

## Review Article

# Conceptualising Connectedness: Implications for Policy and Practice

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*This paper reviews four texts that address connectedness in social relationships. It considers concepts of care and social capital and how these are applied in policy and practice. It argues the importance of understandings deriving from these concepts in developing policies that support well-being, reflect the significance of moral decision making and enable the development of supportive networks.*

### Introduction

This themed issue discusses findings from the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF), which was introduced in England in 2001 as a means of contributing to the prevention of social exclusion. But this issue also has a broader purpose. Social exclusion is a relational concept. It seeks to capture the way in which individuals and social groups become marginalised from mainstream social, economic, cultural and political life and to understand the consequences of this for their overall well-being. NECF sought to understand the nature of that exclusion as experienced by children and their families and to consider the effectiveness of strategies implemented by Children's Fund Partnerships to counteract such negative impacts. In doing so, we also needed to consider ways in which *connections* may be conceptualised and practices developed to build on, develop or enhance networks amongst children and their families, the social groups of which they are a part, as well as amongst the workers implementing preventative practices. In this issue, we aim to contribute to a process of policy analysis grounded in a robust theorisation of the dynamics of social life, which makes its own connections between the framing of policy and its implementation through particular forms of social practice.

For this review article, we have selected to review some rather different texts, which collectively have similar purposes, though they do not always address the same area of policy as the Children's Fund. They address social capital, care, family life and restorative justice. The concept of *social capital* has captured the imagination of academics and policy makers concerned to understand ways in which a more inclusive society may be developed. It features substantially in New Labour policy discourse and, though it has been the subject of considerable academic critique, has received international attention as a means of explaining, for example, variations in economic performance and health status.

The concept of *care* has a rather different pedigree within social policy. Until recently, care was understood to be of relevance only in the context of policies addressed to the

most vulnerable members of society: children, disabled and older people needing the support of others in their daily lives. In this context, it became subject to critique because of the assumed link with disempowering social practices. Work deriving from feminist political philosophy has challenged this negative perspective on the value of care and we address this perspective below.

Recent research on *family life* demonstrates the relevance of ideas about social capital and the positive value of care to understanding how family members address difficult issues of change in familial relationships. It also shows how social policies impact on these processes of decision making in everyday life. Finally, we examine a text on *restorative justice* to illustrate how concepts, both of social capital and care, may be invoked (implicitly or explicitly) in the design of social practices intended to repair fractured relationships – particularly those in which children and young people are involved.

### Social capital

D. Halpern (2005) **Social Capital**, Polity, Cambridge.

The concept of social capital has become prominent in analyses of the ways that people relate to each other in groups and networks and of the individual and collective effects of such connectedness. Halpern's book provides a comprehensive overview of the meanings and uses of 'social capital' in theory and practice.

Halpern provides a straightforward definition of what is a hotly contested concept; social capital refers to:

Social networks and the norms and sanctions that govern their character. It is valued for its potential to facilitate individual and community action, especially through the solution of collective action problems (2005: 4).

Social capital is thus defined both in terms of what it is and what it does. It comprises three 'basic components': the grouping or network to which individuals belong and through which they connect with each other; the norms, values, rules and expectancies, the 'habits of reciprocity', that are shared by individual members; and the punishments and rewards that moderate behaviour and maintain the group and its norms (2005: 10–11). Moreover, these descriptive categories may be applied at a number of levels, from the micro-level of the family, through the meso-level of the neighbourhood or workplace, to the macro-level of the nation and beyond (2005: 13–19). Halpern suggests that most, if not all, forms of social capital can be described in terms of these components and levels. But perhaps more significantly, social capital is also defined by reference to its purposiveness. Social capital is a resource that enables individuals or collectivities to act in certain ways and to do certain things they could not otherwise do.

Social capital functions as a facilitating resource in different ways, according to the types of relationships that characterise the particular network (2005: 19–27). Thus *bonding* relationships refer to the social ties between people with similar identities and interests, enabling collective action in pursuit of common goals. Where bonding relationships predominate, members benefit from strong sources of mutual support and protection – care for fellow members is a key norm. But such networks also tend to be

exclusive, not extending their care and support to outsiders, and to lack the capacity to forge beneficial alliances with other groupings. Conversely, *bridging* relationships refer to the social ties between people with different identities and interests but some shared experiences, enabling dialogue between groups and agreement on joint action in pursuit of common goals. Here, norms of inclusivity, reciprocity and mutual understanding are significant, although for individuals such networks may not be able to offer strong sources of personal support. Finally, *linking* relationships denote connections between networks and external sources of power or resource, such as governmental agencies, enabling network members to access the means to achieve particular goals.

