Assessing Social Capital
Assessing Social Capital: Concept, Policy and Practice

Edited by

Rosalind Edwards, Jane Franklin and Janet Holland

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Rosalind Edwards, Jane Franklin and Janet Holland
**CHAPTER ONE**

**W(H)ITHER SOCIAL CAPITAL?**

JANE FRANKLIN, JANET HOLLAND AND ROSALIND EDWARDS

**Introduction**

In recent years, social capital has become a key concept in academic theories and research, and influential as a framework for guiding policy-making that seeks to shape everyday practices in relation to building social integration. A range of related reasons have been put forward for this attention. These include a concern with the excesses of current individualism and nostalgia for a lost cohesive past; the desire to reintroduce a normative and social dimension to understandings of how society works; the impulse to control contemporary liberal societies that are increasingly diverse and undergoing rapid social change; and the way that social capital enables governments to leave aside redistributive economic policies in favour of (less expensive) informal, community-based social relations. As will become clear from a perusal of this volume, social capital can be defined in various ways, but arguably, its central preoccupation allows a focus on social relationships, the values held as part of these relationships, and access to resources in families, communities, regions and even nations. But does the concept, with its focus on particular aspects of social life and thus the thrust of its influence on policy initiatives, hide more than it illuminates or is it even harmful? Can social capital ideas be amended or adapted to bring other pertinent issues into view, or are there alternative concepts that are better able to address the diversity and complexity of contemporary social, economic and political life?

This edited collection brings together a series of papers that assess social capital, variously as concept, policy and/or practice. They address a variety of national contexts: Australia, Bosnia Herzegovina, the Caribbean, Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, from a range of disciplinary perspectives - anthropology, economics, musicology, politics and sociology. The collection is based on some of the papers presented at the "W(h)ither Social
Capital? Past, Present and Future” conference, organised by the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group at London South Bank University in 2005. The conference was called to address questions concerning the relevance, viability and implications of notions of social capital. The resulting contributions are illustrative of the tenor of the responses to those questions. Some reveal social capital’s conceptual lacks and the concomitant drawbacks of policies directed towards social capital building, and put forward alternative ways to understand social relationships and their economic and political implications. Others pursue the function of mainstream models in grasping various aspects of social capital, albeit noting that these models may need to be adapted if they are to gain full purchase. The authors draw on a diversity of evidence to make their points: theoretical considerations of particular manifestations of the concept, associated political philosophies and methodologies for its study, as well as empirical investigations of forms of social capital among different social groups in different local, national and trans-national contexts.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of these assessments of the usefulness of social capital, placing them in the framework of concerns around social capital as concept, policy and practice.

Social Capital as Concept

Social capital theories, concerned with the effects of social change and fragmentation, set out to explain the motivations and effects of social action and interaction, and their contribution to social cohesion and economic growth. As we see from the chapters in this book, to work with the concept, theorists, researchers and policy makers draw on a range of perspectives to capture its meaning, identify its purpose, and connect it to different social and political values and positions. There are, as Joseph Lewandowski points out in his chapter, “dominant strains” of social capital theory, which flow from the work of James Coleman, Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu. Coleman and Putnam, with a focus on values and networks, inform what has become known as “mainstream” social capital theory. Bourdieu who represents the critical wing of this trio, brings issues of inequality and social justice into the picture. From the perspective of social theory, in her chapter Janet Holland argues, the three tend to fall into two major sociological traditions: the “integrative”, functionalist or consensus tradition in the work of Coleman and Putnam and, following Bourdieu, the critical or conflict tradition.

Perhaps the common focus for these three major approaches is the condition of the social sphere, and the function and effects of social action and behaviour. Lewandowski points to the central focus of each of the dominant strains,
understanding them as models of human action. In Coleman’s rational model, the choices we make about how to live and relate to each other, are based on self interest. He sees the function of social capital, as values and shared norms, to underpin and sustain social order. With Putnam’s political strain of social capital, the focus is on social networks, and the role of mutual obligation and cooperative action. Bourdieu’s theory of practice, provides a critical perspective, sharing an interest in the cohesive function of social norms and networks, but stressing the ways that social capital supports and maintains capitalist society and its inequalities. Writing with a vocabulary of class and social practice, he shows how people’s lives, and their access to economic, cultural and social and symbolic resources, are constrained by social systems. As Holland suggests, Bourdieu’s work allows for a supple use of the concept to analyse the relation between social capital and social class, and the significance of the social and material context in which resources are generated.

In his chapter on the ways families generate and distribute social capital, Frank Furstenberg draws on the perspectives of Durkheim, Coleman and Bourdieu. Families operate, he argues, “as tiny social systems”, a sort of microcosm of the wider community. He is interested in how families are built, how couples get together and stay together, and how they interact and develop a reciprocal understanding of values and practices, especially when they have children. In this sense, social capital operates as a resource, generated within families that, at its best, functions to create meaningful and sustaining relationships. Furstenberg defines social capital as “the stock of social goodwill created through shared social norms and a sense of common membership from which individuals may draw in their efforts to achieve collective or personal objectives”. At a tangent, Pedro Ramos-Pinto’s chapter focuses on social capital more as the capacity for individual and collective action, than a resource. He argues that social capital needs to be understood as “a combination of networks of individuals and sets of collective norms embedded in those networks”. Collective action is then understood in relation to the interplay between social structures that organise around identity, power and social relationships, and the reciprocal meanings and values that flow from them, shaping and constraining social behaviour. Similarly, with her chapter’s focus on children and young people, Nicole Schaefer-McDaniel recognises the value of Coleman’s attention to shared norms and how social capital facilitates the actions of individuals, as well as the network perspective found in Putnam’s work. Pointing to the limitations of mainstream approaches, as we discuss further below in relation to practice, her methodology is sensitive to the dynamic between social and physical worlds. She argues for a new way of thinking about social capital that addresses gender and ethnic difference, and the importance of a sense of place and of belonging.
To understand its contemporary popularity, Barbara Arneil looks at the meaning of the “social” in social capital theory and the political utility of the concept. Working with Bourdieu, she separates out the “constitutive threads” of Putnam’s social capital theory, identifying liberal, republican and nostalgic threads, which, she argues, coalesce towards a vision of the social as a lost unity of participating and engaged citizens. Its current political popularity and utility lies in the way social capital “speaks to the times”, in effect carving out an image of the social in decline and in need of political attention. She shows how the social capital thesis parallels communitarianism and Third Way theory, supporting the “social turn” (Tonkiss 2000) in current political projects in Britain and the United States. In their chapter, Mike Savage, Yaojun Li and Gindo Tampubolon agree that as politics and economics turn to the social world, social capital becomes a means through which economistic assumptions are “smuggled into the city of the social”.

