

## article

# Social networks, social capital and poverty: panacea or placebo?

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Our understanding of the links between social networks and the causes or solutions to poverty have been enhanced through theoretical and empirical research on the concept of social capital. In this paper we discuss how social networks and social capital have commonly been presented as a problem or a panacea in policy regarding neighbourhoods and worklessness and then contrast this with recent evidence. We conclude that policy misrecognises the links between poverty and social networks and social capital and through cuts in public services in the UK, is currently undermining social capital and social networks.

**key words** poverty • social networks • social capital • neighbourhood effects  
• employment • social policy

## Introduction

As with the rest of the papers in this themed section, this paper has emerged from an evidence review of evidence around what might work in tackling poverty; in this case we were focused on social networks and the mitigation and alleviation of poverty. We link the concept of social networks to the broader concept of social capital that has had great salience in social science and social policy since the early 1990s (Field, 2008). Social capital gained widespread traction following the publication of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). It is possibly an over-used concept, or at least one that is not used with theoretical precision (Field, 2008; Fine, 2010). The three main theorists of social capital – Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam – differ quite substantially. For Pierre Bourdieu, social capital is a critical concept that explains the 'old boys' network' of elites: 'social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group' (Bourdieu, 1986, 88). For Coleman, social capital is the value of human capital captured by rational actors from exchanges, a similarly self-interested concept to Bourdieu's, but one that is less exclusive or related to class interest (Field, 2008, 32). For Putnam, social capital is the ties that bind or bridge between individuals and groups, with trust being a key factor in both the creation of social capital, and a product of social capital (Putnam, 2000). These three different

conceptions of social capital are useful in that they highlight how social networks are not passive for individuals. All social networks will have some utility to individuals, whether negative or positive, and using the term social capital focuses our attention on this usefulness.

The first sections of the paper focus on the definition of social capital developed by Putnam: '[t]he core idea of social capital is that social networks have value' and 'a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society' (Putnam, 2000, 18–20). Further, these well connected people are more likely to have productive 'bridging' social capital to a wide range of people in society. Conversely, it is argued that those who are poorly connected also have poor connections – they are more likely to have 'bonding' social capital that might support them, but also might exclude them from wider society. As developed in the policy analysis below, these concepts within a functionalist theorising of social capital have been used in much social policy and anti-poverty policy in the UK between 1997 and 2010. Since 2010, social policy has become focused on the 'dark side' of social capital (Field, 2008). In a more moralistic narrative, social capital is either bad – the norms of worklessness and other cultures of people experiencing poverty in 'Broken Britain' spread through social networks in families or communities; or implicitly good – the Putnam-style social capital that helps the 'strivers' of non-Broken Britain build the Big Society, brooms in hand (Tyler, 2013).

To focus on policy relevance the paper first of all presents a policy analysis of UK policy around neighbourhoods and also worklessness. These are policy areas where social networks, and the social capital (both positive and negative) they are meant to contain are deployed as causative agents or policy solutions. The evidence base for the impact of social networks and social capital in deprived neighbourhoods and on labour market integration collected in the evidence review is then discussed, suggesting that many of the assertions within policy are either incorrect or over-emphasised. In conclusion the paper draws on another earlier review of the way middle-class people use their social capital to gain advantage from public services (Matthews and Hastings, 2013). A critical comparison is made of the way in which social capital is actually used by middle-class people to accrue benefits to themselves and the way policy expects social capital to be useful to less affluent individuals. Indeed, it is argued that policy discourses makes other forms of social capital, such as strong familial bonds, or help in getting by, abject (Tyler, 2013) – solely a source of problematic behaviour and social exclusion. The paper ends by suggesting a more nuanced and inclusive approach to understanding how social networks might alleviate poverty.