Halpern notes that social capital cannot be viewed as an unequivocal 'public good': criminal networks, for example, can meet all the criteria for social capital, and in some communities or associations it operates more as a 'club' good, restricting benefits of membership to those individuals who meet particular criteria. Nonetheless, the general tenor of the book is to see social capital as a force for positive development, something that we need 'more' of, particularly at the community or neighbourhood level. This then has implications for public policy. From this perspective, government has a key role in the development of social capital, in building the organisational capacity and leadership that will enable local communities to take responsibility for themselves and to act on that responsibility (see Prime Minister's Strategy Unit 2002, to which Halpern was a leading contributor).

In his central chapters, Halpern examines the contribution of social capital to improving outcomes in the fields of economic performance, health and well-being, crime, education and effective government. The analysis draws on a wide range of research data, and the conclusions are carefully differentiated; for example, in relation to health and well-being, the general finding is that 'the evidence suggests a very strong relationship' between social capital and mental and physical health (Halpern, 2005: 109). However Halpern notes that:

it is found repeatedly that the *quality* of relationships matter. Just knowing someone is not enough – the relationship needs to be positive and supportive to have beneficial impacts on health. (And) the most powerful health impacts appear to arise from the most intimate relationships – micro-level bonding social capital. While this latter point may seem obvious, it is . . . not true for all outcome variables. Economic advancement, for example, seems to rest rather more on diffuse bridging social capital (2005: 111–112).

In the final chapters, Halpern considers whether and how social capital can be built. His answers again range across the different types and levels of social capital and are offered with appropriate qualifications and caveats. Many of these proposals are, in themselves, unoriginal and may seem wearily familiar; for example:

- Greater support for families and parenting
- Mentoring
- Volunteering
- Neighbourhood level governance
- Community ICT networks
- Citizenship education and service learning
- Facilitating mutual respect.

But what is striking about the policy prescriptions offered here is their grounding in a carefully articulated theoretical framework, which perhaps provides an additional source of legitimation for them. They also provide a means of linking to other themes explored in this article; thus, in providing examples of 'New approaches to dealing with potential offenders', Halpern cites 'bringing young offenders face to face with their victims to establish a relationship' (2005: 299), thereby suggesting – without making this explicit – the possibility for social capital theory to contribute to the development of restorative justice (see below).

## Care

S. Sevenhuijsen (1998), **Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist considerations on justice, morality and politics**, Routledge, London.

Feminist academics have been concerned with the issue of 'care' from a number of perspectives. Sevenhuijsen distinguishes two tracks of work which have proceeded rather separately: work on caring as an activity – a 'labour of love' – and theoretical debate about care as a relational ethic. Sevenhuijsen is interested in the practical application of an ethic of care and in this text she offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which such an ethic has been theorised, and also applies it to specific policy debates: on child custody following divorce and on public health initiatives. She demonstrates how this approach can inform thinking about policies and practices capable of recognising vulnerability and dependence and promoting social justice. Others have applied this framework to practices such as social work and care for people with dementia (e.g. Parton, 2003, Brannelly, 2006) and to understanding the way lay carers make sense of care giving (Barnes, 2006).

Sevenhuijsen starts from the definition of care offered by Fisher and Tronto:

On the most general level we suggest that caring can be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (cited in Tronto, 1993: 103)

Tronto outlined four moral principles of care:

- **Attentiveness:** to recognise and be attentive to others.
- **Responsibility:** to take responsibility for action and its consequences.
- **Competence:** caring work should be competently performed.
- **Responsiveness:** to consider the position of the care-receiver from their perspective.

To which Sevenhuijsen has added a fifth principle: 'trust'. She sums up as follows:

The guiding thought of the ethic of care is that people need each other in order to lead a good life and that they can only exist as individuals through and via caring relationships with others (Sevenhuijsen, 2003: 183).

One of the strengths of the ethic of care is its capacity to be applied to the decisions people make about their personal relationships, the way in which those paid to provide 'care' actually carry out actions associated with this, and to interrogate the capacity of social policies to create the conditions within which friendships, connectedness,

intimacy – all of which Sevenhuijsen claims are essential to a truly human existence – are capable of realisation. Thus it provides a vocabulary with which to consider the consequences of social policies for people's everyday lives in terms that they themselves can recognise.

