Social Policy and Social Capital: A Clear Case of Putting Merit before Method?

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The recent emergence of the term social capital into the vocabulary of policy makers in the UK is indicative of the community-led model which is currently being championed by New Labour. However, before the practical value (if any) of this particular 'new' idea can be realised, ways of measuring social capital which would make it 'fit for purpose' in the local policy setting need to be developed. The findings of one project, which set about measuring social capital in four West Midlands boroughs, provides the basis for a preliminary assessment of what a social capital-oriented tool may actually contribute to the development and implementation of policies at the local level.

Introduction

New Labour has identified social capital as a key element in addressing a host of social ills in the UK, from high crime and under-employment to poor health and low educational attainment (SEU, 2000; SEU, 2001). In fact, interest in this notion was sufficient to warrant the establishment in 1999 of a cross-government agency with the exclusive objective of investigating the potential role of social capital within the UK policy arena. Yet, despite the eagerness to utilise this particular idea, social capital still remains something of an enigma within the field of social policy, with little or no consensus existing in relation to what the notion actually represents in practice or, for that matter, how it might actually be measured in the 'real world'.

These issues provide the backdrop to the discussion elaborated within this paper, which begins below with a brief outline of the political context for the emergence of social capital in UK policy circles. Following on from this, the variety of ways in which practitioners and researchers have sought to measure social capital to date are examined, and some lessons drawn in relation to possible applications within a policy setting. The question is then raised as to just what a tool for measuring social capital at the local level might look like, in particular evidence from a survey recently conducted in four metropolitan boroughs in the West Midlands is used to assess the potential (and pitfalls) of a questionnaire-based tool for measuring social capital. The final section attempts to assess the merits of various approaches to harnessing social capital for the purpose of policy formulations at the local level in light of the West Midland projects findings as well as other similar work.

Social capital and social policy in the UK

Whilst the term social capital is only a relatively recent addition to the vocabulary of policy-makers in the UK, for commentators in the United States the notion has held a

somewhat longer fascination (Putnam, 1993). In fact, much of the interest in social capital (on both sides of the Atlantic) can be traced back to the work of two political scientists based in the United States, namely Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 2001), who during the 1990s were the instigators of a school of thought that attributed many of the social and economic ills of contemporary society to the gradual deterioration of community life. Central to their argument was the notion of social capital, typified as a range of social structures and relations, which acted as a form of social 'glue', facilitating human interaction within communities. Positive social forms of this nature, the argument went, had been eroded to a critical level by the formalisation of many types of social interaction in the twentieth century, leading to a thinning of the glue that had previously acted as an informal buttress against social disorder and social fragmentation. The answer, as similarly forwarded by both Fukuyama (1999) and Putnam (2001), was to develop and reinvigorate the social forms that represented social capital. Moreover, both of these commentators relied heavily for their interpretations upon the work of the sociologist James Coleman (1990) who provided the first definitive typology of social capital and incorporating elements such as trust, social networks, social norms, common expectations, reciprocity and altruism into a more accessible interpretation of the complex notion (Coleman, 1990).

However, the transatlantic debate around social capital was not all one way. At the same time as these ideas were gaining a hold in the US, in the UK the work of the political theorist Anthony Giddens around the role of civil society in contemporary life was proving similarly influential (Giddens, 1999). A central focus of Giddens interpretation was the role of what he termed 'active citizenship', or the need for a greater degree of pro-activity within the UK populace to engage 'social capacity' (including things like networks of acquaintances and extended familial networks) for the purpose of addressing social as well as material needs (Giddens, 1999).