## Review scope and methods

The evidence review was small-scale and tightly focused on the evidence around social networks and poverty. Wider, indirect links, such as research on social capital within education settings, or the growing evidence-base on health inequalities, social networks and social capital were excluded from the review. The review used as a basis what we might term 'folk' conceptions of how social networks may be linked to poverty: that social networks with people not experiencing poverty may help people gain access to resources to leave poverty; that social networks may provide access to resources to alleviate poverty, such as informal credit; that social networks may help

people access work; and that social networks may transmit norms or behaviours that prevent people leaving poverty. The size of the review led to a pragmatic decision to limit its scope to the previous five years before the project began. Scholarly databases were searched exhaustively for key terms: poverty, social networks, social capital, social exclusion; and through an iterative process and more focused literature searches further evidence was brought in, not captured in the initial search.

## Social capital and social policy interventions to tackle poverty

Social policy in the UK has regularly constructed a causal story (Stone, 1989) that some individuals or communities are excluded from social networks, or connected to dysfunctional social networks, which means that they lack functional social capital. Essentially, it puts the 'folk' conceptions listed above into action in problem definition. For example, early urban policy in the late 1960s was concerned that new in-migrants were seemingly not connected and integrated into existing communities (Atkinson, 2000). A greater focus emerged with the growth of social capital as a social science concept in the 1990s, paralleling a growing political concern with the perceived rise of an 'underclass' of individuals, implicitly lacking social capital (Levitas, 2005). In the early 1990s the urban policies of the then Conservative government shifted their concern towards social issues, away from the economic focus of the 1980s, by seeking to develop social capital by engaging communities in partnership in the regeneration of their neighbourhoods (Hastings, 1996; Atkinson, 1999). Cohesion policy, emerging in response to the race riots of 2001 and radical Islam, also defined a policy problem as the lack of engagement of ethnic minority communities in 'mainstream' society, and that insular social networks may spread radical Islamism (Jones, 2015).

Since 1997 it is in neighbourhoods policy and policy towards worklessness that social capital was particularly used within policy stories – as a cause of a problem and as a putative solution. During the Labour government of 1997–2010 the policy focus on social exclusion led to social capital being widely used as a concept (Levitas, 2005). This was predominantly the functionalist theorising of social capital of Putnam – as the connections between people that allowed trust to develop and helped individuals and communities improve their social and economic outcomes (Kearns, 2003). The early focus of the Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Unit on the exclusion of whole communities led to neighbourhood policies attempting to develop social capital and tackling social exclusion through community engagement, such as the New Deal for Communities (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Kearns and Parkes, 2003; Dargan, 2009; Wilks-Heeg, 2015). These policies presented social capital as a policy problem, something spatial communities lacked; a policy solution, something that if communities gained would alleviate poverty and social exclusion; and an implementation measure, something that if captured could make policy more effective (Kearns, 2003).

In policies such as the Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003), the use of mixed communities engineered through mixed tenure regeneration developments represented another way of understanding the role of social capital in neighbourhood regeneration. Mixed communities were meant to allow excluded people and communities to be included through the weak 'bridging' social capital of new, middle-class residents. These policies accepted that the social capital of deprived neighbourhoods was predominantly 'bonding' social capital that made it more difficult for their residents to escape poverty (Kintrea, 2007). By diluting concentrated poverty

residents could change their social networks and get ‘better’ social capital. This was an implicit argument that neighbourhood effects existed (discussed in greater detail below).

In terms of broader social policy, Levitas’ systematic unpacking of policy discourses demonstrated how social capital, or rather the lack of it, had come to underpin the understanding of poverty and its reconceptualisation as social exclusion (Levitas, 2005). The moral underclass discourse portrayed people as excluded from mainstream society, lacking social capital as networks to more moral people who recognised the value of work, and in the most judgemental version, the value of chastity (see Murray, 1996a and Murray, 1996b for a contemporaneous version of this argument). In the social inclusion discourse, people were excluded from work opportunities through a lack of social capital as social networks. Thus social capital became closely intertwined in policy discourses with worklessness.

