Families and Social Capital: Exploring the Issues

Rosalind Edwards, Jane Franklin and Janet Holland

Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group
South Bank University
103 Borough Road
London
SE1 0AA

February 2003
Published by South Bank University

© Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group
ISBN 1 874418 32 2
FAMILIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: 
EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Rosalind Edwards, Jane Franklin and Janet Holland

1. Introduction

2. Families in Mainstream Understandings of Social Capital

3. Critiques of Social Capital

4. Key Areas for Exploration
   4.1 Intimacy
   4.2 Education and Employment
   4.3 Ethnicity

5. Conclusion
1. Introduction

Contemporary family life has become a focus for public concern and academic debate in recent years. Research has been concerned with mapping the overall picture and examining particular aspects of the increasing diversity of family forms and household structures: lone motherhood, post-divorce families, step-families, cohabitation, non-heterosexual families, and so on (for example, Berthoud and Gershuny 2000; Bradshaw et al. 1999; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Ferri and Smith 1996, 1998; Haskey 1999; Maclean and Eekelaar 1997; McRae 1993; Office for National Statistics 1998; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2002; Smart and Neale 1999; Weeks et al. 2001), and with measuring and comparing outcomes for children (see overview by Rodgers and Pryor 1998).

For some analysts, there are assumptions about the relationship between families and social cohesion, with the ‘breakdown’ of traditional family forms regarded as bringing social fragmentation (for example, Davies 1993; Morgan 1995; Murray 1994). For others, changing family forms are regarded in a more positive light, as generating new forms of social allegiance emphasising negotiated consensual intimate relationships and obligations (for example, Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Finch and Mason 1993; Giddens 1992; Weeks 1995). For still others, this focus on change in family life – whether for good or for ill - is overplayed (for example, Crow 2002; Jamieson 1998). A key area of debate is thus the extent of continuity or change in family life (for example, Silva and Smart 1999).

There are other material and cultural developments occurring, material and cultural, that both grow out of and impinge on the dynamics of family life and social cohesion. Firstly, there are changes in women’s and men’s labour market participation, as well as economic restructuring in labour markets themselves, with an increasing emphasis on education and training (Bruegel 2000; Thair et al. 1999). Concurrently, women of all ages are still responsible for domestic and caring work, and are paid less in stratified labour markets (Bruegel 1999; Bruegel and Perrons 1998; Ferri and Smith 1996; Gregg and Wadsworth 1999; Lewis 2000). Secondly, the growing ethnic diversity of families means that Britain is thought to be a multi-cultural society. This encompasses a diversity of family forms, traditions and links with extensive kinship networks in Europe, South Asian, Africa and the Caribbean (Cohen 1997; Goulbourne and Chamberlain 2001; Heath and Dale 1994; Werbner 1999).

The links between broad social changes, particularly in relation to education and employment, and social developments arising from increasing cultural and intimate diversity in family life and relationships, have implications for the social support that may be available within and for families (for example, Home Office 1998). This, in turn, has implications for concerns about the general existence and generation of social capital – the values that people hold and the resources that they can access, which both result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships. The extent to which people share a sense of identity, hold similar values, trust each other and reciprocally do things for each other, then this is felt to have an impact on the social, political and economic nature of the society in which they live.

Social capital has become a key concept underpinning much Government policy-making and a topic of debate in academic circles (for example, Baron et al. 2000; Gamarnikow and Green 1999a; King and Wickham-Jones 1999; Szreter 2000; Thompson 2002). Repairing and enhancing social capital is seen as the way forward in dealing with difficult current social
issues, including the consequences of globalisation and individualisation; the fragmentation and diversification of family forms and society; declining and alienated communities and neighbourhoods, and forms of social exclusion; and decreasing political engagement. The New Labour government has commissioned a series of reviews, surveys and policy ‘think pieces’ on the topic from its various Departments and Units (for example, Office of National Statistics 2001; Performance and Innovation Unit 2002). Such discussions often do not acknowledge the extent to which social capital is a contested concept. Nor do they often explore the different role accorded to families by different approaches. There are tensions within and between these approaches.

The five-year programme of research being undertaken by the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group (see www.sbu.ac.uk/families) is fundamentally concerned with the inter-relationship between the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital. It seeks to address key debates that have developed around the extent to which social capital is constituted in families or communities and is attached to individuals or groups; how far it is rooted in family structures and ties or in economic structures; and whether it is a positive or negative feature of family and social life, breaking down or flowing in new forms? Within this, the programme focuses on specific questions concerning issues of intimacy, education and employment, and ethnicity.

This working paper explores the foundations for the Families Group programme of work. In section 2, we review how families and the nature of family life are addressed in mainstream theorising of social capital. This is an important undertaking because, with some exceptions, the place of families often remains glossed over in the social capital literature rather than being given sustained attention. We then turn, in section 3, to consider critiques of social capital as a basis both for understanding social processes and as a remedy for the ‘ills’ of contemporary society. In section 4, we discuss the key issues arising out of an examination of the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital in relation to intimacy, education and employment, and ethnicity, before concluding our exploration in section 5.

2. Families in Mainstream Understandings of Social Capital

Families are often regarded as a wellspring of social capital generation or destruction. Some commentators centre families, treating them as the main focus of their arguments. Others, however, decentre families: they acknowledge families as a key source of social capital but then shift their focus elsewhere. In this section we highlight families. We lay out the arguments of some mainstream social capital theorists, who represent different approaches both to the nature of social capital and to the centred or decentred place of families within it. This relatively ‘straight’ presentation of their ideas lays the ground for our discussion of critiques of social capital, which follows in section 3.

Families as centred: Coleman and Bourdieu

The two social capital theorists who represent approaches that centre families in their conceptions of social capital are James S. Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu. Both were concerned with the links between individuals and small groups, notably families, and wider social organisations and institutions. While Coleman is concerned with social consensus and control, however, Bourdieu is more concerned with class-based power conflicts.
The most detailed treatment of the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital is contained in Coleman’s body of work (including 1988a, 1990; 1991, 1997[1988]), so we give it some extended attention here. Coleman attempts to combine economic rationality and social organisation theories, focusing on both action and structure. As we see from the discussion below, he makes a causal link between obligation investment and repayment, and investment in the next generation (economically rational exchange and ‘cost-benefit’ action) and cohesive norms and sanctions (a structural moral rationality). In his later work (1991), however, Coleman also seems to stress a prior underpinning biological rationality (primordial relations established by childbirth).

For Coleman, social capital is largely a hidden-hand ‘by-product’ that ‘inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons’ (1990, p.302), and its value lies in facilitating both the actions of individuals to realise their interests, as well as in ‘the provision of public goods … which are not in the interest of any individual to produce alone, but … are of benefit to many’ (1988, p.392). The structure of social relations between people consists of three main forms. Firstly, high levels of ‘obligations and expectations’. People ‘do things’ for each other; actions that they expect and trust will be repaid so that, in due course, they will benefit from the ‘cost’ of their helpful action: ‘individuals in social structures with high levels of obligations outstanding at any time have more social capital on which they can draw’ (1997, p.85). Secondly, there is ‘information potential’. Social relations provide social capital in the form of the acquisition of information from others that enable one to act on a knowledgeable/rational basis. Thirdly, social capital consists of ‘norms and effective sanctions’. Here, social ties constitute a means for social control through the generation and sustenance of norms of approved social behaviour, and the sanctioning of disapproved behaviour. This third form of social capital leads people to act in the interests of collective ‘public’ good not just self-interest. In his later work (1990), Coleman posits three further social capital categories arising out of the main forms, especially in relation to collective value. He briefly identifies ‘authority relations’ whereby people in positions of authority have more social capital, but which they can use to solve common problems. He also, more extensively, discusses ‘appropriable social organisation’ and ‘intentional organisation’ whereby, respectively, people can use the social capital generated in one setting for other purposes, and a group of people who organise for one purpose generate social capital that is available for the benefit of others as well.

In his conceptualisation of social capital, Coleman places families centre-stage as a ‘primordial organisation … that has its origins in the relationships established by childbirth’ (1991, p. 1). He identifies social capital as a resource within ‘the family’ that inheres in the structure of intergenerational relationships, especially between parents and children. Parents invest in their children, as the next generation of the family who will in turn support them in later life, by being physically present, giving them attention and developing an intense relationship with them that involves talk about personal matters and expectations of their educational achievement (although the more children parents have, the more this attention gets ‘diluted’). This resource enables children to increase their human capital (educational achievement), which then enables them to gain greater economic rewards.