In recent years, prompted by the work of Robert Putnam and his peers, more and more of the general ethos and language of social capital has seeped into the approaches and rhetoric of policy-makers in the UK. The influence of this 'new' interpretation has been evident in a variety of strategies adopted by policy-makers since New Labour came to office in 1997, all of which have the common characteristic of giving a central role to the use of informal social structures as a basis for addressing social problems (SEU, 2000; SEU, 2001). Indeed, a core focus of 'new' agencies such as the Social Exclusion Unit and the latter Neighbourhood Renewal Unit has been the potential benefit of social capital for disadvantaged groups in society. Furthermore, the people seen as having most to benefit from maximising the potential of their social resources are those who could be interpreted as being deficient in what can be characterised as more 'tangible' assets, for instance academic qualifications and/or fiscal capital, and who also tend to be concentrated within the poorest communities.

Whilst the notion social capital has been interpreted as encompassing a myriad of social structures and social relations (with particular reference to James Coleman's seminal work), when the term has been used within policy pronouncements in the UK the focus has tended to fall upon three quite specific aspects, namely:

- the benefits of increasing interaction (or participation) within community-based groups and networks;
- the benefits of increasing levels of trust within communities, and

- the benefits of developing a more pro-active sense of self-help, or altruistic nature, within communities.

Just what these 'benefits' might actually be can be a bit harder to pin down. Policy statements which focus upon social capital tend to avoid specifics. For instance, community participation is generally considered a 'good thing' by policy-makers to promote because it is seen as developing capacity within communities, enabling them to contribute to addressing their needs and solving their problems, whether these relate to issues around under-employment, crime and health. In practice, the most explicit links between social capital and policy outcomes have been made in terms of their potentially beneficial impact upon health, with links being made between harnessing community networks in order to promote healthier lifestyles as well as links between higher levels of sociability and an enhanced quality of life (Campbell *et al*, 1999; Gillies, 1998; Campbell and Gillies (2001)). In addition to the field of health, other areas of policy which commentators have suggested could find social capital particularly beneficial are crime prevention (Kawachi *et al*., 1999; Lederman *et al*., 2002; Rosenfeld *et al*., 2001), education (Reay, 2000; Stone, 2001; Israel *et al*., 2001) and employment (Aguilera, 2002; Fernandez *et al* 2001).

Perhaps an obvious point to make here, but nevertheless one which warrants elucidation, is that the benefits of harnessing social capital are unlikely to be confined to their target communities. As informal structures replace formal structures (for instance, informal acquaintances replacing social/community workers) the strain on existing budgets at the local level is likely to reduce. It could be argued then, that the funds freed up on the basis of a more social capital-oriented approach could be redirected to other areas and priorities (at least it would be hoped that this would be the case, rather than simply facilitating overall reductions in local budgets). Yet it could equally be asked whether or not social capital, either as a framework or descriptive tool, would actually bring anything new to the policy process. This question is borne from the fact that a great deal of the terminology – as well as range of approaches – used by the new policy strand would seem to simply replicate much of the language and ethos of community development as a long defined (and sometimes maligned) approach within social policy. The answer to this query is that a social capital inspired approach should differ in its recognition of the interconnectedness of both social structures and social relations. In other words, an approach informed by social capital would implicitly have it that there is little point in blindly trying to develop participation within a community in the hope that levels of trust and altruistic behaviour will increase if the relationships between these different types of social relation are not more fully understood. For instance, the knock-on effect of developing certain types of participation may be to actually reduce levels of trust within a community (whether or not this quality is explicitly recognised by policy-makers is a moot point). However, as already suggested, despite the apparent value of social capital within the policy context, there is currently little evidence as to the 'actual' benefits of adopting social capital either as a descriptive or analytical tool for the purpose of assessing and/or developing policy strategies.

Part of the problem is that however influential the ideas of commentators such as Robert Putnam are, their explorations of social capital provide little of substance in terms of how to actually engage with such a complex notion in the 'real world', not least for the purpose of developing related policies. Before the value of social capital can be realised at

all then, there is a need to develop ways of measuring it that ensure that what is ultimately produced is 'fit for purpose' within local policy frameworks and strategies, specifically, whether any method would fulfil the following criteria:

1 Could any measurement of social capital be applied using existing data retrieval methods at the local level or would it require the development of new approaches?
2 Could any measurement of social capital be explicitly linked to specific policy strands and/or programmes?
3 Next, how (or could) the methodology enable an assessment of the impact of social capital inspired policies?
4 Would the methodology enable an assessment of changes in relative levels of social capital over time?