In her critique, Arneil values the contribution of Bourdieu, especially in the way he treats social capital as resources. She feels, however, that he does not go far enough and his approach could be extended to include gendered and cultural aspects of social capital, as well as economic; and to pay more attention to the historical struggles of subordinated groups. With these extensions of Bourdieu’s work, Arneil argues, we might arrive at a different definition of the social than that which underpins the functional school of social capital. Savage and colleagues agree with Arneil that Bourdieu provides a useful position on social capital. Examining how Bourdieu is set up as the critical wing of the dominant trio, they point out that he was only marginally interested in social capital. They suggest that Bourdieu’s work is limited by his greater concern with how inequalities are reproduced, than how they might be contested. With an eye to the relationship between the theoretical and empirical, Savage and his colleagues argue for a rethinking of the politics of social capital, drawing on the sociology of structural inequalities of race, gender and class. While they agree with Putnam that networks and associations are important, for them such networks are more complex and contradictory than he suggests. They argue that we need to understand associations in social and historical perspective. Through examining social movements like the feminist movement, and the link between social movements and social change, we can see social capital as associational, complex and contradictory.

For Arneil, the meaning of social in social capital theory carries social, cultural and political assumptions that need to be revealed. For example, she challenges the claim in Putnam’s social capital theory that social change since the Second World War has pulled civil society apart, undermining social cohesion and participation. She argues that history tells us more than this. Seen from the perspective of marginalised social groups, changes in society brought
about through feminist politics and campaigns for racial equality reflect the unfinished and, at times, profoundly divisive story of realizing justice. The nostalgia for unity and cohesion in the social capital story stands in sharp contrast to the complexity and diversity of contemporary societies. It supports a politics in which multiculturalism and diversity are always “challenges”. These challenges are posed as difficulties to be managed, overcome and transcended, replaced by a common centre that will provide a cohesive, cooperative and united society.

Rather than stressing the potential unity of the social, then, as Arneil, Savage and colleagues, and others in the book suggest, we might pay attention to inequality and diversity, recognising how ethnicity, gender, disability and social class shape the experiences of different groups. Empirical research enables us to listen to these experiences, in order to understand rather than judge the effects of social change. For Arneil, this means being attentive to the nature of connections between people rather than merely their aggregative number, as is the case in Coleman’s and Putnam’s functional concerns.

Research that has been attentive to the nature of connections bears this out. For example, Holland shows how the social and material environment in which young people grow up acts to shape the values and identities they adopt. Again, working with Bourdieu she develops a nuanced understanding of how individuals build relations within their own communities and how they move beyond them. Similarly Tracey Reynolds and Elisabetta Zontini show that norms and values are important in shaping community and transnational caring practices, but that they are also fluid and subject to change, and to social and material conditions. They argue that by understanding social capital as locality based and operating solely within the confines of local networks, Coleman and Putnam overlook everyday complex negotiations, resources and opportunities.

The theoretical and empirical issues explored in the contributions to this book suggest that social capital theory is opening up and broadening out. Our authors move the debate on in different ways, to fracture the Coleman/Putnam/Bourdieu triangle. Lewandowski recognises the limited potential of the “cause and effect” approach of the dominant strains and, working with Simmel explores the idea of sociability, which emphasises the creativity and expression of social action rather than its normativity or its rationality. Integrating ideas from different traditions and perspectives, others stress the importance of more rigorous definition of the concept of social capital and the significance of difference, history and structural inequalities, asking us to be wary of assuming the neutrality of the concept in politics and policy making. It is our contributing authors’ discussions of the employment of social capital ideas to guide policy-making that we turn to now.
Social Capital as Policy

Inspired particularly by Putnam’s link between social capital and economic development, but also by Coleman’s rational action model (and in the case of Canada at least, Bourdieu’s more nuanced approach), politicians and policy makers have clapsed the concept of social capital to their hearts with even more zeal and greater alacrity than academics, finding it of immense use in dealing with many and varied problems. It has been at the core of Third Way politics, embraced by many western governments in the face of what some see as the crisis of the welfare state and the more recent failures of the free market economy to deal with issues of social and economic disadvantage and exclusion. In this context the concept bridges the political gap between market and state, or liberal free market policies and welfare statism, and brings the social into the economic sphere.

For others, in a slight change of perspective, social capital represents a shift to the civic space between state and citizen. As Arneil points out in her chapter, this shift enables a critique of both the defence of the welfare state by the left, and neo-liberal demands for the pure market model, thus providing support for both Tony Blair’s new left, and George Bush’s compassionate conservatism. Several authors in this book are passionately concerned about social justice and inequality and illustrate the ways that they see governments slipping out of responsibility for these issues by using “weasel words” such as social capital. Keri Chiveralls, echoing Arneil, argues that it subsumes the social and the political within economic discourse and enables policy makers to address the concerns of both sides of the political spectrum, while committing to nothing.