This process of social capital generation within families integrally links to social capital as a resource outside ‘the family’, where parents and children are embedded in close, local relationships. Relations between parent and child and social ties outside the family come together to create a dense social structure of norms, extensive trust and obligations, which
Coleman calls ‘intergenerational closure’. Parents (‘ordinarily mothers’) and children in a local school community who see each other every day have expectations toward each other, and develop internally held and externally imposed norms that enable a guiding consensus about appropriate behaviour standards and stigmatising sanctions: ‘The existence of intergenerational closure provides a quantity of social capital available to each parent in raising his (sic) children – not only in matters related to school but in other matters as well’ (1997, p.87). This process of social capital generation through supportive and constraining social control is enhanced where parents are involved in ‘multiplex’ (rather than ‘simplex’) relations; that is, they are neighbours, ‘fellow’ workers, ‘fellow’ parents and co-religionists (with embeddedness in a local Catholic community and school providing particularly strong closure).

Coleman points to a number of features of contemporary life as undermining social capital both within and outside ‘the family’. Changing family structures lead to a deficit of social capital, specifically in terms of increases in lone mothers, ‘absent’ fathers, and mothers working outside the home, and of decreases in extended family households: ‘The most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families is the single-parent family. However, the nuclear family itself, in which one or both parents work outside the home, can be seen as structurally deficient, lacking the social capital that comes with the presence of parents during the day, or with grandparents or aunts and uncles in or near the household’ (1997, p.89). Patterns of modern market-led consumption (fast/junk food, generation specific leisure activities and youth-oriented mass media, etc.) also pushes aside family life as the ‘nucleus of social organisation’, and lead ‘youth away from parent-generated norms and from school-imposed goals’ (1991, p.5/6). He also argues that market day-care provision and large high schools lead to superficial local social relationships devoid of interdependencies, while high-rise public housing compresses ‘lower-class families whose internal organisation is weak’ (1991, p.6) into a small, social decapitalised, area.

Coleman suggests that these patterns are compounded by the ‘reallocation of [legal] rights away from the family’, including ‘rights held by the child himself (sic)’, reducing the strength of the parental role (1988, p.401). Further, the existence of state welfare services creates an ‘antibiotic resistance’ that negates the economic and social rationality of parental investment in children and of community members incurring trust-based obligations to help one another, promoting ‘free rider’ norms and depreciating social capital: ‘… when the welfare functions carried out by the family for the aged, the physically infirm, the young, and others incapable of economic self-sufficiency are taken over by the state, what is introduced .. [are] caregivers with little incentive to provide humane and responsible care, and a reduced self-sufficiency’ (1991, p.6). In addition, he argues that regional mobility – families moving out of one area into another - destroys social capital by disrupting the intergenerational closure of social capital links between family members and the wider community: ‘For families that have moved often, the social relations that constitute social capital are broken at each move. Whatever the degree of intergenerational closure available to others in the community, it is not available to parents in mobile families’ (1997, p.90). Taken together, these developments mean that ‘strong families and strong communities […] are much less often present now than in the past, and promise to be even less present in the future’ (1997, p.93). Thus, in the face of the eroding social capital, the contemporary social policy dilemma concerns whether and how to put in place some substitute formal organisation of social capital generation (1990, p.608).

Bourdieu’s work on social capital (including 1993; 1997[1986]; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) also involves a focus on families, though not exclusively. Unlike Coleman, his concern is not
with the degeneration of social capital in contemporary society, but with its continual transmission and accumulation in ways that perpetuate social inequalities. Bourdieu's treatment of the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital is less formulaic than Coleman's, too. Bourdieu argued that theoretical concepts should be 'polymorphic, supple and adaptive, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.23). His work is also more complex in envisaging an interdependent relationship between social and a range of other forms of capital. Ultimately, for Bourdieu, like all capitals, social capital is power and economic capital is concealed at its root.

Bourdieu sees social capital as 'made up of social obligations (‘connections’) … [it] 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 acquaintance and recognition' (1997, pp.47/51). People derive their social capital from their membership of a group, such as a family or kinship group. Material or symbolic exchanges within these relationships produce obligations and mutual recognition of group membership, and also ‘may also be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a tribe or of a school, a party, etc.)’ (1997, p.51). The amount of social capital resources available to people depends on the size of their networks, on the extent and quality of the range of capitals possessed by those connections, on expectations of reciprocity being met, and on their status within the group.

For Bourdieu, social capital has to be continuously worked at, rather than merely being constituted in, for example, ‘the genealogical definition of kinship relations’ (1997, p.52). It ‘is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term’ (1997, p.52). The connections comprising social capital are built up over time, and can be transmitted over generations. It is integrally linked, for example, to cultural capital, which comprises ways of thinking and being as well as cultural goods that are transmitted domestically: ‘the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family. Moreover, the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up’ (1997, p.48). Symbolic capital, wherein certain ways of thinking and acting are legitimised and regarded as authoritative in society, is also integrally linked to social capital, in such a way that the latter largely functions through the former. For example, Bourdieu notes (1997, p.57) that ‘manners’ may be included in social capital in the sense that, in being acquired, they indicate the status of the social group of which someone is a member. Further, the ability of parents to invest in transmission of social and other capitals intergenerationally to their children’ (‘particularly in the form of the mother’s free time’, 1997, p.54), or strategies for children’s social and other capital building (such as mixing with the ‘right’ people at the ‘right’ school and university, and progressing from family of origin to the ‘right’ family of destination through marriage), is rooted in the family’s economic capital. In other words, while social capital may be ubiquitous, it manifests itself in class-specific forms and, along with other capitals, works to reproduce class relations.

Families as decentred: Putnam and Fukuyama

In contrast to the central place accorded to families in Coleman and Bourdieu's theories, the arguments put forward by Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama decentre them. Both are more concerned with social capital as a structural feature of large aggregates – communities,
regions and nations – rather than individuals and families. Nevertheless, both acknowledge families as a key aspect of social capital in their arguments, although in somewhat different ways.

In considering the work of Putnam (including 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002; Putnam et al. 1993; Leigh and Putnam 2002), we return to a preoccupation with decreasing levels of social capital. Putnam shares many of Coleman’s concerns about the nature of contemporary life and its impact on social capital. He defines social capital as ‘features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (1993, p.35). Putnam sees social capital as a distinct form of public good, embodied in civic engagement and having consequences for democracy and economic prosperity. He highlights self-sustaining voluntary associations as creating and sustaining the ‘bridging’ social capital that enables people to ‘get ahead’. This ‘bridging’ form of social capital refers to horizontal trust and reciprocal connections between people from different walks of life, and is more valuable than ‘bonding’ social capital because it is ‘public-regarding’ in purpose (1998, p.vi). The ‘bonding’ form of social capital is based on exclusive ties of solidarity between ‘people like us’ and is restricted to enabling people to ‘get by’. This ‘bonding’ form is ‘private-regarding’, and thus of less of benefit to generating rich social capital more widely in a society. Families may be regarded as an exemplar of ‘bonding’ social capital. In Coleman’s terms, then, Putnam is more concerned with extra-familial social capital. Furthermore, Putnam’s focus on the benefits of ‘bridging’ social capital can be said to be in tension with Coleman’s stress on ‘bonding’ social capital within and amongst families as a positive feature of social capital generation. Bourdieu’s work may also be seen as falling into the ‘bonding’ form in its discussion of family and group membership, although identified as having negative consequences in perpetuating social inequalities. Putnam’s arguments about forms of social capital, then, decentre families as a valuable form of social capital in favour of an overarching emphasis on civic engagement through membership of voluntary associations and political participation.

Putnam does, however, at various points in his work, implicate families as important in social capital development, and we draw out this more decentred element of his work here. For example, he poses people’s attitudes towards ‘intermarriage across ethnic and racial lines, even within their own families’ as one indicator of levels of trust within a society (2002), and concludes that the nuclear family is associated with high levels of social trust and civic engagement (1996). Thus, Putnam poses changing family life as one causal feature of social capital decline: ‘The most fundamental form of social capital is the family, and the massive evidence of the loosening of bonds within the family (both extended and nuclear) is well known. This trend, of course, is quite consistent with – and may help to explain – our theme of social decapitalisation’ (1995, p.73). Other features of contemporary family life that Putnam has proposed as causal in social capital decline include women’s rising labour market participation and dual earner households: ‘Many of those women who were homemakers in the 1950s and 1960s were our best social capitalists – keeping school organisations, reading clubs and neighbourhood associations afloat’ (Leigh and Putnam, 2002, p.17); as well as market-based child care provision and increased television viewing as an individual rather than family activity (1996). In addition, he points to the plight of local communities in which an exodus of middle class families and a remaining predominance of work-poor families, has eroded positive in favour of negative social capital, compounding racial and class inequalities (1993). Moreover, he argues that, ‘places with a high level of ethnic diversity tend to have less social capital’ (Leigh and Putnam, 2002, p.18). While Putnam (2000; Leigh and Putnam 2002) has recently
pointed to provisional indications of increased social capital in the USA after the 9/11 attack, he argues that a ‘central challenge of our times’ is to recreate ‘genuine bonds of community’ and civic cohesion alongside contemporary social change (1996, p.21).