With these questions in mind, the following section looks for some inspiration in developing a tool for operationalising social capital in the local policy context from the various approaches that have been adopted to date for the purpose of quantifying and measuring social capital.

Measuring social capital

Although social capital is a relatively recent addition to the language of policy-makers in UK, there already exists a not inconsiderable track record of developing measurements of the concept, although the relative value of these approaches to policy interpretations differs widely (Aguilera, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Fernandez *et al.* 2001; Fukuyama, 1995, 1999; Onyx and Bullen, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2001). In the case of political scientists such as Putnam and Fukuyama, there has been a tendency to rely upon what can be characterised as 'proxy' indicators of social capital, for instance:

• surveys of *Participation Rates in Voluntary Groups* (levels of participation being inferred from this, and in the case of voluntary groups, levels of altruism);
• figures on *newspaper readership* and *voter turnout* in elections (inferred as reflecting concern for (and interest in) the well-being of fellow citizens and, thus, an altruistic tendency);
• survey responses to generic questions around levels of *trust* (often included in surveys of community safety and/or well-being);
• data from *Time-Use Surveys* (a measure which provides a breakdown of the daily activities of individuals, for instance, the exact amount of time they spend socialising with others, providing a proxy of both sociability and participation).

Despite the attraction of such an approach – chiefly the fact that it does not require time consuming and costly development and application of original methods – commentators have been quick to cast doubt on its credibility, for instance, questioning whether or not many of the proxy indicators it relies upon actually have much to do with social capital at all (Levi, 1996; Morrow, 1999; Portes, 1999). In turn, these approaches also highlight a further problem with mining data from diverse (and largely non-comparative) sources for the purpose of developing measurements of social capital, namely their inability to facilitate any assessment of the relationships between its distinct components, whether this refers to the connection between levels of trust and participation in a community or that between aspects such as altruism and sociability.

However, there have also been attempts to develop ways of measuring social capital through the collection of dedicated (or original) data, using methods which are more explicitly grounded in theoretical understandings of the notion, two of which are discussed now.[1] A particularly good example of such a theory-informed approach to measuring social capital has been developed by Onyx and Bullen (2001), who utilised a large-scale survey method to measure social capital in five rural areas of Australia. The measurement of social capital used in this particular example incorporated a variety of dimensions, selected by the researchers on the basis of an intensive review of the literature surrounding social capital, and included distinct elements such as participation in networks, reciprocal relations, levels of trust, and the existence of social norms within communities (Onyx and Bullen, 2001). Each of these separate elements was *realised* through a series of standard questionnaire prompts (for instance, 'In the past week, how many telephone conversations did you have with friends?' being one of the prompts used to measure participation). In this way Onyx and Bullen were able to develop a measurement of social capital which incorporated at least some of the diversity of social relations it is seen as representative of, whilst also providing the basis for a comparative measurement of the notion across five distinct localities.[2] More generally though, whilst the findings of the study suggested that this methodology generally provided a good basis for measuring social capital, in some ways at least, the picture it provided was somewhat limited. In particular Onyx and Bullen (2001) suggested that large-scale surveys of social capital would benefit from being grounded within more in-depth qualitative work undertaken within communities to situate broader findings within the real life experiences of people.

Closer to home, the *General Household Survey* (GHS, 2002) has recently incorporated a series of questions on social capital in its regular data retrieval procedure. As in the Australian case study, the GHS addresses the multi-dimensionality of social capital through the construction of six specific dimensions, and whilst there is some similarity with those chosen by Onyx and Bullen, the GHS incorporates a more network-oriented interpretation of the phenomena, as shown here:

- civic engagement;
- neighbourliness;
- reciprocity;
- social networks;
- social support;
- perceptions of local area.