The concept of social capital has been influential in shaping governments’ policy narratives. These narratives structure a picture of the social world, of individuals, families and communities, from which ideas for policy are drawn, justified and legitimised. Policy narratives may well contain contradictions. For example, in the UK there is a clash between a discourse of social capital and community cohesion, and individualised social mobility. It is argued that social capital can conserve and enhance particularly excluded communities. Whereas for individualised social mobility, the individual needs to “get out” of socially excluded and disadvantaged communities to “get on” (Thomson et al. 2003; and see also Holland in this book). In this sense social capital contains the seeds of its own destruction (Edwards 2005). There is also the case that the policy narrative in its legitimising process can move into classic blaming the victim territory where the excluded and disadvantaged are seen as responsible, indeed to blame, for their lack of social capital and excluded status (Chiveralls in this book. See too Skeggs 2004, and Gillies 2005 on political discourse derived from sociological theory in relation to new formations of class). Some chapters in this
book illustrate how this narrative fails to capture or deal with the complexity of everyday life. Others examine how the concept of social capital underpins the policy narratives of the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, and the costs this dependency has for the lives of the citizens of these countries, particularly the diverse or disadvantaged. There is also a discussion of a simple failure of the World Bank’s use of social capital in the context of war and social destruction in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Elements of US policy based on social capital involve an appeal to civic renewal and community. As Arneil reports, the White House is explicit about their goal of energizing civil society and rebuilding social capital. One strand of US policy (after 9/11) combines nationalism, national security and civic renewal, and is exemplified by the USA Freedom Corps. A second shifts responsibility for social services from state to faith-based organisations, emphasising the crucial relationship of religion and community. The policy also then blurs the line between state and civic society and state and church: “Faith based communities remain such a crucial reservoir of social capital in America that it is hard to see how we could redress the erosion of the last several decades without a major religious contribution” (Putnam 2000: 409). Arneil sees dangers in allowing the “community” revival to blur into an idea of a reawakened church that is saving souls or a nation state seeking security within its borders. And in this drive for national cohesion, difference and diversity become suspicious, as George Bush famously averred, if you are not with us you are against us. As we noted earlier, the model also loses the distinctive history of difference, diversity and struggle, and cleavages around race, class, gender, ethnicity and disability in US society, as the stories of subordinated groups such as women and cultural minorities are subsumed in this generalized narrative of community.

In the UK, Tony Blair aligns the liberal left with Putnam and Bush and shares their ambition of civic renewal. The UK policy narrative similarly links national security and civic society, poses common enemies both outside and within society, and buttresses New Labour’s critique of the welfare state. It explicitly calls up an identity of “Britishness” (in speeches and writing by Blair and his ministers) based on shared values that are rooted in history, and provides an antidote to the divisiveness posed by terrorism and multicultural demands. As Arneil points out, as with the USA, British history has many different sides. The invocation of a glorious past can only be sustained by ignoring the powerful forces of exclusion, assimilation and colonial rule that sustained the unity of Britain and its wider empire. Once again stories of difference and diversity, historically and in the present, are lost.

In Canada, the social capital policy narrative is carried through by civil servants, who no doubt started with similar concerns to those of the USA and UK about the welfare state and neo-liberalism, drawing on the functionalist
versions of the concept favoured by Coleman and Putnam and employed by the World Bank. But the crisis over national unity in the 1990s caused by Quebec’s desire for secession brought the embedded multiculturalism of Canada to the fore. This led policy makers to shift towards a network and resources definition of social capital drawing on the work of Bourdieu. In this context, whilst the federal government did seek “social cohesion” or “social union”, they did not demand shared identity, values and norms. The Policy Research Initiative (a policy making group) made this change in the concept of social capital employed explicit: “[Bourdieu’s] definition is, in many respects, more parsimonious than that offered by either the World Bank or the OECD, excluding, for example, both norms and attitudes” (PRI 2004). But whilst preferring Bourdieu’s definition, Canada did not incorporate into their policy narrative his critical stance, which theorises networks and access to resources as shaped by history and power. Once again challenges to power by the subordinated are written out of the story.

The Australian policy narrative is also built on Third Way politics. As Chiveralls says, it represents a “whole of government, whole of community, social partnerships approach to human service provision”, as well as a focus on the devolution of government. An important element in the social capital discourse is that of mutual obligation, exemplified by programmes such as Work for the Dole. As noted above, combined with the trend for devolution of responsibility for social problems to the local level, this can lead to a passing of moral responsibility from the state to the disadvantaged. In practical terms, “As government attempts to reduce its expenditure on human services, it shifts responsibility to the local level through community programs at a much lower cost through virtue of volunteers and low paid community workers” (Hase et al. 2004: 9). Chiveralls provides a trenchant critique of the concept of social capital, and the Australian government’s deployment of the “weasel word” particularly in the context of regional development. She points out that the current use of the concept in Australian politics often represents disadvantaged and marginalized groups as lacking in individualized values, and largely to blame for their lack of social power. To retrieve the social democratic element of social capital, for Chiveralls, would require the historical and contextual nature of the social, the impact of political and economic processes, and issues of power, class and structural inequality to come back into the frame.