The UK government since 2010 has returned to the moralising discourse of social exclusion that social networks contain ‘bad’ social capital – that is, they transmit norms and culture that are unhelpful for people experiencing poverty. This is particularly noticeable within policy discourses around ‘troubled families’ and tropes such as ‘three generations of families unemployed’. These policy discourses and stories have been widely criticised and shown to be incorrect (Macdonald et al, 2014). Within these policy stories, social networks within families are seen as a key way that unemployment is ‘transmitted’ through generations. This reflects Coleman’s conception of social capital as a positive factor in ‘primordial organisations’ such as the family; in this case, these families lack this positive social capital (Field, 2008, 28–9). This is operationalised in policies such as the Troubled Families Project. In a controversial report, the head of the Troubled Families Project, Louise Casey, explained how: ‘Intergenerational transmission of problems such as being in care, poor parenting, violence, abuse, low aspirations, non-attendance in school and few or no qualifications was rife’ (Casey, 2012, 46).

Thus, this was bad social capital as it transmitted bad norms throughout the generations. These bad networks were not just limited to the family. As with earlier policy discourses around deprived neighbourhoods, wider social networks were also portrayed as problematic: ‘Neighbours, friends or extended family who live close to but not necessarily in same household as the family exert a strong influence over its culture’ (Casey, 2012, 50). The functional nature of these social networks was made quite explicit: ‘These extended networks of family and friends appeared to be very powerful influencers and were often detrimental forces’ (Casey, 2012, 2).

In urban regeneration policy and contemporary policies around worklessness social capital is used in both defining the policy problem, and as part of the policy solution. The policy stories (Stone, 1989) describe a lack of functional social networks, or engagement in social networks that are dysfunctional, as leading to problems. These can be solved by connecting people through bridging social capital to better networks and good social capital. The evidence for these causal stories from our evidence review are now presented.

## Social capital and socio-economic outcomes

The impact of social capital within neighbourhoods, and social capital as a cause of worklessness, are often interlinked in policy, and empirical evidence, with

descriptions of neighbourhoods and communities of workless people. In presenting the evidence here we will treat the two issues as distinct, especially as there are specific methodological challenges with the empirical evidence on neighbourhood effects.

### *Social networks in the neighbourhood: neighbourhood effects?*

Neighbourhood effects theory, simply put, is the idea that it is worse to experience poverty in a deprived neighbourhood – that living with a high concentration of people experiencing poverty and individual deprivations lowers the chances of any one individual escaping poverty (Galster, 2007). Of particular interest here is neighbourhood effects caused by negative socialisation (cultures of poverty); and neighbourhood effects caused by poor access to resources through social networks (Galster, 2007). As discussed above, the presumed existence of neighbourhood effects transmitted through social capital (cultures of poverty) is one of the arguments supporting mixed communities policies and the dilution of concentrated poverty through tenure diversification. The most famous global example is the US HOPE IV programme and the voucher household-relocation scheme Moving To Opportunity (Briggs, 2003); similar schemes are now the new normal in urban regeneration throughout the world (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2002; Dekker and Van Kempen, 2004; Kintrea, 2007).

The limited number of longitudinal datasets that include sufficient data on individuals down to the neighbourhood level with variables that can be controlled for in any regression analysis limited the number of recent studies of neighbourhood effects in this review and their findings were mixed. An analysis of a particularly extensive Swedish dataset (Galster et al, 2010) found evidence of a neighbourhood effect on household income for working-class men and women lone parents. The authors theorised that this was caused by a ‘dosing’ effect – these people spent more time in the deprived neighbourhoods, so experienced a larger ‘dose’ of negative socialisation that then ultimately reduced household income. An analysis of a Scottish dataset based on a sample of census data – the Scottish Longitudinal Survey – found some evidence of a neighbourhood effect on employment opportunities, but explained this as being due to a selection effect – that is, people with higher opportunities for employment choose to live in less deprived neighbourhoods (van Ham and Manley, 2010). Neighbourhoods themselves do not cause unemployment. A study of data from Paris also found some evidence of a neighbourhood effect on employment, but did not have sufficient data to theorise or explain why this may be the case (Sari, 2012).