Like Putnam, Francis Fukuyama’s work (including 1995, 1999, 2001) regards ‘families [as] obviously important sources of social capital everywhere (1999, p.17) and then decentres them. This time, however, decentring is pursued more deliberately in terms of the ‘private-regarding’ nature of the social capital that families may generate.

For Fukuyama, social capital, in the form of expectations and norms of honest and cooperative behaviour, is ‘the crucible of trust’ (1995, p.33). Trust is the initially developed in nuclear families and communities with strong norms and (as for Coleman) oriented towards children’s socialisation and educational attainment. In some societies, however, family allegiances are elevated above other sorts of social ties and obligations, and so do not allow wider trust - social capital - to flourish in civic society: ‘In some cases, there appears to be something of an inverse relationship between the bonds of trust and reciprocity inside and outside the family; when one is very strong, the other tends to be weak’ (1999, pp.17-18). Familialistic societies do not have sufficient, broader, social capital for economic development and prosperity in global markets. Thus, at the same time as he regards rising divorce rates and births outside marriage as disrupting of societies, Fukuyama also speculates that such trends may potentially promote beneficial weaker social capital: ‘Although the breakdown of a family in itself constitutes a loss of social capital, this breakdown may actually lead some family members to greater levels of association with people and groups outside the family … it is possible that the weakening of bonds within contemporary western families leads to an increase in social ties outside the family’ (1999, pp.117-18). However, he also states that modern ‘excessive individualism’ encompasses ‘a preoccupation with one’s private life and family, and an unwillingness to engage in public affairs’ (2001, p.11). Nevertheless, another body of theorising concerned with the nature of late modernity, including individualisation, regards increasing diversity in family forms and lifestyles as indicating the flowering of new forms of association, which has implications for social capital debates. We discuss this further in section 4a.

The concept of social capital has been endorsed as useful in bringing issues of complex social lives, quality of relationships and a long-term view to policy-making, placing a number of social issues on the agenda that might otherwise not be highlighted (Schuller 2001). Nevertheless, the concept - both as it relates to families and more generally - has been subject to sustained and wide-ranging critical analysis, and it is to this we now turn.

3. Critiques of Social Capital

Critics of the concept of social capital recognise its value in focusing on sociability and the ways that informal networks can help individuals to generate and access information and resources (eg Molyneux, 2002; Portes, 1998). However, they have also pointed to a series of drawbacks in relation to the theoretical, methodological and political assumptions that underpin mainstream theories of social capital (Portes, 1998). On one level, critical debates cluster around issues of definition and measurement. The concept is seen as ‘slippery’ and ‘difficult to operationalise in research and policy settings’ (Molyneux, 2002: 168). The diversity of interpretations, even within the mainstream approaches outlined above, has led to a lack of
consensus about what precisely constitutes social capital, so that the gathering and analysis of statistical information about its presence or absence is problematic. On another level, there are concerns about associations between social capital and communitarian perspectives that tend to towards political conservativism, and an disregard of structural analysis of social, economic and cultural inequalities and relations of power. It is this conservative approach that heralds the fragmentation of society and the breakdown of the traditional family. For the concept to have any heuristic potential, writers argue, the ‘allegiances and assumptions’ that underpin theories of social capital need to be radically critiqued (Morrow, 1999; Molyneux, 2002; Portes, 1998).

In this section, we look at the allegiances that shape the discourse of social capital in current policy and social theory in debates about inequality; at the links between social capital and communitarianism; and at the assumptions that shape the discourse around families and gender relations in particular. We then look briefly at the critical perspective offered by Bourdieu.

Policy perspectives

The current popularity of social capital as a concept is largely due to the way that it fits with the third way paradigm that underpins the New Labour project. In this sense, several commentators have argued that it is not value free, but adheres to a set of ideas and principles that form part of a broader policy agenda (Baron 2003; Gamarnikow and Green 1999a; Molyneux, 2002). Implicit in the approach operationalised in government policy agendas is a ‘deficit model’ of social capital, which is consistent with a conservative approach to families and social change. This model focuses on the ‘inadequacies’ of the less privileged in society in their ability to access the resources that would initiate their social mobility and economic success (Portes, 1998; Baron, 2003), and informs a problem centred approach. A social and democratic deficit is posited, which needs to be solved in the interests of the economy and a more pleasant, secure and cooperative way of living. The charm of social capital is that it offers a fairly simple diagnosis, and a prospect of cure, for the socially disruptive effects of individualisation and social change.

Fine and Green (2000) argue that over recent years traditionally self contained policy discourses (social democratic, conservative, new right) are converging into a single explanatory framework where the lack or loss of social capital explains unsuccessful outcomes and social capital building becomes a successful policy strategy. The idea of social capital reconfigures the dynamic between social justice and economic efficiency, making social relationships a key factor in explaining levels of inequality, economic prosperity and political participation (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999a). It aids the shift in responsibility for ‘social inclusion’ from economy to society, and from government to individual, informing policies that focus on social behaviour. This reduces the cost to government, since, as Alejandro Portes (1998) points out, social capital provides non-economic solutions to social problems. If social capital tends towards explanations which view society as prior to and causative of the production of the economy (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999a; Fine, 2001), it follows that inequalities are socially rather than economically or culturally produced. This legitimises a policy focus on individual or collective behaviour (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001; Wright et al, 2001).
Mainstream theories of social capital generate a horizontal understanding of social structure where inequalities are seen to flow in and out of interconnecting networks. In this scenario, individuals can access opportunities through network connections, and their potential for social mobility and moving out of disadvantaged positions is high. This explanation has developed in contrast to a vertical understanding of social structure that brings a range of inequalities and difference into the equation. The positions individuals occupy in society, in relation to their class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ability, overlay a complexity of social, economic and cultural hierarchies against which individuals have to struggle for their mobility and opportunity. The discourse of social capital embeds a horizontal understanding of the relationship between structure and agency that eclipses vertical inequalities, without any argument or rationale for why they are being ignored.

Social capital as a cross-disciplinary concept

Just as the convergence of policy discourses tends to simplify the explanation and solution for inequalities, in a convergence of academic disciplines, society is seen predominantly through the eyes of political economy; an approach which does not take account of the messiness, unpredictability and intricacies of social life. Ralph Fevre points out, that one of the central ideas in the social capital literature, that social relations in the form of social capital offer a ‘vital contribution to economic growth and prosperity’, ‘is not a central concern for sociology’ (2000: 108-109). The ‘social turn’ in economics and political science identified by Fran Tonkiss (2000) heralds an integration of two previously distinct social science traditions. For Peter Loizos, ‘the phrase social capital unites a term from sociology and anthropology with another from economics to produce a concept that seems to integrate two approaches traditionally treated as opposed’ (2000: 125). Traditionally, political economists have largely taken the view that in the choices they make individuals weigh up costs and benefits, so that human behaviour can then be predicted and statistically analysed. Sociology has a history of critical engagement with this position, suggesting that people act in the context of the structural forces that constrain them in relation to the way they understand themselves, and to the meanings that infuse their relationship to others and the world around them. The way these ideas are worked together highlights compatibility and downplays difference, so that any tensions that exist between the amalgamated ideas are not addressed.

In framing their conceptualisation of the ‘social’, however, political scientists and economists have integrated aspects of functionalist sociology into their theoretical framework. Similar to functionalist sociology, social capital theory is thus concerned with the norms and values that shape social relations, social solidarity and social order or cohesion. However, as Gamarnikow and Green point out (1999a), in the transition from sociology to social capital theory, there is a key shift in the understanding of causality. Functionalist sociology, embedded in the modern context, has an integrated understanding of social and economic systems and relations, and the social inequalities they produce. Social capital explanations tend to view society as prior to and causative of the production of the economy. In sidelining economic, material or structural context and effects, Gamarnikow and Green argue, social capital theory opens up a space for policy intervention in the realm of culture and society.

Social capital research informed by economic and political science perspectives tends to follow the methodology of the natural sciences where the value freedom of the researcher and the categories used is taken for granted (Schuller, 2001). This may lead to statistical analysis that tends to skirt over the complexity of everyday social interactions. The intention of the research
has to be clarified. If, for example, levels of trust and participation are seen to be externalities important for economic growth, they can be legitimately counted or measured in line with the logic of quantitative methodology. If research is directed towards an understanding of the quality of social relationships, the meanings people attach to their actions, or the complex relation between risk and trust, then a more qualitative approach may be appropriate (Tonkiss, 2000; Schuller, 2001). Whatever the intention however, a more reflexive approach is required where the intentions and perspectives of the researcher become a significant aspect of the research. Hidden or taken for granted subjective understandings, operations of power and categories of thought are then made visible, problematised or deconstructed, and become a critical aspect of the research process.