Iva Božović favours a network approach to social capital. She uses a World Bank (2002) study of Bosnia Herzegovina, which evaluated social capital and local institutions, to illustrate the failures of the functionalist approach, particularly in the specification of bridging and bonding social capital in relation to the notion of generalised trust. Inward looking “bonding” social capital, links people into families and communities, and outward looking “bridging” social
capital, makes links across different groups. Božović criticises the circularity of arguments about bridging social capital, for employing researcher-imposed categories to assess its presence. In the case of Bosnia, the presence of bridging social capital is inferred if relationships between individuals from different ethnic groups are observed, missing other potential linkages and leading to failure of social policy to enable bridging social capital. Her work also highlights people’s everyday, informal social capital practices. We now turn to the ways that contributions to this volume have addressed both these researcher and everyday social capital practices.

**Social Capital as Practice**

As we have already seen, one theme of many of the contributions to this collection is how we can recognise social capital? As is obvious from our discussion above, authors variously place stress on particular aspects of what constitutes social capital, for example social networks and collective action, common norms and expectations, rewards in the form of resources and sanctions that restrict access to them, and trust and reciprocity. These emphases may differ somewhat, but all point towards the importance of understanding how social capital works – the everyday, routine and regular, grounded “practice” of social capital generation, maintenance and use.

The concept of “practice” was developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) as part of a broader understanding of social and cultural fields, and associated reproduction of inequalities. While some of our authors, including Chiveralls and Holland, find Bourdieu’s approach to social capital illuminative, others have been somewhat critical. In particular, as we noted earlier, Lewandowski, and Savage, Li and Tampubolon, argue that Bourdieu’s focus on social stratification is overly deterministic, cutting out alternatives and resistance. Nonetheless, the concept of practice is useful here in two ways. First, it draws attention to the relationship between theories of society that define what is of interest and importance, and social life as it is lived – in other words, the methodology of investigating social capital. Second, it enables a focus on how people comprehend, negotiate and nurture social capital in specific geographical and social contexts, over time and across generations. The contributors to this collection have something to say about practice on both these counts: methodology and everyday process.

Notions of social capital do not just assume a particular way that social life works or fails to work, they also construct the nature of the social actors involved, with implications for methods of study. In their respective chapters, Lewandowski and Chiveralls argue that dominant accounts of social capital construct human actors who are rational, self-interested and instrumental. This
narrowly predetermines how researchers define the object of their study and how they investigate it. As already noted, Lewandowski offers an alternative account placing at its core how sociability is transformed into social capital, which is methodologically open. Simon Procter’s exploration of the possibilities of social capital generation as an aim of “musicking” in the context of the practice of music therapy, provides an illustration of such an alternative concern. He acknowledges the infiltration of the rhetoric of social capital into professional practice, providing him with a legitimating rationale for his work that will instrumentally secure resources for service provision. Nonetheless, Procter’s elaboration of the process of a group music therapy session with psychiatric hospital in-patients, in which he ponders a non-individualised, non-rational “pre-social musical capital”, is akin to Lewandowski’s ideas about sociability as a necessary precursor of social capital generation.

A focus on social capital resources as practices points to everyday fluid processes in specific locations, rather than static indicators and outcomes. Furstenberg chastises the unreflexive quality of the current state of social capital measurement. He finds it makeshift and individualised, confused about process and outcome, and in need of measures tailored respectively to the macro, meso or micro level manifestations of social capital under investigation. Furstenberg feels that until there is clarity about what constitutes social capital and therefore agreement about how it can best be researched, judgement about the usefulness of the concept must be suspended. Some contributions to this collection can be read in this light, as efforts towards Furstenberg’s identification of the need to separate process from outcome, and to address setting and time, within the mainstream endeavour. Schaefer-McDaniel reworks Coleman’s and Putnam’s social capital frameworks to look at children’s social capital in neighbourhoods, identifying issues of networks and interaction, trust and reciprocity, sense of belonging and place attachment as the focus of social capital investigation. Lucinda Platt and Paul Thompson draw on Coleman as well as Bourdieu to develop the analytic concept of “family social capital” to address generational ideas about success, trace adaptive family patterns in context and over time, and capture within-group variation.

Several authors champion social network approaches as the methodological way forward because social capital flows through networks rather than being a free-standing measurable resource. Ramos Pinto, Savage and colleagues, and Božović maintain that placing social networks at the centre of social capital investigation overcomes the limitations of dominant ideas, including in relation to bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Both Ramos Pinto and Božović, argue that the way bonding and bridging social capital is conceptualised and operationalised in much research leads to methodological blind spots, creating and imposing either/or categorical social identities and
obscuring power intersections not only between but also within categorical
groups. Meanwhile, as Schaefer-McDaniel points out, the social category of
children is left aside in dominant conceptions. The complexity of, and tensions
between, bonding and bridging social capital practices are a feature of several
contributions to the collection, confirming these methodological points. Their
arguments reveal the social and historical dimensions to people’s lived social
capital practices that are located in and built on shifting understandings,
institutions, and economic and political frameworks.

As discussed earlier, several authors question mainstream social capital’s
preoccupation with consensus and common values in bridging associational
activities. Savage and colleagues point to the value of tensions and conflicts in
the everyday bridging associational activities they studied in a British city,
which are generated around issues of real concern to the people involved (rather
than the fixations of policy-makers). As part of these struggles, people coming
together collectively create the definition of “outsiders” from whom they
distinguish themselves. Thus what constitutes bridging is created through
everyday practice involving tensions, rather than reflected in the categories
imposed by researchers searching for shared values, trust and reciprocity. They
also demonstrate that any decline in social capital in Britain is linked to the
demise of working class collectivity, embodied in trade unions and working
men’s clubs, and the rise of more middle class individual lifestyle associations.
As noted above, through her reinterpretation of data from the World Bank study
of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Božović similarly demonstrates a critique of
simplistic notions of bonding and bridging. She explains how, post-transition,
historic ethnic divisions and everyday ethnic-specific bonding social capital
practices that enable access to resources are reinforced by the failure of social
policies.

