessary in neo-liberal societies militate against them, as the following interview with a nursing home matron demonstrates.

A nursing home should be moving away from a hospital situation and making it more of a home. But the rules and regulations won't allow it! Bureaucracy, red tape... The fire officers came in about fire doors. They insisted on measuring 'running distance' for these people who can't run!

And for instance the Health Board came in one day from Environmental Health and there was a patient sitting on the stairs. They were very alarmed. 'There's a man sitting on the stairs!' But he liked to do that and I didn't see it was any problem to him or to me...

I think at eighty years of age people should be allowed to do what they want to do... I had a man who used to drink his whiskey and stay in bed and I think he was very happy. The Health Board attitude was, You should get him up and make him unhappy!

Litigation comes in as well nowadays. Everybody's worried about people coming down on their back (interview R. Edmondson, 20.4.2001).

The very conditions that make modern societies liberal—including the attempt to apply the same standards to all—endanger some types of social capital. These effects can be seen clearly when neo-liberal conditions are applied in development contexts. [Harriss \(2001\)](#) shows how forms of social solidarity which make sense in one setting can be hard to make intelligible in terms of another (see also [Parekh, 2000](#)). This can make it impossible for third-world organisations to apply for support in terms Western donors understand ([Ahmad, 2002](#)). The attempt to apply egalitarian standards here, though in many ways laudable, entails considerable problems in practice. They endanger the very types of *responsiveness* to setting which were common to all the types of social solidarity discussed in the previous section.

If the social capital issue is so problematic, does debating it help health policy at all? [Labonte \(1999\)](#) points out that we do know a great deal about socio-political relations and health, for example that health decreases down the social scale, or that bad housing and

bad nutrition is bad for health. The challenges this entails are already considerable, and demand inventive public health measures. But such measures all depend on political change, and in this sense are no simpler than the social capital discussion. For instance, the Healthy Cities movement ([Ashton, 1992](#)) advocates an ecological approach to living together in society, and also an emphasis on public participation which is responsive to social context, to the extent of advocating a 'non-control model of change' ([Duhl, 1992](#)). The 'social capital' concept could augment neomaterialism and reinvigorate such debate if it were used to explore further our understanding of politically defensible forms of social relatedness—and to confront the question how they can be promoted without undermining those forms of universalism we may also wish to support.

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