The paradox of social capital theory

Subtle theoretical twists like this add to the sense that theories of social capital rest on a paradox. Just when politics turns its attention to the social world, to families and communities - a ‘social turn’ that feminists have long advocated - its mode of analysis, couched in the language of communitarianism, is covertly economistic. This obscures rather than illuminates the effects of structural inequalities and relations of power (Fraser and Lacey, 1993; Tonkiss, 2000; Molyneux, 2001). Thus, even though ‘social processes are now more squarely in the policy domain’ (Molyneux, 2002: 168), they are evaluated through a theoretical lens that prioritises and takes for granted the economic system that maintains them.

Within this economistic perspective, social capital approaches are silent on gender and inequalities. As we described in section 2, Coleman, for example, is concerned to highlight the ways that social capital works to illuminate the differentiation of human capital acquisition, and the attainment of educational qualifications. Yet, as has been pointed out, he pays little attention to structural inequalities like gender and disability (Baron et al, 2000). Similarly, social capital theorists are less than attentive to power relations that shape women’s roles in families and wider society, largely taking for granted that women are central to the production of social capital. There is a tacit understanding that women are the most productive social capitalists and an unspoken assumption that ‘women are naturally predisposed to their families or communities’ and take their responsibilities seriously (Molyneux, 2002: 178). Indeed, the ‘gender revolution’, and the social changes in family and community, notably indicated by a gradual increase of women in the labour force, has been identified by social capital theorists as key to a decline in social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam 2000). Molyneux argues that ‘a gender aware approach to social capital has to begin not just by recognising but also by problematising the fact that women are very often central to the forms of social capital’ (Molyneux, 2001: 49).

Links with communitarianism

Social capital theory echoes the communitarian agenda in that it privileges the traditional family and community, norms and values and cohesion and consensus over approaches that emphasise material and cultural difference. Communitarians are dismissive of liberal individualism and of rights-based policy agendas that encourage the ‘selfishness’ and ‘isolation’ of individuals in contemporary societies. They are in favour of policies that encourage responsibility, rather than the rights-based agenda that they argue has contributed to the gradual erosion of family and community life since the 1960s. The communitarian individual is embedded in the community and has no need for abstract rights or freedoms. It is
understood that common sense values emerge from the social situation, building the norms that contribute to the security and order of communities (Etzioni, 1995). The communitarian focus of social capital theories on micro level phenomena, Maxine Molyneux suggests, cuts out the challenging presence of liberal principles of equality and justice, so that social capital exists in ‘considerable tension with women’s rights and entitlements’ (Molyneux, 2002: 174).

Though social capital chimes with a communitarian perspective in many ways, its allegiance to rational action theory (stemming from the work of Coleman), and to entrepreneurialism and economic success (following Putnam and Fukuyama), is less inclined to dismiss autonomous individuals, though it is happier when they are associating with others in local organisations and community life (Misztral, 1996; Baron, 2003). In theories of social capital that follow Coleman, Putnam and Fukuyama, one of the key roles of parents is to socialise their children into the norms and values of society, and to nurture and develop their human and social capital. The generation of social capital within and outside families leads to relationships that underpin informal social control, rendering the formal or coercive control of parents, teachers and police officers less necessary (Portes, 1998; Wright et al, 2001). As our overview in section 2 indicated, in families where parents are ‘absent’, as in dual earner or single parent households, or in large families where attention has to be rationed, parents are said not to have enough time to give their children the attention that they need. Parents who fail to make the right choices or investments in their children or to socialise them properly are seen to place an ‘externality’ on society with economic cost (Baron et al, 2000). Parental choice thus has a social effect. As families maintain and enhance their social position, society gains from the transmission of norms and values conducive to social cohesion (Wright et al, 2001).

Families and gender relations in social capital theories

This prescriptive, normative approach to family life tends to obscure the diversity and complexities of intimate relationships. In positing the traditional family as the norm, as Virginia Morrow points out (1999, 2001), social capital theories can obscure the different experiences of children in families and the positive relationships and frequent contact children can have with separated parents. Morrow has shown that Coleman hides the potential agency of children in his understanding of the ways that social capital is generated by parents and transmitted to their children. In assuming that children are only influenced by family and school, he takes a narrow view of their potential, the ways that children socialise in friendship networks and participate in local schemes and activities, generate their own connections, and indeed make links for their parents (Morrow, 1999: 752). The concept, she argues, is ‘poorly specified as it relates to children’ (Morrow, 1999: 744), and obscures supportive relationships between siblings and friends.

In contrast, as we described in section 2, for Bourdieu family is the place through which capital assets are transmitted over time, through generations. When children are born, they inherit a social space from which they gain access to different capital profits (Skeggs, 1997). Patricia Allatt (1993) draws on Bourdieu’s conceptual framework to show empirically how privilege is transmitted from generation to generation in families. She identifies two forms of social capital: social networks and sociability. Social networks provide support and access to resources. They consist of contacts and group memberships based on social exchange, obligations and shared identities, and are sustained through ‘the unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 250; Allatt, 1993: 143). Allatt identifies how parental social capital, expressed in networks, is both used on
behalf of their children and generates the creation of the children’s own social capital, networks and sociability. These values, aspirations and resources are woven into family practices and oriented, she finds, to young people’s futures (Allatt, 1993: 143).

Like Coleman, Putnam also senses that social change has had a detrimental impact on family life. As we described in section 2, he points to a growing divide between work rich/time poor and time rich/work poor households, as having an effect on family ties and the socialisation of children. He argues that ‘strong families’ have a positive effect on neighbourhoods, and are associated with lower levels of youth crime: ‘good families have a ripple effect by increasing the pool of good peers’ (2000: 314). Putnam also argues that the integration of families into neighbourhoods may not always be beneficial, if neighbourhood values are at odds with ‘decent’ norms. Little attention is paid in this analysis to structural constraints that may be differentiated by gender, ethnicity and location, and their impact on individual and community life. Following the logic of Coleman’s and Putnam’s arguments, youth unemployment is more likely to be due to individual failings than external labour market processes (Morrow 1999). Moreover, the downside of ‘strong families and strong communities’, as Portes identifies, is that the same strong ties that bind groups together also keep others out. They tend to exclude undesirables and outsiders, and to restrict individual freedoms in favour of social cohesion and responsibility. Portes argues that where community is synonymous with conformity and where the level of social control is strong, the privacy and autonomy of individuals is compromised (Portes, 1998).

A critical perspective from Bourdieu

While Bourdieu has had limited influence in defining the concept of social capital that is currently dominant, aspects of his work offer an important critical balance to mainstream social capital theories (Fine, 2000). For Bourdieu, as we noted in section 2, social capital is related to other forms of capital and is rooted in the practices of daily life. This draws attention to the strategies individuals employ as they invest in and capitalise on social, economic and cultural resources. Bourdieu’s methodology reflects this understanding in two ways (2001: 62). First, unlike mainstream approaches, he is interested in the historical context and social construction of relationships and identities, in relation to the structures that situate them. Second, he sees significance in the meanings that actors place on their social relationships. Thus, for example, statistical analysis of participation in voluntary associations as an indication of the presence of social capital is only half the story. The meanings and motivations that volunteers invest in their actions is equally important. It is not enough to establish the presence of a network, there is also a need to examine its content in practice. Further, the categories Bourdieu uses, like capital and networks, are not fixed but are heuristic, temporary constructions to be informed by empirical research (Reay, 2000; Fine 2001).

Bourdieu is critical of social science models that depend on understanding human behaviour as intrinsically rational or utilitarian. Rational action theory, he suggests, takes no account of social divisions and applies an abstract rational position across a multiplicity of cultural and historical circumstance. Further, it lays a theoretical model over real life, hiding empirical data that might challenge its defining assumptions. The methodological individualism implicit in rational action theory, Bourdieu points out, suggests that social life is generated through conscious individual choice. This ignores the individual and collective histories that unconsciously generate the social construction of everyday life. And finally, methodological individualism prevents an understanding of how individuals relate to each other and the world
around them (Jenkins, 1992). Social capital research, following Coleman and Putnam, tends to measure individual levels of trust and participation by questionnaire and then aggregate up ‘from household, to community, to nation’ (Schuller, 2001:12). This assumes that everyone counts the same as everyone else, without regard for the diversity of social and economic context or for the meanings that people invest in their relationships (Skocpol, 1996). Taking account of the complexities of social interactions and the qualitative differences in the density of social capital in different networks, Schuller argues, would suggest that different methods might be appropriate at different levels of analysis (2001). Bourdieu emphasizes the construction of social capital in the interaction between individual agency and a society stratified by social and economic inequalities, providing a framework for understanding the differentiated acquisition of capitals (Skeggs, 1997). While social capital theory is oriented towards the ways that social factors impact positively or negatively on economic and political spheres, Bourdieu is concerned with how people create the world they live in, with a view to exploring how systemic inequalities are maintained.