The use of a questionnaire-based methodology of the types described above has a range of benefits, not least of which is the potential it offers of reaching large numbers of people with the prospect of gauging their levels of social capital and its constituent elements. Separating out discrete aspects from social capital (e.g., into dimensions such as trust and altruism) also offers the potential to assess the relationships and impacts of such social forms upon one another and the implications these may have in the development of social policies. In turn, similar survey methodologies are already common practice amongst most local authorities in the UK in relation to their consultative mechanism with local residents (thus longitudinal change in levels of measured social capital could be gauged).

However, on the flip side, the basic questionnaire approach can also be quite limiting, a fact openly recognised even by those who have utilised this approach (Onyx and Bullen, 2001). Large-scale surveys tend to lack depth and therefore understanding of how processes work in 'real life', concentrating instead upon common denominators and general trends. In particular there is also an issue around the cultural sensitivity of the questions used within questionnaire surveys. The accuracy and representativeness of any measurement of social capital is likely to be severely effected by the prescriptive nature of the prompts used to investigate social capital. Moreover, and in specific reference to the 'fit for purpose' model outlined earlier, questionnaires of this type may be of little value in the context of developing and testing local policies unless they are more explicitly geared towards specific policy strands and initiatives. The likelihood that social capital is a highly contextualised phenomenon – in other words, what represents social capital is in one area might differ markedly from another – is another factor that may mitigate against a survey method. This situation is undoubtedly complicated by the standardised nature of the survey methodology, which seeks comparative analyses across social groups and geographic areas (e.g., across ward boundaries and local authority districts). These are just some of the issues that any questionnaire developed for the purpose of measuring social capital would have to seek to address.

If social capital is to play a positive (and effective) part in directing social policies at the local level, methods of measuring the phenomenon in this context would appear a priority. However, as already outlined within this paper, in order for such a procedure to be 'fit for this purpose', any methodology would have to aspire (at least in the immediate term) to the existing frameworks and exigencies of policy practice. Whilst there already exist approaches which would appear to have value in developing social capital-oriented policies, their practicality and value at the local level remain in doubt. With these issues in mind, the following section looks for some pointers as to what some of the likely pitfalls to such a process are likely to be through the findings of a study which recently set out to measure social capital within four metropolitan boroughs of the West Midlands.

Measuring social capital: the Black Country case study

The Black Country is a sub-region of the West Midlands which incorporates the four metropolitan boroughs of Wolverhampton,[3] Dudley, Walsall and Sandwell. Moreover, a tradition of heavy industry has meant that this locality has suffered more than most as a result of the restructuring of the global economy over the last two decades. As recently as 1998 the *Index of Deprivation* used by the *Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions* (DETR, 2000) suggested that three of the sub-regions four boroughs were in the top 31 of the most deprived districts in England. The human face of this deprivation is evident in the high levels of health inequality, low employment, high levels of crime and poor physical environment that persists throughout much of the sub-region. As part of an integrated approach to addressing the sub-regions problems, agencies (public as well as private) with a stake in the regeneration of the Black Country have recently begun to investigate the potential for harnessing the social resources of the sub-regions' inhabitants for the purpose regenerating the locality (BCC, 2000).

The Black Country Social Capital Project[4] (BCSCP) is just one tangible outcome of this new thinking. The BCSCP set out to investigate the potential for developing measurements

of social capital within the four boroughs of the Black Country, as such it also offered a test bed for some of the issues that will need to be addressed if similar methodologies are to be used explicitly in relation to defining and assessing the impact of social capital-oriented policies at the local level.

Taking Onyx and Bullen's (2001) work as a starting point, the first step in the development of the methodology for the BCSCP involved the definition of a range of core domains through which to assess social capital. In turn, the domains used for the purpose of the BCSCP were chosen because they were seen as encapsulating core aspects of social capital as defined within the literature, the resulting typology being fourfold:

- trust;
- participation;
- sociability;
- altruism.