In contrast, focusing on families, Furstenberg regards social capital as linked
to practices involving common norms and expectations. His exploration of
the creation of bonding social capital teases out the complexity of family formation
and functioning as involving greater or lesser social capital, notably around the
balancing act between separateness and unity in partnerships. But he also
argues that the setting for these family relationships needs investigation. In a
longitudinal study of young people living in contrasting locations in Britain,
Holland too identifies families as important in providing them with bonding
support and bridging networks, as do the communities in which they live. She
introduces a complex understanding of these forms of social capital, as not
merely a feature of everyday practice that creates disadvantage but also a result
of it. For working class young people in areas of social exclusion, family
support and withdrawal from the local community, breaking with local bonding
networks were key to any social mobility, which was not the case for those from the middle class.

Links between social capital and issues of social mobility involving geographical mobility are also the concern of other chapters in this collection, again requiring a more nuanced understanding of bonding and bridging practices. As with Holland’s contribution, gendered and classed social capital practices are a feature within both bonding and bridging forms (rather than constituting them). Schaefer-McDaniel explores how place and the generation and maintenance of social capital are linked for minority ethnic children in a low-income city neighbourhood in the United States, in the gendered practice of everyday spatial mobility. Children whose parents restricted their movement within their neighbourhood, which largely applied to girls, relied far more on school for their bonding social capital building, while those who had greater mobility sustained or envisaged more widespread and bridging social capital.

Platt and Thompson, and Reynolds and Zontini, move us beyond the local to the transnational in considering social and geographical mobility in relation to social capital. Platt and Thompson map the ways that family social capital (a form of bonding) can work variably for ethnic groups, in the case of Indian and Caribbean migrants in Britain. Looking in-depth at the latter group, they show how social mobility following on geographical mobility is related to social class and gender, and to structures and norms in the country of migration. They draw attention to the way that aspects of social capital and associated values, helpful in providing resources in one context, may be counterproductive in another particularly in terms of career trajectories. They also stress the importance of gender in understanding ethnically differentiated mobility patterns. Platt and Thompson note how families play an important role in the migration process and through later exchanges of help, and Reynolds and Zontini consider this issue in-depth. They look at inter and intra-generational reciprocal care as a bonding social capital resource, comparing transnational links for African-Caribbean and Italian families settled in Britain. They argue that, in contrast to mainstream assumptions, geographical mobility in the form of migration does not undermine this form of social capital across and within generations for either ethnic group, despite their different orientations to kinship – relational for Caribbeans and interconnected for Italians. There are also similar gendered differences in the nature of caring responsibilities within these ethnic groups, such as “flying grandmothers” moving back and forth geographically to help provide child care, shaping caring for and about as part of bonding social capital resources. Overall then, people’s social capital practices are active, fluid, negotiated and cross-cut with class gender and ethnic practices, as part of the routine of everyday life.
Conclusion

There has been somewhat of a feeding frenzy around the notion of social capital. Academics have leapt upon it to extol its virtues across a range of disciplines, they have expanded, contracted and critiqued it from a multitude of perspectives, and having chewed it well, may now be in the process of digesting and moving on. Policy-makers perhaps are still in a process of pre-digestion, seeing social capital development as the way forward in dealing with difficult current issues, including globalisation and individualisation, fragmenting and increasing diverse societies, declining and alienated communities and neighbourhoods, and forms of social exclusion. Meanwhile, people live out their lives, over time and within and across different places.

In this vein, the contributions to this edited collection provide a range of assessments of the nature, viability and ramifications of social capital as a theoretical concept, its shaping of policy developments in several national contexts, and its practice in research that seeks to understand how everyday life works.
CHAPTER TWO

CAPITALISING SOCIABILITY:
RETHINKING THE THEORY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

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Introduction

What is social capital? What, if anything, does such a notion explain about the facts and norms of social life? And how, exactly, is social capital causally related to the growth of a market economy, the health of a democracy, or the quality of a neighbourhood? The generic answer to such questions is that social capital consists of those networks of trust and social norms that facilitate human actions of various kinds. Of course the question of what, exactly, “networks of trust” and “social norms” are, and the causal connection between such networks and norms and the “various kinds” of actions they can be said to “facilitate”, is less easily answered, and remains one of the central issues in social capital theory and research. It also begs the more probing question of the future of social capital as a viable explanatory concept in the social sciences.

This essay shares with current critiques of social capital theory an overarching sense that much of what is contained in and purportedly measured by the notion of social capital suffers from empirical and theoretical shortcomings. At the empirical level, the causal force of social capital is difficult to chart with any analytic clarity. Indeed, insofar as social capital can be said to “facilitate” or cause anything, its causal map is lined with arabesques, not arrows. At the theoretical level, claims about the causes and effects of social capital are characteristically dependent upon one of the two contrasting images of human actors—*homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*—that have always polarised the social sciences. Here the extent to which actions facilitated by social capital are pulled by individual reason or pushed by shared norms is presupposed in opposing but equally one-sided conceptions of the nature of human action.

Yet however problematic, it is the underlying premise of the present inquiry that such empirical and theoretical shortcomings need not necessarily signal the
failure or demise of social capital research programmes. Rather, they invite and help to justify a renewed attempt to rethink and develop an alternative account of the core notions contained within those programmes. The goal of this essay is to outline such an account. As my title indicates, I shall argue that social capital is best understood as the harnessing or “capitalizing” of a distinct form of social interaction or human association that Georg Simmel called “sociability” (Geselligkeit).