Conclusion

We have highlighted some of the key critiques of mainstream theories of social capital, outlining their close association with communitarian ideas and their fit with the policy agenda of the New Labour government. Further, the particular cross-disciplinary configuration of social capital theory, with its links to functionalist sociology and rational action theory, results in a conservative reading of the social world and an authoritarian approach that limits its heuristic potential in social research. Feminists have criticised social capital theory for its lack of analysis of gender and power relations in families and wider society, and for missing the intricate processes through which people encounter each other, build relationships of trust, and share experiences and resources.

Nevertheless, there is a growing move within the field to see if it is possible to generate an understanding of social capital that sidesteps the ‘celebratory’ quality of the concept, its links to communitarian politics, and the way it is shaped by a particularly middle class American yearning for community (Portes, 1998; Morrow, 1999). To do so, as Morrow suggests, we might expand the concept to recognise the multiplicity of ways that social relationships work, take a less pessimistic view of the impact of social change, and encompass an understanding that the structural tensions that exist in society cannot be skirted over (1999). Such a move might follow Bourdieu’s emphasis on the construction of social capital in the interaction between individual agency and a society stratified by social and economic inequalities (Skeggs, 1997). It might also work with the ideas of late modern social theorists, who argue that individuals in contemporary societies are themselves transforming traditional social structures through their choices about how to live differently in a constantly changing and uncertain world (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002; Jones and Miller, 2001; Winter, 2000). We look at these ideas in more detail in our section on intimacy and social capital below.

4. Key Areas for Exploration

The nature of intimate relationships, changing structures of education and employment, and increasing ethnic diversity, as we outlined in section 1, are areas at the forefront of discussions of family and social change. They are also areas that are addressed in various ways within social capital theorising. In section 2 (in relation to intimacy) we saw that Coleman’s work is
concerned with family structures as linked to the strength of relationships between parents and children. He is also interested in the qualities of obligations and trust, which imply forms of intimacy and are stressed by all social capital commentators. Bourdieu’s ideas on social capital, that it is continuously accumulated and transmitted within and outside families, implies affectivity (an aspect of intimacy), which can be manifested in class-specific forms. In relation to education and employment, we saw that both Coleman and Putnam identify mothers’ increasing labour market participation as, for Coleman, impacting on children’s educational achievement and, for both, undermining of wider social capital generation. Putnam is also concerned with the detrimental impact of a growing divide between work-rich/time-poor and work-poor/time-rich households. For Bourdieu, education in particular operates through the class-specific processes of social and cultural capital, and is underpinned by economic capital, including employment. Finally, as noted in section 2, the ethnic diversity of societies has formed one of Putnam’s explicit preoccupations, where he sees it as leading to decreased trust within and between ‘races’.

In this section, then, we discuss in turn the key issues arising out of an examination of the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital in relation to intimacy, education and employment, and ethnicity. Each of the following three sections constitutes a conversation between an existing literature and the social capital debate, and each identifies key issues to be explored.

4.1 Intimacy
(This section draws on Holland et al. 2003)

Introduction

Significant social change is a central theme in contemporary theorising about family life, and discussion often focuses on the impact of broader structural and societal changes on personal relationships. But the evidence for such change is far from unproblematic, and while change and transformation, may be a common premise in contemporary literature on personal and family relationships, forming the basis of theories, models and prescriptions, their meanings are contested. In this section we elaborate on the three broad approaches to theorising the relationship between social change and family and intimate life suggested in the introduction, that are relevant for an understanding of social capital and intimacy.

These approaches cohere around notions of:

- breakdown and demoralisation due to the detraditionalisation and individualisation of social life and the disintegration of moral frameworks;
- democratisation and egalitarianism as a result of a greater diversity and plurality of lifestyles;
- continuity, particularly with regard to enduring power relations.

Concerns over a perceived demise in community solidarities and an associated decline in trust have generated a new interest in social capital as a framework for theorising and promoting social resources. Policy makers hope to strengthen social cohesion and produce positive policy outcomes through its deployment. The application of theories of social capital to family and other intimate relationships focuses on the resources and support that such associations generate, and on the
relationship between family members and broader sections of society. Here we will relate particular readings of social capital to the broad perspectives we have suggested.

Breakdown and demoralisation

A number of influential commentators argue that de-traditionalisation and the concomitant process of individualisation have undermined the values and identities associated with family life, weakening social ties and damaging social cohesion. As we have seen above, many social capital theorists who emphasise the importance of the family would fall into this group (e.g. Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Amato, 1998; Runyan et al., 1998). More generally, writers who adhere to this perspective highlight increases in divorce, separation and people living alone as evidence that isolation and individual self interest have intensified at the expense of principles of responsibility and obligation. Principles deemed essential to the social fabric such as reciprocity and trust are viewed as casualties of individualisation, which threatens not just the family but the very basis of social life (Davies, 1993; Dennis and Erdos, 1992; Mead, 1986; Murray, 1990, 1994).

This position can feed into a conservative agenda. For example, social capital theorists have identified changes in family and community brought about by the gradual increase of women in the labour market as key to a decline in social capital, ignoring the struggles of feminist economists to reveal the gendered nature of economic processes (Molyneux, 2001). As Virginia Morrow (1999) points out, the mainstream social capital literature both draws on and feeds into a powerful political rhetoric about the damaging impact of family breakdown on children and society in general. Little attention is paid to structural constraints, and how social capital may be differentiated according to class, gender, ethnicity and location (Skeggs 1997). This type of theorisation might also contribute to an agenda of social and cultural deficit, with social capital as another resource that unsuccessful individuals, families, communities and neighbourhoods lack (Morrow, 1999; Gamarnikow and Green, 1999a).

Individualisation and democratisation

Theorists who describe an emerging democratisation of personal relationships on the whole perceive social change in a more positive light, and emphasise a progressive move towards more egalitarian associations. Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck Gernsheim have attempted to document the emergence of a new social order of ‘reflexive modernity’ that they claim has led to a transformation in the experience of the personal. Giddens describes a post traditional society in which men and women, progressively freed from the roles and constraints associated with traditional social ties, are compelled to reflexively create their selves through day-to-day decisions (Giddens 1991, 1992). The changing roles and status of women are seen as indicators of this potentially positive change. From this perspective the detraditionalisation of social life has freed people from the fixed, constrained social roles of the past, allowing them to create new, more fulfilling relationships based on mutual satisfaction rather than contractual obligation. Theorists writing from this perspective argue that individualisation has altered rather than destroyed practices of trust and reciprocity. Instead of defining reciprocity as obligation that maintains trust, trust is understood as a dynamic and constantly changing response to risk. Without the security of kinship and community, trust cannot be taken for granted but must be reflexively generated between individuals in intimate relationships, negotiated in a democratic process.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s ‘individualisation’ thesis suggests that a new age of radicalised modernity has replaced the old predictabilities and certainties of industrial society, bringing new risks
and opportunities (1995, 2002). They argue that these changes have fundamentally altered the experience of love, sexuality and family life, placing intimacy at the heart of detraditionalised life. With traditional ties weakened, love and intimacy become ever more important to ease the isolation of this new autonomy. Family relationships are rendered conditional, characterised by risk and fragility rather than rules and rituals, and individuals are caught in a paradox, as love and intimacy become ever more central, but ever more difficult to secure and maintain.

Many theorists have placed lesbian and gay relationships at the forefront of the cultural shift towards democratisation in intimate relations. With no cultural guidelines or institutional supports, same sex couples are compelled to fashion new forms of association. Research by Jeffrey Weeks et al. (2001) notes the prevalence of an ‘egalitarian ideal’ (see also Dunne, 1997; Peplau et al., 1996) in accounts of their relationships offered by non-heterosexual couples, with notions of equality and democratic negotiation emphasised as characteristic of their own and other same sex relationships.

These patterns develop, it is implied, if rarely explicitly argued, because of the new forms of social capital that have developed in the non-heterosexual social worlds (Plummer, 1995; Weeks et al., 2001), organised around concepts of identity and community. These have enabled the growth of what has been described as a ‘friendship ethic’ in and through which the values of elective relationships, chosen kin, and egalitarian relationships can be validated. Similarly, many have argued that the HIV/AIDS crisis has produced a remarkable resurgence of community based activity, which betokens the importance of the ties of friendship and endurance in the face of adversity for building up resources for ‘collective self activity’ (Weeks, 1995).

Notions of families of choice and the centrality of friendship in the late modern world are not particular to non-heterosexuals. Pahl and Spencer (1997; see also Pahl, 2000) have seen the growth of ‘friend-like relationships’ as characteristic of the contemporary Zeitgeist. As old communities of fate and necessity decline and family patterns change, the flexible patterns of friendship can provide more adaptable structures both for private life and the labour market, offering effective ‘bridging ties’ to enable individuals to escape from traditional obligations. The work of such theorists has considerable implications for the development of social capital theory, in putting forward a different account of changes in the relation of individuals to society and to each other, and the consequences for intimate family life. They see new forms of social capital emerging from a context of fluid, diverse social interactions, and emphasise agency and creativity in the context of dissolution of tradition.