However, as in the case of the notion of social capital itself, there exist a variety of interpretations in relation to each of these domains. So for the purpose of clarification, it is useful to briefly elaborate those interpretations adopted for each domain within this study (and just *why* these were adopted).

The first domain, trust, is a social virtue which is consistently seen as a pivotal element in the development of social capital, perhaps even the cornerstone of co-operative activity between individuals (Coleman, 1990; Fukuyama, 1995, 1999). The trust domain is defined here in relation to the individuals perceptions of the trustfulness of others within their community, levels of this trust being likely to differ considerably in respect to different groups and individuals and in response to a variety of factors, rational or otherwise (Fukuyama, 1995).

Moreover, the relationship between trust, and the second domain, participation, is often characterised as a mutually dependent one, with both – to varying degrees – dependent upon the other to function effectively (Coleman, 1990). The interpretation of the participation domain reflects the emphasis upon informal activities related to *micro-networks*, networks such as local associations, community-based groups and clubs (Putnam, 1993).

In turn, sociability, although superficially very similar to participation, is seen here as more indicative of the individuals innate tendency (their *predilection*) to interact with others, a dimension sociologists have recently begun to suggest is a key signifier of social capital (Portes, 1999).

The last domain defined, altruism, encapsulates the notion of activity initiated on the basis of an altruistic sense of serving the public good, identified as a key motivational factor behind the decisions made by certain individuals to participate within social networks, not chiefly for their own benefit but for that of others (Coleman, 1990).

Again with reference to Onyx and Bullen's (2001) work, each of the above domains was *realised* as a series of questionnaire prompts to be applied through a large-scale survey within each borough. In practice, whilst the precise nature of the questioning was similar to the surveys discussed in the previous section, in the case of the BCSCP the prompts were designed to reflect the nature of the domains as described above, as in the case of altruism shown here:[5]

	Yes	No
Did you vote in the last *general* election?	[ ]	[ ]
Did you vote in the last *local* election?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you attended any kind of community consultation event in the last 3 years (e.g. events run by the local council, a health organisation or the police)?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you organised or taken part in any group activities arranged through a religious organisation or faith group in the last year?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever been personally involved in an environmental project (such as tree planting, canal clearing or community gardening)?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever been involved in a campaign/protest group about a local issue?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever been involved with helping in a voluntary organisation?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever helped anyone by acting as an advocate for them (i.e., putting their case for them)?	[ ]	[ ]
Do you regularly give money or other things to charity?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever organised an event for a charity or voluntary organisation?	[ ]	[ ]
Have you ever organised a social or sporting event?	[ ]	[ ]

As the examples above and in the appendices indicate, these prompts do not differ significantly from those adopted by others already discussed. As suggested above, this is partly a reflection of the need to comply with the exigencies of the survey methodology they are applied within. However, just as the domains selected have been chosen on the basis of facilitating an assessment of the impact of various aspects of social capital on one another, they attempt to improve on previously used prompts by incorporating a scaling system for responses, allowing respondents to indicate just how much benefit (if any) these individuals thought they gained from participating in specific activities and/or socialising with their friends (see appendix).

The final questionnaire was sent to a sample of residents within the four boroughs (providing a total of 3225 respondents). The inclusion of questions relating to basic socio-economic indicators (e.g., occupation, tenancy, gender and ethnicity) in the survey responses allowed an assessment of how different social groups engaged with the various domains of social capital. By using respondents postcodes it was also possible to map social capital across the locality. A targeted 'booster' survey was also conducted to ensure the representativeness of the sample (adding a further 340 respondents across the four boroughs). The completed dataset was then analysed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). The rest of this section relates these findings and points to some lessons for future improvements to the methodology.

Social capital in the Black Country: encouraging more participative communities?