It should be made clear at the outset, nonetheless, that I am not proposing here anything like a “Simmelean account” of social capital. For Simmel would view any attempt to harness or capitalise sociability as deeply symptomatic of the ways in which modern life—with its over-determining material demands and instrumental rationality—negates the impulse to sociability in human beings. But there is no need to adopt such a general—and rather one-sided—reactionary pessimism regarding the life-world colonising imperatives of modernity here. On my account, the capitalising of sociability does not entail the instrumental negation of sociability but rather its practical transformation into the fungible resource that is social capital. Thus, while the account of social capital to be developed in what follows is inspired by Simmel, it is decidedly not “Simmelean”.

The argument is divided into four sections. I begin by summarising what I take to be the three dominant strains in contemporary social capital theory and research; here I highlight the ways in which conceptions of human action profoundly shape current social capital theory and research programmes (Section I). In a subsequent move I argue that the weaknesses of contemporary theories of social capital stem directly from the shortcomings of their action-theoretical presuppositions (Section II). From there I go on to elaborate relevant features of Simmel’s provocative “sociology of sociability” (Section III). In closing, I brush Simmel against the grain in suggesting an alternative account of social capital as the capitalising of sociability (Section IV).

**I. Contemporary Theories of Social Capital**

For all their diverse theoretical origins and empirical applications, it is possible to identify three prevalent strains in contemporary work in social capital theory. First, there is an economic or rational strain of social capital, found most notably in the rational choice theory of Gary Becker and James Coleman, and central to policy-oriented theories of growth and economic development such as those pursued at the World Bank. Second, there is a political or democratic strain of social capital, developed most prominently by Robert Putnam, which is one of the hallmarks of contemporary neo-Tocquevillean political science and democratic theories of associations. Third,
there is a critical or Marxist strain of social capital theory, exemplified by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in which theories of social groups, power, and class conflict are applied in the empirical study of cultural practices. In this section I focus on the action-theoretical assumptions and notions of social capital peculiar to each strain.

Central to the economic or rational strain in contemporary social capital theory is the rational choice conception of the actor as an essentially self-interested individual whose behaviour, guided by instrumental reason, always takes the form of strategic action. Gary Becker calls this the “rationality assumption” (1990: 41) upon which the rational choice theory of action is based. In this conception of human action, the “utility function”, as Becker describes it, serves to minimise transaction costs and maximise outcomes of individual actors as they pursue the realisation of their self-interests. Such minimising and maximising behaviour is taken to be the fundamental and governing aspect of all human action. Human action, it is assumed, is essentially economic action.

Similarly, James Coleman’s influential rational choice sociology of action begins with universal assumptions about human beings as radically individualistic utility-maximising reasoners. In his Foundations of Social Theory, Coleman adheres to a rational conception of action in which all types of action are subsumed under “a single purpose—to increase the actor’s realisation of interests” (1990a: 32). Of course Coleman differs from Becker in his attempt to introduce social structure—or what he calls the “social organization of trust”—into economic analyses of action (1984; 1990a). In so doing, Coleman seeks to explain how individual rational action is translated into systemic or collective action via shared norms. But this micro to macro translation does not alter so much as it extends the core assumptions of Becker’s economic approach to individual human action to the discipline of sociology and the study of how individual rational action is collectively organised to ensure the effective realisation of self-interested utility-maximisers.

Such individualistic rationality assumptions regarding the nature of human action profoundly affect how networks of trust and social norms are understood, and how these notions are incorporated into the theory and empirical study of social capital. Indeed, as a consequence of its conception of human actors as utility-maximisers, this strain of social capital theory understands trust among actors as a horizontally thin, organisational network which functions to bridge and coordinate individual actions. In a related way, social norms are construed as outcome-oriented conditional constraints that enable the efficient coordination and realisation of individual preferences and self-interests within a social structure. Thus, viewed from within the framework of the rational choice conception of action, social capital amounts to those organised bridging connections between and among individuals that have functional utility. Or, in
Coleman’s parsimonious definition, social capital consists of “some aspect of a social structure” and it facilitates “certain actions of individuals who are within the structure” (1990a: 302). Here social capital is one of many functional resources, including physical and human capital, needed to make possible the efficient realisation of individual ends. It is that store of functional bridging connections or resources upon which individuals may choose to draw to optimise their interests and behaviours to achieve ends difficult if not impossible to attain in the absence of such resources.

Deploying this rational account of social capital in empirical research on education and the family, Becker (1957; 1964; 1981) and Coleman (1990a; 1990b), among others, have sought to explain the causal connection between the resource of social capital and the uses—and abuses, as in the case of social inequality and discrimination—that resource facilitates within particular social structures. This rational sense of social capital has also made its way into economic development debates and planning at global monetary policy-making institutions such as the World Bank, where social capital surveys of trust and the efficient use of norms are taken to measure the stability and growth potential of market economies.10

It would not be an exaggeration to say that in both its conception of human action and sense of the effects of social capital, the political or democratic strain in contemporary social capital theory runs largely counter to the strain found in Becker and Coleman and other social capital theorists who adhere to the rational choice model of action. Indeed, where the rational strain focuses exclusively on the utility-maximising potential of the action-facilitating resource of social capital, the political or democratic strain in contemporary social capital theory has followed Tocqueville in arguing for a causal link between networks of trust and social norms and the practical realisation of the political ideals of democracy. This strain in social capital theory, popularised by Robert Putnam, takes as its action-theoretical starting point not the dissociated utility-maximising individual of rational choice theory but a contrasting Tocquevillean image of the voluntarily associated citoyen of 19th century American townships.