**Power Relations and Continuity**

But this theoretical perspective is not without critics. Feminists have interrogated the concepts of individualisation and democratisation, questioning the notion of the individualised subject underpinning these approaches. They have formulated instead conceptions of autonomy that emphasise mutuality, relatedness and recognition of the needs of the other, a relational ontology encapsulated in an ‘ethic of care’ (Benhabib, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Sevenhuijsen, 2002), clearly crucial for an understanding of social capital. Others have argued that the contemporary interest in intimacy and personal relationships has eclipsed the gendered dimensions of parent child relationships. Previous feminist concerns with the private sphere of family and domestic household have been marginalized, and the private re-framed in terms of intimate adult relationships, within which intergenerational relationships between children and adults cannot be adequately theorised (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2002). More generally, in a comprehensive review of research into intimate relationships, Jamieson (1998) found little evidence to support the thesis that individualisation or democratisation is yet a dominating feature of contemporary relationships,
suggesting instead that experiences of intimacy are wider and more variable than the ideal of the ‘pure relationship’.

For many theorists, then, the concept of social change in personal relationships is overstated. They question the empirical basis for narratives of both decline and transformation, highlighting the danger of interpreting the past and predicting the future through fixed theoretical lenses. They argue that these positions reflect and reinforce politically grounded versions of the truth that distort or obscure the real workings of power. From this perspective the ideological underpinnings of narratives of social change become identifiable. Those adopting a breakdown and demoralisation standpoint tend to endorse a conservative or a moderately reformist agenda, promoting values of responsibility and duty at the expense, it is sometime argued, of social and economic inequities. Single mothers, same sex parents and other non conventional family forms are at worst vilified as the embodiment of moral decline and threatening to the very structure of society, or at best seen as unfortunate victims of the decline of family and community (Davies, 1993; Dennis and Erdos, 1992).

Conversely, those who welcome individualisation as promising greater egalitarianism in intimate relations generate a view of equality and justice that can seem to operate independently from wider structural constraints. The democratisation of the family is in danger of being seen as private, personal transformation, occurring in spite of the inequity and discrimination that characterise the public sphere. As feminists and others have argued this optimistic account obfuscates not only the relationship between structural inequality and interpersonal dynamics, but also the enduring significance of gender in the organisation of domestic chores and childcare, and at the core of intimate family life (James, 1991; Oakley, 1974; Pilcher, 2000).

Conclusions

It is important to clarify and engage with the discourses about families and their relationship to social capital that we have discussed here. These discourses help inform ideas about how policies should be constituted and changed. They can come to dominance in the political sphere, bringing their own baggage, and helping to set policy agendas. Much of the recent work that has captured the attention of politicians and policy makers, has been concerned in various ways with quantifying social capital or the potential for it to develop. Concerns about a breakdown in social capital, seen as the glue holding societies together, power the policy agenda. But the political demand for rapid solutions to what are regarded as social problems sits uneasily with the need to understand processes that configure change and continuity in intimate life both within and outside families. While the concept of social capital can seem like an elastic catch-all in the multiple and sometimes thoughtless ways in which is has been deployed, with careful definition and elaboration it might cast light on these processes. We have highlighted here some of the ways the concept has been applied to families and intimate life, and indicated areas of theory and research that are important for any further development and refinement.

4.2 Education and Employment

(This section draws on Bruegel and Warren 2003)

Introduction

In this section, drawing largely on the US literature on social capital and educational attainment, we consider the proposition that well-bonded communities can compensate for material and cultural
poverty and thereby promote social mobility (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Schneider and Coleman, 1993). We focus on Coleman's work since it addresses issues of deprivation and the role of family structure most directly, and his conclusions are increasingly being translated into policy in the UK.

In linking the soft concept of the ‘social’ with the ‘moral power of economic rationality’ (Fevre, 2000) embodied in ‘capital’, ‘social capital’ is a central concept of ‘Third Way’ thinking (Blair, 1998; Gamarnikow and Green, 1999b; Szreter, 2000). It promises a way of reconciling the demands of competitive markets with the quality of ‘community’. We argue that the confusions, elisions and ‘stretching’ of the concept of social capital need to be addressed before putting much faith in social capital building as a means of redressing inequalities in the labour market, and the related inequalities of the education system (Fine, 2000; Foley and Edwards, 1999). As Lin (2000) argues, we need to know more about the distribution of different types of social capital across different groups - whether by ethnicity, class, gender and location - and about how efficacious is the deployment of social capital for each.

It is possible to disentangle the relationship between social capital development and patterns of inequalities by drawing on the distinction made between bonding, linking and bridging social capital (Szreter, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Thus bonding social capital operates as a resource for poorer, ethnically homogenous communities, protecting them from market inequalities, while providing, richer, exclusive communities with the means to consolidate their advantages. Bridging social capital can offer ways of building trust across different communities, reducing inequalities between communities and facilitating social mobility. The contribution of social capital to reducing inequality and building the capacity of the poor communities will also depend the relation of community networks to the loci of political power, which can be seen as ‘linking social capital’.

The question arises of the nature of the interactions between these different forms of social capital, and whether it is helpful to treat these different processes as part of a unity (Lin 2002). It may well be that very different skills and systems of trust relations underlie these different forms, or there may yet be ways of transforming bonds to bridges, by building forms of collective action on social bonds.

**Educational attainment, class and social capital in the UK**

In practice it is not hard to see how access to different types of social network are likely to influence educational outcomes. Local differences in patterns of economic development structure differences in opportunities and in institutionalised networks between the education system and employers, in ways that are clearly gendered. In stable economies these would also be reflected in parental values and aspirations, fostering, for example, pride in male manual as against white-collar work (Willis, 1977), which ‘resonated with the organisation and selection processes of the school’ (Brown, 1990:89). Research in the UK which examined restructuring in different types of community across the country in the 1970s and 1980s showed the importance of local opportunity structures, but provides hints that social networks linking schools to local employers could be important in defining occupational opportunities (Ashton and McGuire, 1990).

One form of community social capital sustaining inequality is well recognized in the UK, the maintenance of class privilege in the face of the development of a more open, meritocratic education system has been achieved through private education, leading to jobs of high influence (Westergaard and Resler, 1975:253-256). "Those buying ‘distinction’, in Bourdieu’s terms, do so largely through family resources affording cultural capital and access to top public schools as access to exclusive
social networks of overwhelming power. Family financial investment in school fees is then realised through access to social networks, and not only through enhanced qualifications.

With increasing competition between schools and increasing globalisation of elite labour markets, the importance of school and college reputation for an individual’s occupational attainment are likely to increase (Wolf, 2002). The ‘name’ of the school and university counts as a marker of attitude, soft skills and commitment. Though this may look like a retreat from social networks as a ladder to opportunities, reputation is a classic public good and social capital is likely to be deployed to protect it and to limit ‘free-riders’. This can occur at all levels of the educational system and suggests that parental engagement may operate to police boundaries to protect reputation and hence enhance the market value of the qualifications their children acquire.

**Social Networks and the transition from primary to secondary school**

Even before the 1988 Education Act gave the appearance of choice of secondary schools in the UK State system, those who could mobilise both social networks and financial resources were able to subvert the administrative systems of local allocation (Fitz, 2001). Research on parental choice in the US and UK reveals the influence of class on the process of making choices and the distribution of places, though the degree of social differentiation is disputed (see Gorard, 2000; Taylor 2002). Both Gewirtz et al. (1995) and Woods et al. (1998) identify class differences in the use of networks in Britain post 1988, with working class families continuing to opt for more familiar local schools, and relying more on formal information from schools. Gerwitz et al. (1995) also found that at the bottom and the top of the scale, it is the potential social networks of children that are important in choice of school, with both groups seeking to enhance appropriate ‘bonding’ (Allatt, 1993, 1996). The middle group were more concerned with accessing ‘bridging’ capital for their children. With increasing parental awareness of the importance of qualifications, working class parents may now be following suit (Woods et al., 1998).

Overall, the literature relating school choice to social networks suggests that the switch from administrative allocation to a ‘parental choice’ system extends the role of social networks, without necessarily helping to build social capital further. The reproduction of class and community differences is enhanced by the ability of parents to use their power in the education market to shape their children’s future milieu.