The methodological challenges of finding statistical evidence of neighbourhood effects are extensive. The efforts to carry out this type of analysis have led one critic to describe scholars of neighbourhood effects as a ‘cottage industry’ (Slater, 2013). Two of these challenges may explain why there is little statistical evidence that shows that social networks within deprived neighbourhoods lead to poorer outcomes. First, is whether we can get evidence down to a low enough spatial scale to identify where neighbourhood effects might have an impact – it could be at the street or housing block level and we just do not have data that detailed (van Ham and Manley, 2010). This is particularly the case as there is evidence neighbourhood effects only have an impact on social norms and individual outcomes through social capital when a particular threshold of concentrated deprivation is reached (Galster et al, 2000).

The second problem and the most pressing in the context of this paper, is the lack of evidence around causal pathways – even if there is a neighbourhood effect, do we know that it is caused by different social norms being transmitted through social networks – bad social capital? Statistical evidence of neighbourhood effects tends to merely theorise the causal pathway rather than evidence it (see, for example: Galster et al, 2010; Hampton, 2010).

Given the challenges around neighbourhood effects research, it is argued by some that deprived neighbourhoods actually offer agglomeration economies for low-income households offering support and services to their specific needs that might be lacking from more mixed or affluent neighbourhoods (Cheshire, 2007). However, evidence from the UK suggests this is not necessarily the case – while poorer households are more likely to be recipients of help from family and friends in their neighbourhood, there does not seem to be a discernible or strong neighbourhood effect – they would have received such help wherever they lived (Bailey et al, 2015). Similar research in the Netherlands also showed that lower income households had greater social networks within neighbourhoods (Pinkster and Völker, 2009). However, there is little evidence that these networks are associated with greater social support.

There is, however, rich qualitative evidence around neighbourhood effects, indeed a trend in the research is that qualitative research finds evidence that residents experience neighbourhood effects, and the breakdown of social norms and restrictions due to concentrated deprivation, whereas statistical evidence does not support this (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004). For example, in this review there was evidence that parents in deprived neighbourhoods in the Netherlands keenly felt neighbourhood effects in terms of their children becoming victims of crime and changed their behaviour accordingly (Pinkster and Fortuijn, 2009). Qualitative research with young jobseekers in deprived neighbourhoods in England found evidence of neighbourhood effects being driven by the spatial mismatch between residential location and employment opportunities. This suggested that young people who live in peripheral locations in weak labour markets were likely to have less geographically broad horizons when looking for work, and to know fewer people who travel a distance to work, than people in less peripheral locations in stronger local labour markets. This changed their job search behaviour, narrowing their horizons (Green and White, 2007).

Overall the evidence base for social capital within neighbourhoods being operative, positively or negatively, through neighbourhood effects is mixed. It is certainly not sufficiently robust to suggest that policy to tackle poverty should attempt to develop social networks in specific neighbourhoods with a view to creating more social capital.

### *Social networks and worklessness*

Focusing on individuals and social networks in the labour market, Granovetter's famous study of labour markets in Boston (Granovetter, 1974) showed the strength of weak ties in labour markets – that is workers in professional jobs used weak ties with acquaintances to get information about the labour market to help them advance in their careers. Manual workers had stronger ties into the labour market; this meant that they could get access to employment opportunities, but not information about better work. The social networks of professional and manual workers contained different social capital with differential impacts on individual outcomes.



There is evidence that this pattern persists, however some contemporary labour market changes are altering this. Greater access to the internet and use of online application processes by large employers means that young people are much more likely to use online services to get information about employment opportunities rather than rely on their social networks (Green et al, 2011). As with society-wide patterns of digital exclusion, older people are less likely to use the internet as part of their job search, and rely on social networks more (Green et al, 2011).

Although the use of the internet for job search has lessened the importance of social networks in finding employment, there is evidence that social networks and the social capital they contain do still have some impact on employability. In fast-growing sectors which require highly-skilled workers, such as IT, there is evidence that employers rely on social networks to employ required talent (Green et al, 2012). At the other end of the labour market, those in low-skilled employment are also more likely to use social networks to access jobs, but this is likely to be at a similar skill-level leading to a cycle of moving into and out of low-skill, low-pay, insecure employment (Shildrick et al, 2010; Green et al, 2011). For people who are distant from the labour market, there is evidence that they lose social networks with those who are in work, which may lower their ability to gain employment (Green and White, 2007; Lindsay, 2010). Finally, there is evidence that social networks remain important for young people accessing their first job (Green and White, 2007).