In the context of her discussion of legal and policy debates regarding child custody following divorce, Sevenhuijsen contrasts positions based in a contractarian philosophy or liberal rights discourse with those based in an ethic of care: 'Because the freedom of individuals to realise their goals is the overriding moral value in the liberal rights discourse, there is no moral space for thinking in terms of what it means to lead a meaningful life or for notions of connectedness to others' (1998: 106). In contrast, since an ethic of care starts from a 'premise of an existential situation of mutual dependency' (1998: 110), it focuses attention on the real life dilemmas to be faced in reaching decisions about how to act in ways that are good and just in terms of (in this instance) forming, developing and maintaining relationships with children. These are the kinds of real dilemmas faced by families undergoing change that appeals to the competing rights of the parties concerned are unable to resolve. Sevenhuijsen argues that the ethic of care 'provides meaningful modes of moral reasoning at the interstices between public and private where the legal regulation of family life is situated' (1998: 120). Thus, it provides an ethic to guide the building and maintenance of social capital. Its key characteristics are that it is concerned with responsibilities and relationships rather than rules and rights; it addresses concrete situations rather than being formal and abstract; and it can be described as a 'moral activity' rather than a set of principles to be followed.

### Family Life

F. Williams (2004) **Rethinking Families**, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London.

This book distils findings from a major research programme that addressed – and challenged – many assumptions about changing patterns of family life in England. The Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) programme explored the diversity of arrangements for 'partnering and parenting' across different locations and social groups. Importantly, it examined ways in which people negotiate the 'proper thing to do' (in relation to decisions about child care, work, living together, divorce or separation) in the context of the social, economic and cultural contexts in which they live. It challenged the notions that increasing individualisation leads to a decline in responsibility and that diversity in family arrangements leads to social instability. It revealed the inadequacy of broad brush theories in capturing the variability of different groups' experiences of change and the ways in which they respond to this in determining how best to live together. Thus it challenges pessimistic assumptions about the 'decline of the family' by pointing to both continuity and complexity in family forms and the necessity to understand why, for example, divorce has harmful effects in some circumstances but not in others.

Williams questions the extent to which children and family policy is based on research evidence that explores how family members behave in relation to each other, and how experiences of family life are affected by social policies. Given the context of diversity of family structures and of social, cultural and economic backgrounds, what might the CAVA research suggest to us about children and family policy in relation to how families can be supported to prevent social exclusion? A version of this question is posed at the start of the book: 'If governments are to support the capacity of people to care for themselves and each

other in ways they think fit, it is important to understand how people experience changes in family lives and personal relationships and what values inform their actions' (2004: 11). A key issue for this first chapter is the significance of relational ethics, in particular care, in providing a basis for policies and practices that can support the building of networks and resilience. The significance of concepts of 'connectedness' and 'commitments' are emphasised in using these to frame one of the two chapters that review the evidence from the programme as a whole.

Williams offers a review of family policies from the perspective of the normative assumptions they reveal about family life. She identifies how parenthood and parenting have become issues of public regulation to ensure parenting responsibilities are fulfilled. The focus on entry into the labour market as a means of tackling poverty is located within an emphasis on an ethic of work, which includes a moral imperative to turn people into better citizens. Thus one of the responsibilities of parenthood is to ensure that children are prepared to become 'citizen-workers'. Law and policy relating to divorce and separation is based on identities and responsibilities as mothers and fathers, rather than on relationships between husbands and wives. Parents face stiff penalties if their children break the law or do not go to school. Policies such as Sure Start and Every Child Matters require parents to work in partnership with the state, voluntary and commercial sectors to protect children from harm and to ensure they grasp educational opportunities to enable them to succeed in life. Williams also argues that policies are influenced by the priority given to targeting particular problems, such as youth crime, and identifies very different views of what childhood and children are about within policy discourse. However, she suggests that the dominant view is that of children as future citizens, with the emphasis on 'achieving' rather than 'enjoying' (DfES, 2003).

The CAVA research explored five aspects of family and relationship change: life after divorce; motherhood, work and care; non-conventional partnerships; transnational kinship; and collective groups and organisations who mobilise around parenting and partnering issues. Williams highlights the way in which both adults and children are active moral agents applying practical ethics 'which enable people's resilience in the face of change' (2004: 41) within particular cultural contexts that influence the decisions they make. Thus, for example, mothers' decision making about work is primarily influenced by their view of what it means to do the right thing for their children, and this is influenced by what being a good mother means to them. Such decisions cannot be mapped on to social or cultural variables such as social class or ethnicity; for example, differences were identified between different networks of parents relating to the schools their children attended. But what is evident is that policy based in assumptions of an instrumental cost-benefit rationality underpinning mothers' decisions about paid work is a blunt instrument that fails to recognise the moral concerns that guide such decisions.