Now, however coarse, this initial contrast between the conception of action in the rational and democratic strains of social capital theory reveals more than the persistent split in the social sciences between the methodological individualism of rational choice theory and more holistic approaches in the disciplines of the social sciences. It also helps to illustrate the source of the differing account of social capital found in the democratic strain. For in the democratic strain, voluntary associations are “plural subjects” or “we”-phenomena.11 That is to say that in this strain of social capital theory, associated actors are not rationally organised individual atoms. Rather, they are social facts that cultivate what Tocqueville described as the “habits of acting together in the
affairs of daily life” upon which democratic society depends (1969: 514). Here the “technique of association” (Tocqueville 1969: 522) creates normatively thick forms of mutual trust in which intersubjective moral obligations—Tocqueville called these “mores”—are acquired and reinforced in the day-by-day working together and associating with others. Consequently, for Tocqueville, and for neo-Tocquevillean democratic theory, trust networks are not—or not only—thin horizontal bridges that facilitate connections among individual utility-maximisers. Rather, such networks have a bonding intersubjective moral function: they constitute the normative glue of the kind of communal plural subject—or civil society—that is a necessary condition of collective self-rule.

Moreover, as a result of its plural subject conception of human action, social norms are understood differently in the democratic strain of social capital theory. Such norms do not function exclusively to facilitate the efficient individual realisation of private goods within a particular social structure. They also retain the universalising core of a democratic ethos. Indeed, to the extent that social norms foster reflexive social cooperation—or what Tocqueville called “self-interest rightly understood”—they are viewed as the unconditional constraints that govern the collective articulation and practical realisation of the social structure transcending “public good”. In the democratic strain in social capital theory social norms are understood as nothing less than those “we”-constraints that enable the collective realisation of democratic ideals.

Thus informed by its normative assumptions about the social facts of associations, the democratic strain in current social capital theory conceives of social capital as the communal inventory of “generalized trust” and social norms which facilitate the kinds of mutual obligations and cooperative actions that, to borrow Putnam’s phrase, make democracy work. In fact, for Putnam social capital enables the democratic resolution of collective action problems (“prisoner’s dilemmas” and “free-rider” problems), “greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly”, and develops and maintains “character traits that are good for the rest of society” (2000: 288). In fact, in the democratic strain of social capital theory, the explicitly normative effects of associational life are considered so crucial to democratic existence that a numerical decrease in associational memberships is thought to imperil democracy. Put in the metaphoric terms of Putnam, in a society where generalised trust and social norms have eroded—where, that is, individuals are increasingly “bowling alone”—democracy is inevitably in decline and community is in need of revival. Putnam (1993; 2000) has sought to deploy precisely this causal argument about the democratic effects of social capital in his empirical studies of Italy and the United States.
In many ways the account of action and social capital developed in the work of Pierre Bourdieu presents a unique alternative to the opposing rational and democratic strains in contemporary social capital theory. To be sure, Bourdieu’s theory of action—what he calls a “theory of practice”—shares with the rational strain in social capital theory a general sense of the embeddedness of action in social structures. But throughout his work Bourdieu has persistently rejected the rational choice reduction of collective action to behavioural aggregations of rational individuals whose choices are governed only by a utility function. In this way the conception of practice that underlies the Marxist strain of social capital theory not only marks a polemical departure from rational choice models of individual action; it also shares with the democratic strain a general commitment to a kind of collectivist account of associations as distinctly social facts.

Yet it would be a mistake to see Bourdieu’s holism as merely a rejection of rational choice and somehow commensurate with a Tocquevillean sense of the voluntarily associated citizen upon which democracy depends. For Bourdieu, the plural subjects of associations—Bourdieu calls them “social groups”—do not come about simply through the voluntary cooperative actions of individuals who have rightly understood their self-interest. Rather, social groups are for Bourdieu “classes” in a neo-Marxist sense. That is to say that for Bourdieu social groups are not, as Marx maintained, actual classes mobilised explicitly for the common purpose of dominating or confronting an opposing class. Instead, social groups are implicit or probable classes in the sense that their existence, identity, and membership are determined by non-voluntary predispositions shaped by everyday struggles over the consumption and distribution of limited economic, social and cultural resources. Social norms in this strain are thus primarily pre-reflective, stratifying norms of consumption that, for example, predispose some actors to “choose” to drink beer instead of wine, or to “join” rugby clubs rather than bird-watching societies.

Bourdieu’s action-theoretical account of how such non-voluntary predispositions ineluctably shape individual and collective practices is elaborated in his notions of “habitus” and “field”. Habitus is the shared set of durable dispositions, perceptive schemes, and ingrained orientations that, according to Bourdieu, function as the structuring structure for the production and reproduction of human action or practice. Habitus is for Bourdieu a pre-intentional “feel for the game” that enables and limits individual and collective practices within particular contexts. Habitus facilitates and constrains action inasmuch as it equips actors with, as Bourdieu describes it, a sens pratique for what is to be done in given situations. Bourdieu characterises such given situations as “fields” or “fields of struggle”. By this he means arenas of social (re)production—academia, journalism, sport, politics, culture, etc.—that require
a specific practical sense for their successful navigation, and in which particular associations or social groups emerge, seek to establish themselves, and inevitably clash with one another for positions of dominance.

Not surprisingly, given the class-based logic of its theory of practice and social norms, the Marxist strain conceives of social capital as a socially shared "credit" that facilitates intra-group identification and trust (mutual recognition and solidarity among group members) and inter-group action and struggle (antagonisms and conflict between groups). Social capital is therefore neither simply rationally bridging (utility-maximising) nor normatively bonding (causally democratising). Instead, in its Marxist strain social capital is a highly group-specific, context-dependent, and socially stratifying resource. Using this conception of social capital, Bourdieu’s wide-ranging empirical-critical studies of culturally embedded practices have sought to explain how, why, and in what concrete forms, social capital has historically facilitated the irrational and undemocratic consumption and distribution of social power among bourgeois groups and their proletariat counterparts.