**Educational attainment, closure, and school/community links**

Catholic schools and communities are central to Coleman’s analysis of ‘closure’ or community social capital. Such schools are less well funded than state schools in the USA, yet yield higher rates of advancement as measured by standard tests, especially for disadvantaged ethnic groups. Here Coleman sees the community as the locus of networks that sustain school quality. For Coleman, however the key variable other than social class behind the high drop-out rates for children of lone parents and from larger families is the investment of parental time in their children’s education. Using similar large datasets, however, Astone and McLanahan (1991) and Teachman (1996) question whether lone parents do spend less time with their children.

From this brief consideration of a growing literature on social capital, we can identify a need to examine closely what types of family resource are forms of social capital, with spillover benefits, and which are better seen as human capital investment. We need to distinguish time inputs from social capital itself; is time spent an indicator of social capital or a measure of investment in social capital?
There is a need to go beyond a crude differentiation of family type to consider the nature of the
gendered relationship between parents and children, irrespective of measured household form
(Stambach and David, 2003).

Though Coleman considers differences in schools’ social composition and ethos, he does not
include community structure variables. Yongmin (1999) and Sampson et al. (1999) add variables
describing the local neighbourhood/catchment area to Coleman’s main variables. Both find
contextual effects of community social capital on the relationship between family characteristics and
attainment. Sampson et al. (1999) show that processes of intergenerational closure do not
compensate poorer communities; it is in the affluent areas of Chicago that parents interact with the
parents of their children’s friends and where adults know the local children. This does not mean that
active engagement in a church community is irrelevant amongst the poor, but that the processes
highlighted by Coleman tend, in the bigger picture, to reinforce existing advantage.

Morgan and Sorenson (1999) suggest that bonding, in the form Coleman identifies, helps to enforce
social norms at the cost of creativity or what they call ‘horizon-expanding’ social capital. While a
community with high ‘bonding’ social capital may help children do well in tests, it does not provide
them with the self-reliance, flair and ability to take risks and to move their careers forward beyond
local horizons. Nor does it especially enhance their potential contribution to the economic vitality of
their communities (Avis, 2002). ‘Bonding’ social capital may therefore have limited value in
promoting social mobility or reducing inequality. The distinction between horizon-enhancing and
norm-enforcing schooling may be highly relevant.

Sampson et al.’s (1999) analysis is important on another count. They regard social capital as an
essentially neutral vehicle that can transmit both positive and negative interactions. They attempt to
move beyond social capital to a value-laden concept of ‘collective efficacy of children’. This reflects
active involvement in direct processes of child control, whether neighbours identify truants, vandals
and ‘those being disrespectful’ to their elders. They conceive of agency as lodged beyond the
individual, recognising that the aggregation of individual responses so common in the multivariate
analysis of secondary data sets does not ‘reveal patterns of social structure’.

Detailed reading of the US literature on social networks and educational attainment reveals that
socio-economic variables remain central to educational attainment, but this is a point that tends to
get lost the identification of ‘new’ processes in complex multi-level multivariate analyses.

Parental inputs of various types generally have positive effects on attainment but tend to reinforce,
rather than reduce, class advantage/disadvantage; those in a position to consider longer term effects
can spend time now, those with fewer resources need to draw on their child’s time, rather than spend
their own time. Family trust in whether investment in educational qualifications can secure returns
will affect this perception, with immigrants generally rating the returns more highly than those
suffering long histories of discrimination, or deeply embedded in areas of limited opportunity. Gender
also seems to get lost in this literature, despite worries about boys’ attainment and the increasing
importance now being attached to fathers’, as distinct from mothers’ involvement.

Conclusion

The increase in discussion of social capital appears to reflect some real processes in the education
system and the economy, even if it is a new term for some very long recognised processes. But we
still know very little about the scale of change in the mobilisation of social capital through the years of
economic restructuring in the UK. Certainly attempts to quantify changes in associational activity tells us very little about changes at the level of the school, though Maloney et al.’s work on Birmingham (2000) points to a rapid growth in the numbers and activities of educational associations.

From our reading it is particularly important to distinguish home-school and child-parent links that build social capital as a public good or collective resource, from those that only boost individual competitiveness and possibly undermine trust relations. While the work for example of Coleman and Sampson, suggest that parental networks might be useful in improving community safety, that is not the same as compensating for material disadvantage in the competition for valued jobs.

Several areas for investigation have emerged in this brief review. These include: Involvement in adult friendship networks based on children’s social networks. If these are overwhelmingly female networks, are there different implications for boys and girls? The social and ethnic homogeneity of school friendship networks and parental networks built upon them. Do links between students and their friends’ parents offer forms of bridging social capital or are they essentially forms of surveillance in Coleman’s mould? The impact of changes in the labour market on parent’s (and children’s) visions of their futures, and how that relates to competition for high reputation secondary schools, as well as to social and geographical mobility of the parents themselves. The expansion of avenues of higher education and the role of teachers as mentors together with parental and student networks in routes to degrees, in an ever more differentiated higher education system. Social capital research has yet to address these areas and answer these sorts of questions.

4.3 Ethnicity
(This section draws on Goulbourne and Solomos 2003)

Introduction

In this section we want to explore some aspects of the problem of understanding the concepts of ethnicity and social capital with regard to family life in different communities in contemporary Britain, and across national boundaries. Our work has a three-fold focus reflecting trends in the lived experience of people, academic interests and policy initiatives. We wish to explore first, families and young people’s diasporic identities (see, Goulbourne, 2002); second, household and family rituals (Gardner and Grillo, 2002); and third, family care and provisions in a transnational world (Goulbourne, 2002; Werbner, 2001). The questions raised in these areas are central to an understanding of how identities and values, trust and reciprocity, and caring for and about members of families, kinship groups and communities explain significant aspects of a widely shared diverse national and globalising world order (Cohen, 1997; Portes, 2001).

Understanding ethnicity and social capital

The question of ethnicity and social capital is complex. There is a need to establish some understanding of both concepts, and suggest ways in which they may be related to the nexus of relationships and practices we generally describe as the institution of the ‘family’ (see, e.g. McRae, 1999).

We see ethnicity as denoting socio-cultural factors such as shared histories, memories, myths, customs, sentiments and values. The combination of these elements which may define an ethnic identity are subject to change, although ethnicity is not an always changing entity (Goulbourne,
There are changes, but at a societal level what is interesting is the capacity for auto-maintenance of ethnic identity, as well as incorporation of a high degree of change without destroying flagged characteristics. Identities evolve and change over time and space and are recognisable by certain characteristics or patterns that people point to as defining what marks them off from others. But precisely because of the fuzziness of declared aspects of these identities, we should focus not so much on the elements of an ethnic identity, but pay attention to the boundaries that mark off one ethnicity from another.

The concept of ethnicity is conceptually and empirically distinct from that of race, but in practice these are usually confused. The concept of social capital shares a fuzziness with the concept of ethnicity. Both are essentially social as opposed to individual and autonomous, and are not always easily pinned-down. The growing body of literature on social capital agrees that this is a form of capital that is collectively possessed and utilised – hence its elusiveness. The general attractiveness of the concept seems partly to be that it is a residual category of resource that cannot convincingly be fitted into the categories of human or economic capital. Following Baron et al.’s (2000) suggestion, we wish to utilise the concept of social capital as a heuristic device to help us better understand the complex relationships between the factors being considered here.

Utility of the social capital concept

It is now possible briefly to state three general theoretical and methodological assumptions of how these concepts may be utilised when conducting research into families, ethnicity and social capital. First, we start from the sociological assumption that all human beings enjoy bonding properly presumed to be ethnic in character. This means that we need to avoid speaking of ethnicity as a preserve of minorities, and to apply it to all human beings and communities and speak of minority and majority ethnic communities. Second, we can assume that ethnicity is a form of social capital that may be nurtured and invested, squandered, lost, or shared, mixed and utterly changed as a result of meetings at boundary points. Third, the examination, of social capital and ethnicity are best done comparatively across ethnic groups (both majority and minority), across generations, gender, social classes and national boundaries, because the importance of ethnicity is that its relevance to social action tends to be when it is mobilised for collective social action (Goulbourne, 1998).

It follows that families, ethnic identity and social capital all have to be understood in social, as opposed to individual, terms, it is still through the family and the wider kinship networks that individuals come to be endowed with collective rights and responsibilities or obligations. There is an affinity between the relatively private institution of family, its wider kinship network and the creation and utilisation of social capital.

This close relationship between family, ethnicity and social capital naturally raises a number of conceptual questions. First, is it a worthwhile exercise to explore family, ethnicity and social capital together. Engagement with empirical research should provide us with the best answers. Second, are these concepts representations of different but related characteristics of much the same social phenomenon. Are what we call family, ethnic identity and social capital different facets of the same social animal? They share the characteristic that they have to be accessed through the collectivity; and while they respond to individual needs and demands, they provide sanction of membership and acceptable behaviour through the collectivity. Third, do all communities or ethnic groups possess social capital, do some possess more than others, do ethnic groups utilise social capital in different ways, and could one group’s social capital be another group’s absence of social capital? Here then
are a set of initial questions that research into these issues need clearly to identify, categorise, and understand in themselves as well as in relationship with each other.