The values that influence care and support amongst kin and close friends also operate in self-help groups. Such groups were particularly important for those who felt they were seen as 'bad parents' – whose children did not conform to behavioural and educational ideals. Groups enabled the sharing of experiences to provide a basis for challenging inappropriate and disrespectful practice, and gave members a sense of belonging based on informality, trust and reciprocity, and a non-judgmental approach. Thus they conformed to a type of social capital in which 'bonding' relationships were effective. However, the groups were rarely involved at the level of local partnership and decision making – they were less effective in developing 'linking' relationships, *except* where they reflected

political priorities concerned with crime and community safety and health inequalities. It was these 'policy relevant' groups that had best access to funds to support their activities.

The overall conclusion for policy is that an ethic of care needs to balance an ethic of work: 'Policies for ensuring children are well educated and their parents are self-sufficient have a logic and a laudable aim – of reducing poverty and of enhancing economic competitiveness. However, this logic alone does not resonate with what matters to people in their family lives and personal relationships' (2004: 74). This emphasis on developing policies that reflect the significance of how people live and decide together – amongst kin groups, friends and less intimate groups – provides a powerful counter to dominant discourses, which assume that diversity of personal and social relationships undermines social cohesion. It also reflects a growing interest in the value base of social policies and practices. It suggests we need to be much more sensitive to the particular networks in which people live and make decisions in order to understand how best support may be provided to families.

### Restorative justice

A. Morris and G. Maxwell (eds) (2003), **Restorative Justice for Juveniles: Conferencing, mediation and circles**, Hart Publishing, Oxford and Portland, Oregon.

Restorative justice (RJ) is an approach to dealing with the effects of 'crime' and with those who commit it that avoids the negative effects associated with the punitive ethos of the conventional criminal justice system. Its advocates constitute something akin to a world-wide movement, and elements of restorative justice are practised in many countries. It is regarded as a particularly appropriate response to juvenile offenders, and the book reviewed here provides accounts of a range of examples of restorative justice practices involving young people.

RJ is grounded in an explicit set of values and principles. There is, moreover, a marked resonance between RJ's values and principles and those of the ethic of care.

The values of RJ derive from its understanding of crime as 'a violation of people and relationships' (Zehr 1990, quoted in Morris and Maxwell, 2003: 3). Criminal acts are seen as destructive of social relationships, particularly between victim and offender, and as damaging both to the victim's feelings of trust and confidence in social relationships and to the offender's sense of obligation and mutuality in their relationships with others. For RJ, the harm resulting from crime requires 'solutions which promote repair, reconciliation and reassurance' (ibid). The search for such solutions must involve the principal parties who experience the harm: the victim, the offender and the wider network of relatives, friends, colleagues and neighbours ('the community') affected by the crime and its consequences.

These values contrast with those associated with 'conventional' (Western) criminal justice, in which retributive values dominate. Here, the emphasis is on crime as an offence against the state; on punishing the person committing the crime, rather than repairing the harm caused; and on a legal process that denies effective participation to the parties principally affected. Proponents of RJ view this approach as inherently exclusionary and stigmatising on an individual level. The victim, especially, is generally excluded from meaningful engagement in the justice process, and the offender is branded as a 'social outcast' with no route back into the social mainstream. At a collective level, retributive justice is criticised for its destructive effects – breaking up family and

community relationships, and generating social divisions between the law-abiding' and the 'criminal'. Despite this critique, it is important to recognise some similarities between the retributive and restorative justice approaches. As Walgrave's contribution to this volume makes clear, RJ generally involves the coercion of the offender and thus both it and conventional processes 'provide clear limits to social tolerance, base the intervention on the accountability of offenders, use force upon them, and may be painful' (2003: 30). But there is a crucial difference: 'the positive socio-ethical value of restorative justice . . . opens greater opportunities for more socially constructive responses to crime, leading to more restoration for the victim, more social peace and safety for the community, and more re-integrative opportunities for the offender' (ibid: 30).

The principles governing the application of RJ values can be summarised as:

- full participation of and consensus between the key stakeholders
- healing or restoring that which has been harmed
- acknowledgement of full and direct accountability by the offender
- repairing divided or fractured relationships, by creating respect and trust through dialogue
- strengthening the community to prevent future harms (ibid.: 5/6).