II. The Weaknesses of Contemporary Theories of Social Capital

Characterising the three prevailing strains in social capital theory and research vis-à-vis the senses of human action that underpin them, as I have sought to do in the previous section, helps not only to make explicit the action-theoretical presuppositions that inform their respective notions of social capital. It also, or so I want to argue in this section, brings into focus the central weaknesses of each strain. In the case of the rational strain in contemporary social capital theory, the problem is not only that its model of rational choice reduces the social to the individual, as critics of rational choice theories of social capital rightly argue. Difficulties arise when this strain reduces social norms to rational norms, and conceives of trust horizontally, as merely a bridging resource that facilitates individuals’ realisations of their rational interests. In reducing social norms to rational ones, the rational strain’s theoretical assumptions about the universality of the utility function of human action rules out in advance any consideration of the kind of non-outcome oriented, unconditional constraints that are the hallmarks of genuinely social norms. In horizontalising trust, this strain similarly eliminates any account of the thickness (or normative density) of trust relations. Such theoretical short-circuiting leads to a levelling of social capital to rational capital. An analysis of the social character of action, norms and trust is thus omitted entirely in the rational strain in contemporary social capital theory. The result is that this strain suffers from what I want to call “rational reductionism”.


Conversely, the core problem with the normative or democratic strain in contemporary social capital theory is what might be best described as “moral inflationism”. Here a normatively overloaded conception of the social facts of associations leads to universalising claims about the causal, democratically salutary, effects of such associations. Far from reducing social norms to rational norms, this strain errs in the other direction: it inflates the morally bonding function of such norms into association-transcending democratic ideals. To be sure, plural subject associations such as bowling teams and bird-watching clubs, may not, as Amitai Etzioni (2001) has argued, be “morally trivial”. But neither can their normative force be puffed up as causally democratic. The resolution of collective action problems and the promotion of “character traits” that may take place in many associations and social groups do not in any necessary way entail the fostering of democratic mores among individual association members or between associations and social groups. Put simply, what the rational strain in social capital theory reduces, the democratic strain morally over-inflates.

The Marxist strain in current social capital theory does not suffer from the rational reductionism or moral inflationism of its rational and democratic contemporaries; indeed, Bourdieu’s unique theory of practice allows him to side-step both problems. But there is nevertheless a persistent weakness in the Marxist strain’s theory of practice and social capital. That weakness stems from the overly close fit between habitus and field upon which Bourdieu’s account of social capital depends. To be sure, these two elements of the theory of action in the Marxist strain avoid the atomism of rational choice and the voluntarism of recent neo-Tocquevillean political science and democratic theory: Bourdieu’s conception of social capital depends neither on a reductive conception of rational individualism nor on overblown appeals to the democratic effects of the social facts of voluntary associations.21

But with its heavy emphasis on the non-voluntary predispositional constitution of social groups, it is difficult to see how Bourdieu’s theory of practice can conceive of human actions and associations as anything other than the more or less seamless reproduction of an objectively stratified social structure or field.22 Here the practical sense of human action can only mimic—Bourdieu would say “embody”—the stratifying norms of consumption that serve as powerful markers of class distinction, division and conflict in a given field. This strict correspondence between habitus and field places profound limits on the Marxist strain’s attempt to enlist a notion of social capital in a materialist critique of culture. For here the intra-group bonding and inter-group stratifying “credit” of social capital is a function of a pre-reflective habitus-field homology. Consequently, in this strain social capital does not facilitate actions; rather, it determines them. Hence, while avoiding the rational reductionism and moral inflationism of the other strains in social capital theory, the Marxist strain...
suffers from a tendency towards functionalistic homologism. Rather than criticise the stratifying effects of social capital, its theory of practice deterministically reproduces them in an analysis of social groups.

An empirically adequate and theoretically robust alternative account of social capital needs to avoid the reductive, inflationary and deterministic tendencies that severely weaken the current strains in social capital theory and research. To be sure, such an account can and should include what is right about contemporary notions of social capital. The rational strain’s insight—shared but nevertheless overdrawn by Bourdieu, as we have seen—that social capital is a structurally embedded resource; the democratic strain’s insight that, however embedded, social capital contains the normatively rich potential to alter human interaction and the locations in which that action takes place; the Marxist strain’s powerful suggestion that social capital plays a fundamental role in defining and determining the trajectory of social struggle and group conflict—all these need to be incorporated into any viable alternative account of social capital. It is in an attempt to outline such an account that I want next to turn to Simmel’s work on sociability.

III. The Sociology of Sociability

The model of action that underlies Simmel’s sociology of sociability shares little with the action-theoretical presuppositions that inform the dominant strains of contemporary social capital theory. In fact, Simmel’s thinking on social interaction and association explicitly rejects the kind of reduction of human action to rational individual action that is the universal assumption upon which the rational strain in social capital theory is based. It is also, as we shall see directly, cautious not to over-inflate the normative potential of human interaction and association in the ways characteristic of the democratic strain. Moreover, Simmel, however attentive to the problem of class, does not conceive of human interaction and association as so many homologous functions of social struggle and class conflict, as the Marxist strain in social capital theory mistakenly does.

Instead, in his discussion of the sociability of human interaction Simmel foregrounds the social creativity of action—a model of action that is sorely missing in contemporary social capital theory. Simmel’s account of sociability examines the creative relations between and among actors. Sociability is thus an aesthetic—rather than rational, normative, or class-determined—action-theoretical model of human association. Indeed, for Simmel, as we shall see directly, sociability is a distinctly expressive form of human interaction—an integrative “art” or social “play”—that is neither purely individualistic nor wholly collectivist. Indeed, operating within the alternate framework of the