The evidence on social networks and employment is clearer than that around neighbourhood effects. It seems that ‘bonding’ social capital can help people access low-skilled work opportunities and ‘bridging’ social capital in networks with weak ties can help people access work in tight labour markets. However, technology and the use of the internet for job searches does seem to have unsettled the broad pattern. There is also strong evidence that interventions can create social networks to get people back into the employment, for example through community development approaches with the long-term unemployed (Quinn and Seaman, 2008; Lindsay, 2010), or through working with young people to expand their search horizons and encourage them into employment (Green and White, 2007). However, to say that this amounts to ‘cultures of worklessness’ and a Broken Britain of ‘skivers’ is not supported by the evidence base. As Macdonald et al (2014) found, trying to find families with three generations of unemployed people was like ‘Hunting the Yeti’ – this focus of policy interventions, such as the Troubled Families Programme, simply does not exist. The true picture is more nuanced.

## Understanding the nuances of social networks: social capital as classed practice

To summarise the evidence, the links between poverty and social networks in neighbourhoods and employment chances are complex and nuanced. Contrary to policy discourses and stories, social networks and the social capital they may contain do not seem to have a major impact on people’s life chances, at least not in a simplistic way. Neighbourhoods do not seem to develop specific cultures that prevent people escaping poverty; and there seem to be social networks and cultures of insecure work, not worklessness. Social networks and social capital do not, immediately, appear to be a panacea to help people leave poverty.

This contrasts with the ‘folk’ conceptions discussed above, for example that someone experiencing poverty might be able to get short-term assistance from a family-member or friend. It also contrasts with the evidence from another evidence review that demonstrated how social capital does seem to be aligned with socio-economic status (Matthews and Hastings, 2013). Quantitatively, middle-class people are much more likely to be members of groups as volunteers (Egerton and Mullan, 2008) and over time the difference in the extent of middle-class forms of organisation and working-class organisation has grown (Li et al, 2003). Indeed for middle-class incomers to a neighbourhood, the formation of friendship through groups such as parent–teacher associations is a key route to developing social networks (Bagnall et al, 2003).

These social networks of more affluent people are also more likely to be rich with capital which they can call upon to help them: get information on which school is the best to send their children (Ball et al, 1995); enable them to access specialist knowledge to engage effectively with the planning system (Abram et al, 1996) or even mount a legal action (Watt, 2009); it even means they get the latest medical treatment before other people (Hughes and Griffiths, 1997). In summary, it is more affluent, middle-class people who have the most social capital, and gain the most from the exercise of social capital. Indeed, evidence suggests that they maintain social connections, and thus the potential to realise social capital, even if they experience downward social mobility (Li et al, 2003). To return to the discussion in the introduction, social capital for these people is something which they develop in their self-interest, in the form of Coleman’s rational actors, and more critically it is also class-interested (Bourdieu, 1986). This is very much the social capital that Bourdieu argues is unequally distributed and ‘based on indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges’ which ‘exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he [sic] possesses in his own right’ (Bourdieu, 1986, 88–9). This evidence would suggest, initially, that social capital might be linked to leaving poverty and remaining out of poverty as it is so useful for these people. This contrasts with the less equivocal and nuanced accounts of the links between poverty and social networks explored above.

## Conclusion: doxa in policy?

The contrasting evidence presented above suggests that the common ways that social policy discourses link social networks and poverty misidentify problems and solutions. However, returning to a functionalist theorisation of social capital develops a more nuanced story. In the work of Putnam in particular, the importance of norms and trust is emphasised, and reciprocity within social networks is a product of, and something that develops, social capital (Putnam, 2000; Field, 2008). While social networks and social capital may not be linked immediately to people leaving poverty, this does not mean that those experiencing poverty necessarily lack social capital. Recent evidence from the UK suggests that those experiencing poverty are more likely than those not experiencing poverty to receive help, particularly if they have strong social networks with their family. The obverse is also true – those who are more affluent, and those with strong social networks with their family whether poor or not, are more likely to give help (Bailey et al, 2015). Recent research showed the extent of such support within families in the south-west of England, with participants offering help such as care as well as other resources to family members coping with benefits cuts (Herden et al, 2014). This suggests that those experiencing poverty have bonding social capital in



families. However, as discussed above, current policy demonises such social networks as producing ‘cultures of worklessness’.