The ways in which these principles are implemented varies between different national jurisdictions. However, there is broad agreement that the most complete expression of RJ values and principles is found in practices based on conferencing, mediation and sentencing circles, and accounts of these applications provide the majority of contributions to the book. These practices all share a number of features and it is helpful to consider them in relation to the ethic of care principles. Thus, 'attentiveness' toward others is a core requirement of the participants in RJ practices, in particular the need to listen to and try to understand each other's feelings and points of view. Taking 'responsibility' for action is incumbent on the group of stakeholders as a whole, but is especially required of the young offender, who must acknowledge both their responsibility for the harm done and for acting to repair it. 'Competence' is required of those who convene the stakeholder group and lead it through the process of conferencing, mediation or circle sentencing. 'Responsiveness' is again specifically expected of the young offender, who is asked to consider the position of the victim and to try to understand the victim's experience. Finally, the (re)creation and maintenance of 'trust' between the stakeholders is a key object of RJ practices, and without it the attempt at restoration will almost certainly fail.

It is therefore possible to identify, at least provisionally, some general resonances between restorative justice and the ethic of care. Whilst 'care' does not itself appear as an explicit value or principle of RJ, it is clear that, for its advocates, a defining feature is its attempt to achieve justice through an approach that *cares for* those who are most directly affected by the criminal behaviour – the victim, the offender and relevant others. Indeed, it might be said that what is being restored in RJ is the integration of the victim, offender and others into networks of caring relationships; what, in this book, are sometimes referred to as the offenders' or victims' 'communities of care'.

This signals one of the weaknesses of the RJ approach – its tendency to adopt a simplistically benign view of 'community'. Young people's experiences of community are often of misunderstanding, repression and exclusion – of an absence of care – raising doubts about the ambitions of the RJ project. As other commentators have asked: 'Why might a young offender want to be restored to a community that has abused or



marginalised them?’ (Crawford and Newburn, 2003: 52). Nevertheless, the evidence from this book is that RJ at least offers the prospect of a constructive approach to responding to young offenders that is grounded in values of ‘care’ and prioritises outcomes seeking the young person’s involvement in supportive relationships and networks.

## **Conclusion**

The texts reviewed here, although quite diverse in their substantive concerns and in their style of analysis, open up ways of thinking about the relevance of ‘connectedness’ as a social policy concept and its implications for a range of policies and practices. More specifically, they enable us to reflect on two issues that we believe are significant in understanding how people navigate their way through the challenges and dilemmas of social life, especially where these involve questions that impact on the well-being of children. These issues are the nature and extent of moral decision making in people’s everyday lives, and the ways that people engage in groups and networks to find sources of strength and support in making moral decisions.

As the CAVA research shows, people facing fundamental changes in their personal and family relationships generally seek to cope with them ‘responsibly’, taking account of the needs and views of others, such as children, who are less able to influence outcomes. The ethic of care provides a conceptual framework both for analysing the content of such decision making and for identifying the kinds of policies and professional practices that can assist it. It clarifies the kinds of values and behaviours that policy and practice should seek to promote and enable, if the outcomes of personal decisions about relationships are to meet goals of social inclusion without comprising people’s right to choose how they live their lives. The research also shows how people engage with groups and networks that can provide support, advice and reassurance in the process of making difficult and complex decisions. Such engagement is particularly significant for people who are perceived, or experience themselves as, socially excluded or marginalised. Social capital theory is in turn helpful in understanding how such collective action operates, in identifying its potentialities and limitations in different circumstances, and, again, in suggesting directions for official policy and practice in helping marginalised and disempowered groups develop and sustain themselves. In this context, restorative justice provides an example of a formal attempt to develop a relational response to young people at high risk of social exclusion, that looks for ways of integrating and connecting those individuals to local networks of support. In restorative justice, ‘connectedness’ functions as both a means and an end of social policy.

These issues are of direct relevance to the topics addressed in other papers in this section. Both the Beirens et al and Mason and Broughton articles consider the significance of social capital in work with marginalised groups of children and families. Evans and Plumridge emphasise the value of networks amongst parents of disabled children. The discussions by Folgheraiter of network-based practice and by Morris and Burford of work with children’s networks have similarities with the RJ approach. An overall finding of NECF was that the emphasis in the Children’s Fund on individual children rather than on their social relationships limited the capacity of Partnerships to create sustainable change (see editorial).

The body of work represented by these texts has major implications for any analysis or evaluation of social policies. Policy analysis must assess the individual outcomes that may

be experienced by those targeted by policy initiatives. But it must also assess the extent to which such policies, and the practices through which they are implemented, enable the development of supportive networks and recognise and respect the complex moral decision making through which care is expressed in diverse situations. More broadly, it suggests that our understanding of 'social inclusion' might benefit from incorporating a nuanced understanding of the way in which connectedness is experienced and expressed.

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