Although essentially developed to measure a baseline of social capital within the Black Country sub-region, the findings of the BCSCP offer some useful general insights into

Table 1   Social capital domains by gender in the Black Country

	n^*	Participation	Altruism	Trust	Sociability
Female	1718	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.11
Male	1791	−0.02	−0.04	−0.06	−0.11

Table 2   Social capital domains by age in the Black Country

	n^*	Participation	Altruism	Trust	Sociability
Younger persons (16–24)	258	−0.03	0.55	−0.31	−0.19
Early middle-aged (25–44)	1098	0.34	0.05	−0.10	−0.16
Later middle-aged (45–60)	1299	−0.14	−0.16	0.17	−1.24
Older persons (over 60)	879	−0.20	0.01	0.11	0.39

the value (and limitations) of using a traditional consultative tool for the purpose of measuring and assessing the impact of social capital at the local level. In particular it provided the opportunity to examine one particular strand of the Government's social policy in more detail. As previously indicated, agencies such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit are placing increasing emphasis upon one core dimension of social capital, namely, participation. Nowhere is this new emphasis more apparent than in the recent introduction of funding strands such as the Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) and Neighbourhood Renewal Community Chests (NRCC), introduced with the intention of both harnessing and developing networks within communities, not only to make the policy process a more inclusive one but also to promote a greater degree of proactivity within the 88 most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK (SEU, 2001). The inclusion of participation as a distinct domain within the survey offered the opportunity to develop a preliminary assessment of the hurdles this new approach is likely to encounter.

However, the initial, broader, examination of the data also revealed some interesting patterns. One of the first stages in the analysis of the responses from the BCSCP involved mapping the data across all four boroughs at the level of postcode district[6], to assess the existence of any distinct geography of social capital within the locality as a whole. Interestingly, as in the case of the Australian study, social capital was seen to possess quite a distinct geography within the Black Country: whilst the highest levels of social capital were evident to the north of the locality, these gradually decreased the further south you went.[7]

However, when the responses of different social groups were analysed against each of the four domains of social capital it was obvious that any general trends masked quite distinct disparities in how the residents of the Black Country engaged with social capital in its various forms (Tables 1–4).[8] For instance, as evident from Table 2, younger people appear to be considerably more altruistic in their behaviour than their older counterparts in the locality, whilst the highest levels of participation are evident amongst those in their early middle age. In turn within the classifications of ethnicity, although the findings indicated that *white* respondents exhibited the highest levels of trust and sociability (albeit to a lesser extent), in terms of the other two domains of altruism and participation, they displayed lower levels than most other groups. Furthermore, if taken as an indicator of socio-economic status, the responses in relation to occupation (Table 4) provide a varied

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Table 3 Social capital domains by ethnicity in the Black Country

	n^*	Participation	Altruism	Trust	Sociability
White	3086	0.01	−0.04	0.06	0.05
Black Caribbean	116	0.01	0.30	−0.41	−0.14
Black African	22	−0.14	0.35	−0.38	−0.73
Black Other	40	0.05	0.50	−0.35	−0.02
Indian	148	0.21	0.16	−0.22	−0.36
Pakastani	69	0.13	0.27	−0.11	−0.41
Bangladeshi	33	−0.24	0.45	−0.23	−0.16

Table 4 Social capital domains by occupation in the Black Country

	n^*	Participation	Altruism	Trust	Sociability
Employed	1365	0.121	−0.136	0.011	−0.233
Look after home	159	0.245	0.307	−0.306	0.125
Education/training	92	0.249	0.326	0.080	−0.302
Unable to work	96	0.178	−0.349	0.168	0.039
Seeking work	77	−0.134	0.344	−0.652	−0.119
Retired	749	−0.107	−0.148	0.269	0.445

Note: * total number of respondents.

picture of how employment status influences levels of each domain amongst the Black Country sample, most notable being the apparent relationship between those seeking work and low levels of trust.