This does not mean, however, that the people experiencing poverty have endless reserves of social capital which they can call upon to ameliorate their situation. The same research found that those who experience poverty are least likely to give help as they simply do not have sufficient resources. International qualitative evidence suggests that the burden of reciprocity can lead people to leave social networks (Offer, 2012). The shame of poverty can also lead to people leaving social networks and not engaging in activities, such as sending children to sports clubs or allowing them to attend parties (Boon and Farnsworth, 2011). The burden of poverty on networks can also lead to the most tight-knit networks, such as families, collapsing under the weight of demands on their social capital (Heflin et al, 2011).

An anti-poverty policy that responded to this complexity might ensure that households have sufficient income to maintain reciprocal social networks. Policies to support people into work would be based on a community development model developing social networks with those in work, not penalising people. Urban regeneration and redevelopment would ensure that people could maintain local family and friendship links that help them get by. Instead, as discussed above, we have policy that problematises or even makes abject (Tyler, 2013) social networks on which families and individuals might rely.

This contrasts with the experience of social capital for more affluent groups that is enormously positive, yet rarely discussed in policy, particularly with regard to how it may actually produce socio-economic inequalities (Hastings and Matthews, 2014, in press). To use the repertoire of theoretical terms developed by Bourdieu, we would argue that this is an example of doxa, that is ‘what is taken for granted, to the reality that goes unanimously unquestioned because it lies beyond any notion of enquiry’ (Deer, 2008, 120). As doxa this makes ‘problematic’ the social networks of people experiencing poverty, and the social networks rich in social capital of more affluent people are seen as normal (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Further, this disguises the massive benefits of social capital accrued to more affluent people that enable them to accumulate other capitals, and that ‘the existence of a network of connections is not a natural given...it is the product of an endless effort at institution’ (Bourdieu, 1986, 89). This doxa then becomes part of the cultural political economy of disgust (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) justifying policies that might disrupt the social networks of less affluent people, such as forced eviction and moving to a neighbourhood away from family through the ‘bedroom tax’ or benefits cap.

As Fine suggests, in policy ‘social capital offers the golden opportunity of improving the status quo without challenging it’ (Fine, 2010, 4). Our evidence review suggests that the most productive way to use social capital within policy to tackle poverty must tackle the status quo and recognise the doxa and misrecognition described above. Within the evidence on social networks in neighbourhoods, we found evidence that new, more affluent residents in mixed tenure neighbourhoods are unlikely to mix with less-affluent residents, even though these residents would welcome contact with their more affluent new neighbours (Arthurson, 2010). There is good evidence that if affluent people live near poorer people they are more likely to support policies to increase welfare benefits and income redistribution (Bailey et al, 2013). Within neighbourhoods, it is places for informal interaction that foster these networks – the gates of the primary school, local community centres and libraries, and parks. These

spaces can develop valuable linking social capital up and down the socio-economic hierarchy (Woolcock, 2001, cited in Field, 2008, 73). It is this sort of social capital that policy to tackle poverty should attempt to generate to then foster greater public support for more direct interventions, such as income support and income redistribution.

Increasing residential segregation is making it less likely this type of informal contact will occur between affluent people and those experiencing poverty (for an example relating to primary schooling, see Butler et al, 2013). Cuts to local authority budgets mean many of these places may cease to exist, or in the case of parks, be of such poor quality that they are little used (Hastings et al, 2015). Further, if local authorities transfer assets such as libraries and community centres to community groups as part of the 'Big Society' it is likely that the most affluent communities will have the assets of financial resources and social networks to manage these most successfully (Hastings and Matthews, 2014, in press). Overall, current policy is doing more to undermine the social networks between people experiencing poverty and more affluent people than it is doing to support them.

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