**Conceptual and policy issues**

In Britain the concept of social capital has not generally been utilised in academic discussion about ethnicity, although some specific public policy initiatives invite consideration of such relationships. It can be noted, however, that important concerns of social capital theorists have been strongly implied in debates about ethnicity, and race and ethnic relations in Britain over the past few decades. A key assumption that informs much of the work in race relations analysis has been that some groups are better equipped than others to draw upon family, kinship and communal resources.

It has been asserted, for example, that the different kinds of participation of minority ethnic groups in Britain have been determined by the value systems of these groups. In this view, there are two strong models of participation of minority ethnic communities in British society: the Jewish (represented as being socially, economically, politically successful, and well integrated into the upper echelons of society) and the Irish (generally represented as being less successful and mainly outside the mainstream of British society). The argument is that subsequent groups followed this dual pattern. Thus, while Asians are assumed to have followed the Jewish model of incorporation, African Caribbeans are assumed to have followed the example of the Irish. To one degree or another these views were widely expressed in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s with regard to the economy (see, for example, Ward and Jenkins, 1984), and political participation (Dench, 1986; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). Indeed, the view that Caribbeans withdraw from political engagement has been reflected in a recent assessment of their participation in community organisations, and this is now seen as a comment on this group’s stock of social capital (Mclean, 2001).

This neglect of the role of racism and the overriding determinacy of group and family values is strongly reflected in the literature on minority ethnic communities in America, where interest in families and social capital has been more manifest than in Britain. In both countries researchers have been overwhelmingly concerned about questions of integration or the forms of incorporation of immigrants and their offspring into the majority society. In the USA, however, the sheer scale and longevity of immigration from a wider range of societies than Britain, has stimulated and maintained a long tradition of interest in how newcomers, distinguished by race and ethnicity are integrated into the social order. The maintenance of separate communities alongside each other in the USA, each of which participates in the market and together united by the forces of production of goods and their exchange, has been based on an overall commodity-plenty society, including abundance of space in relation to population. In a space-limited, historically-honed population, relatively homogenous culture, and highly centralised nation-state, such as post-imperial Britain into which new immigrant communities have been inserted, the question of integration has become equally pressing and this is reflected in both the academic and policy worlds. In this situation there are at least three important observations to bear in mind from the longer and more developed American concern with integration.

First, this body of literature places a strong emphasis on comparison between different groups, and their perceived and experiential differential incorporation into American society. The literature examines the differential performance of communities in terms of success and failure, assessed by degrees of acquisition of wealth, occupation, residence, and general life chances. These groups or communities come from a variety of societies in the Old World (Europe, Asia, Africa) and from within
the New World (the Caribbean, Central America, South America). This methodology has limitations in the way it is sometimes used in both societies. There is a general tendency to favour the scientific seeming quantitative approach and to take the present moment as representative of reality. The powerful corrections provided by history or the longer view of human experience, are wittingly or unwittingly set aside as irrelevant to the sociological account of lived experience.

Some comparisons of this type have been undertaken as part of a drive towards equality for all in a multi-cultural society, active participation within communities, and social cohesion. This has been the case in Britain particularly since the mid-1990s, and is expressed by many state policy initiatives. For example, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Policy Action Teams in the Cabinet Office have recognised that ‘... minority ethnic communities are at disproportionate risk of social exclusion’ (Cabinet Office, 2000: 7). Drawing on the many reports about the nature of their disadvantages in housing and neighbourhood renewal, education and training, employment, health and so forth, they have stressed the need to incorporate the needs of these communities and the issues that arise into overall government policies. Social capital thinking informs discussions about neighbourhood renewal, family, community, and citizenship. These are all conceived in terms of collective social action, and in this light the notion of social capital may be more attractive.

Of course, the ideal of the multi-cultural society as put forward by some of its most strident advocates (Swann, 1985; Parekh, 2000) may promote toleration and require social peace, but it may also conflict with the notion of a cohesive society. The Home Office (Ruston, 2001) places great emphasis on promoting what they describe as ‘active’ communities, race equality, and the family. But these relate to the notion of social capital and in general draw upon Putnam’s (2000) and particularly Michael Woolcock’s work (1998), emphasising social networks, reciprocity and trust and anchored around their break-down of social capital as ‘bridging’, ‘bonding’, and ‘linking’. Each of these resonate with past normative accounts of group behaviour, from the group theorists at the beginning of the last century in France, Britain and the USA (see, for example, Bentley, 1908; Nicholls, 1974), to discussions in past decades about in-ward-looking and out-ward-looking ethnic communities, or indeed to discussions in politics about different kinds of community political engagement and participation over the last four decades (see, for example, Birch, 1993; Dahl, 1961; Milbrath, 1965).

Second, the American tradition of inquiry into racial and ethnic identity and solidarity as applied to the field of family studies sets out questions that may be quantified or measured by widely acceptable empirical criteria. Thus, there are questions about a wide range of issues to do with ethnicity, family and social capital, such as education, employment, and residence (see, for example, Bianchi and Robinson, 1997; Driessen, 2001). The same degree of attention has not been evident in Britain, but this may be forthcoming as the need for social cohesion in a post-imperial multi-cultural society is becoming increasingly evident (Goulbourne, 1991; Ousley, 2001).

**Conclusion**

A number of issues remain to be addressed fully in empirical research concerning families, ethnicity and social capital: for example, the extent to which ethnicity is perceived, utilised and reproduced as social capital or resource in the processes of lived family life; what it might mean to say that ethnic values and solidarity affect or condition family behaviour and structure/organisation, particularly in conditions where communities are adjusting to new situations such as in multi-cultural Britain; and how ethnicity - understood as social capital - is reproduced within the discrete domains of families and kinship relationships across national boundaries. We need to ask questions about the conditions necessary for ethnic affinities to become a family resource or a social commodity; whether families
are the most effective conduit for maintaining ethnic social bonding across national state boundaries; and, crucially, whether groups that appear to lack ethnic solidarity are refusing to mobilise their ethnicity or capitalise their shared ethnic values. In the British context, this kind of research should help us to explore such questions as whether the high level of inter-ethnic marriage/partnership threatens or strengthens ethnic solidarity or opens the way to a new and more tolerant and inclusive national culture? In addition it should also allow us some insight into whether the possession and utilisation of multiple ethnic and nation-state identities are likely to be the future direction of a regional (of continental proportion) if not a global social order.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have given some attention to how families and the nature of family life are variously centred, or decentred but implicated, in the theorising of social capital. We have pointed to some of the key critiques of the concept addressing its political and theoretical connections and the implications for an understanding of families and communities, and thus for policy-making. In particular, we have considered some issues arising out of an examination of the dynamics of family life and processes of social capital in relation to intimacy, education and employment, and ethnicity. Each of these areas is at the forefront of discussions of family and social change, and of policy intervention.

Our discussion has shown the need for a wide-ranging investigation of, and critical approach to, the relationship between the dynamics of family change and social capital in different circumstances and localities. This is essential to provide theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge of the processes through which social capital is formed and sustained for and within families. These processes will include the generation of social capital within, and use of broad forms of social capital by, families and family members. They will also encompass community coherence or breakdown as both a background to, and a facet of, family change. Such an investigation requires an holistic approach that keeps in play both endogenous aspects within families and also exogenous aspects of life outside families in broader society, over time.

In relation to the interaction between families and social capital generally, we have identified key questions concerning:

- how far social capital is constituted in families or communities?
- how far it is rooted in family ties and/or structures or in economic structures?
- how far it is a positive or negative feature of familial and social life?
- how far it is attached to individuals, groups or communities?
- how far it is irretrievably breaking down or flowing in new forms?

Within these broad questions, there are further issues that relate specifically to intimacy, education and employment, and ethnicity. These focus around:

- the implications of growing diversity in intimate and family relationships for social capital;
- what changes in education and employment mean for family values and life, and for social capital; and
- how growing ethnic diversity and trans-national networks affect family life and social capital.
Currently, theoretical and empirical assumptions about the nature of the relationship between family life and the generation, sustenance and circulation of social capital in communities remain ambiguous, contested and open, rather than providing clear-cut solutions. Until the working of social capital in a changing and multi-layered society are more fully understood, moving from research indications to policy and practice initiatives may prove fruitless. In addressing the issues outlined above, the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group’s programme of work aims to contribute to policy and practice by providing more comprehensive and informed knowledge about the interaction between families and social capital.

Note: For further details of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group’s programme of work see www.sbu.ac.uk/families.
References


Fine, B. (2001) ‘It ain’t social and it ain’t capital’ in V. Morrow (ed) An appropriate capitalisation? Questioning social capital, Research in Progress, Issue 1 (Special Issue) Gender Institute, London School of Economics.