However, the measurement of participation constructed for the BCSCP provides a useful indication of some of the issues around accessing (as well as developing) community capacity, whether for the purpose of enhancing community involvement in the policy process (as in case of the CEF), or for more generally beneficial aims. The range of questioning included within the BCSCP to measure this particular domain was intended to reflect the notion of civic engagement, in particular respondents were asked about their participation in local groups, such as local sports and leisure facilities, credit unions, advice centres, community centres, drop in centres, adult education services, after school clubs and other youth clubs, the very kinds of networks which funds, such as the CEF and NRCC need to tap into for the purpose of widening the process of consultation. As the above tables show, there were significant disparities evident within the sample in relation to how specific social groups engaged with the various forms of participation. For instance, Table 4 shows that whilst the highest rates of participation were found to be amongst *White* and *Afro-Caribbean* respondents the lowest levels were evident amongst the *Bangladeshi* and *Black African* respondents. However, the findings of the survey also indicated that the value attributed to particular networks varied quite markedly amongst respondents (they were asked to indicate how useful they found respective groups/activities e.g., ranging from '*not at all*' to '*very useful*'). Responses also suggested that many within the sample were often unaware of the existence of certain groups in their local area, despite indicating that they would like access to said activities. Moreover, the data also tentatively indicated

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that there was at least some relationship between two of the domains measured, namely participation and altruism, the findings suggesting that they were, at least to a degree, dependent upon each other. For instance, this finding may indicate that higher levels of participation are predicated upon the altruistic behaviour of the residents of a particular area. This finding perhaps indicates the value a more holistic approach to addressing the issue of participation in the policy context. At the very least, it suggests the need to examine the relationship between participation and other types of social relation within the policy context.

Measuring social capital: a way forward?

This paper has sought to assess the *how* and the *why* of operationalising the theoretically derived notion of social capital within the local policy context in the UK. As suggested above, in recent years a great deal of *political* capital has been vested in the notion but, despite a range of studies suggesting its potential benefits within a host of policy-related fields, the practicalities of just how a nebulous concept such as social capital could be applied for the purpose of developing new policies (and improving existing ones) remains something of a conundrum. However, whilst providing few easy answers, the existing work around social capital does at least give some pointers as to how it could be measured in a manner that was 'fit for purpose' within the local policy context. In turn, a recent study which utilised a questionnaire survey method to measure social capital within four boroughs of the West Midlands, provided further insights into the potential pitfalls of such an approach to measuring the phenomenon at the local level.

What the review outlined in this paper indicates is that an emphasis upon survey-based interpretations of social capital may be misplaced. This is not to say that quantitative approaches to measuring social phenomena have no value. In particular they enable the views of a large number of people to be accessed as well as the context for the assessment of a broad range of trends from representative samples of the UK populace. Moreover, the survey method is already commonly applied within the UK as a standard local data-gathering mechanism for many local authorities and therefore offers scope for assessing changes in the level and nature of social capital over time.

Yet quantitative approaches such as the survey methodology also require a range of variables to maintain significance and validity, begging the question of just how many variables is enough? For instance, in the case of social capital, can there ever be enough variables to encapsulate the multi-dimensionality and interconnectedness of this notion? Then again, there is the question of which variables to measure and the allied one of how do you know what you are asking people is actually relevant to their everyday experiences and needs? In addition to all of this is the difficulty of evaluating the impact of specific policy strands aimed at evoking social capital, whether for enhancing community safety or a more general aim of increasing the sense of well-being within a community, using the 'quantity' over 'quality' approach typified by the questionnaire survey.

Many of the likely problems with measuring social capital through a survey method are evident from the experience of the BCSCP. Whilst the findings of this study indicated distinct differences in relation to the levels of participation within the sample, it is likely that the prescriptive nature of the options provided may have omitted a range of activities more relevant to certain groups, with the end result of giving an unrepresentative picture of participation levels. One way of addressing this problem is to adopt a

mixed-method approach to measuring social capital, one which incorporates qualitative as well as quantitative methods. The inclusion of more qualitative elements such as in-depth interviews and focus groups could help the development of questionnaires, in particular, making them more context specific to their target communities, this is particularly important in terms of ensuring that indicators are culturally sensitive to the nature of the communities they seek to measure social capital in. Indeed, the value of similar approaches has already been recognised in the policy context in the UK, a number of studies conducted for the Health Education Authority (Campbell *et al.*, 1999) have already incorporated in-depth interviews in order to develop definitions of social capital that are relevant to particular client groups. What the findings of the BCSPP and similar approaches to measuring social capital indicates is that if it is to be made 'fit for purpose' in the local policy context, definitions of this complex notion will have to be derived from *within* communities as well as in terms of specific policy functions, in order to gauge just what those in need benefit from by using their social resources.

Acknowledgements

Appendix: Social Capital Questionnaire Prompts

Q1.   How much do you trust the following people?
PLEASE TICK ONE BOX FOR EACH GROUP

	Not at all	A little	Quite a lot	Completely	Does not apply to me
Next door neighbours	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Others who live nearby	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Your Doctor	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Your work-mates	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Young people in your area	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Old people in your area	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local councillor	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Your faith leader (e.g. priest, Imam, minister, Rabbi)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local Police officers	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Members of your family	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
A stranger at your front door with no form of identification	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
A stranger at your front door with some form of identification	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

The following question is about what kinds of social activities you take part in and how beneficial you feel they are for you (this includes whether they make you happy, improve your prospects, give you better skills etc.)

Q2.   To what extent do you benefit from taking part in the following social activities?
PLEASE TICK ONE BOX FOR EACH ACTIVITY

	I get no benefit	I get a little benefit	I get quite a lot of benefit	I benefit a great deal	Does not apply to me
Socialise with friends	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Socialise with relatives/ family members	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Socialise with work-mates	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Socialise with members of the same religious or faith group	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Meet new people	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Go on holiday with friends	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Communicate with people over the internet	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Q3.   To what extent do you benefit from the groups and facilities that you use in your area?
PLEASE TICK ONE BOX FOR EACH GROUP/FACILITY. IF YOU DON'T USE A PARTI-CULAR GROUP/ACILITY, PLEASE TICK THE "DO NOT USE" BOX

	Do not use	I benefit a great deal	I get quite a lot of benefit	I get a little benefit	I get no benefit
Mother and toddler group	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Childcare facilities e.g. registered childminder, nursery	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
After school clubs/activities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Youth club/other youth activities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local sports/leisure facilities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local pub/social club	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local adult education courses	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Credit Union/community organised savings group	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Neighbourhood Watch Scheme	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Community Centre/meeting place	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Public transport services	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Drop in centre for older people	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local sheltered housing/ residential facilities for older people	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Please write in below any other facilities we have not listed:

1.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
2.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

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Notes

1 These examples are chosen as they are seen as having the most potential in terms of application within a local policy context.

2 The findings of the Australian case studies indicated that higher levels of social capital within the five communities were strongly associated with the development of social networks and different forms of participation within the communities. It was also apparent from the findings of the Australian study that social capital was geographically varied, or, more specifically, that levels of social capital (and its constituent elements) differed quite markedly between the five communities studied.

3 Wolverhampton attained city status in its own right during the life-span of the project.

4 The BCSP project methodology was developed and implemented in the second part of 2001, the retrieved data being analysed in the first part of 2002.+

5 Examples of the prompts used for the other domains are included as appendices. A copy of the full questionnaire used for the purpose of the survey can be obtained from the author on request.

6 Copies of relevant maps are available from the author on request.

7 Explaining this pattern is more difficult, although superficial data did seem to suggest a correlation between lower levels of social capital and higher levels of affluence.

8 The values given in these tables indicate how the social capital of a given group of respondents compared with that of others in the Black Country, positive values indicating that a particular social group appeared to have 'more' of a given type of social capital, and for negative values the opposite being true (in general the further from zero a value is the 'more' or 'less' of a given type of social capital a group has). For example, in Table 1, the negative figures exhibited for all domains under the 'Male' grouping indicates that 'Female' respondents exhibited higher levels of sociability, trust and altruism than their male counterparts (although the overall difference has to be seen as minimal).

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