

# Measuring the social capital of children

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# Abstract

Social capital has been defined in numerous ways and can refer to sociability, social networks and social support, trust, reciprocity and community and civic engagement. The effect of social capital upon children's well-being is under-researched. A theoretical model identifies potential linkages between social capital, intermediate variables and child well-being. After presenting some of the key issues in the measurement of social capital (the separation of cognitive and structural social capital, the exclusion of outcomes of social capital, the definitions of community) this paper then considers the limited literature on conceptualizing social capital in relation to children. Quantitative measures of children's social capital need to build upon the qualitative work available. An ongoing longitudinal study covering 8000 children in four developing countries is introduced as one way forward.

# I. Introduction

*'As a hybrid metaphor, social capital attaches the often-ignored "social" to the invincible "capital", thereby reinvigorating interest in the role of social issues in contemporary policy debates' -Earls and Carlson 2001, p 149.*

Social capital has been defined in numerous ways and can refer to sociability, social networks and social support, trust, reciprocity and community and civic engagement (Morrow 1999). Putnam (1993) picked up the concept of social capital in his book on civic traditions in modern Italy to theorise about trust and participation. Putnam defined social capital as 'features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated action' (p. 167). While Putnam focuses largely on the beneficial effect of social capital, most researchers now recognize the potential downside of social capital: inward looking communities which are closely tied but exclusive of other communities (e.g. Putzel 1997), or networks which have undesirable outcomes e.g. the mafia.

There is a burgeoning literature on social capital and it is not the intention of this paper to provide a review of all the issues being discussed. The objectives here are: to highlight why social capital matters to child welfare outcomes; to briefly consider some key issues in the measurement of social capital; to consider the limited literature on conceptualising social capital in relation to children; and to conclude with some directions for measuring the social capital of children. While social capital can be measured in qualitative and quantitative ways, this article focuses upon quantitative measures as there is a growing interest in examining the statistical relationship between a child's social capital and his or her well-being.

## 2. The relationship between social capital and child welfare

The effect of social capital within a community and/or household upon the well-being of children has rarely been measured. Jack and Gordon (1999) offer a useful theoretical discussion of this, while Runyan et al (1998) and Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) provide empirical evidence.

Figure 1 presents a theoretical model of the relationship between social capital and child welfare outcomes. Social capital may affect various attributes and attitudes of both parents/caregivers and children that ultimately affect the well-being of the child. For example, informational support received from the network of a parent may influence the choice of which school to send a child to, which in turn may affect the quality of education, the attitude of the child and ultimately the life skills of the child. While the model does not purport to include all relevant variables, it emphasises the breadth of factors within each stage, and, therefore, the required complexity of any empirical work (for example the need to include several potential confounding factors).

## FIGURE 1.A THEORETICAL MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

### ASPECT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL (WITHIN AND OUTSIDE FAMILY):

- ✿ extent of networks (eg. participation in informal and formal organizations)
- ✿ information, emotional and instrumental support received from networks
  - ✿ perceived trust and reciprocity
    - ✿ shared norms
- ✿ balance of bonding versus bridging social capital (within and outside community)



### INTERMEDIATE VARIABLES:

#### Parent/caregiver

- ✿ Parental resources available to invest in child
- ✿ Parental decisions to invest in child
- ✿ Parental values and norms (including child abuse)

#### Child

- ✿ Amount and quality of child care and education
- ✿ Child's attendance of and attitude towards school
- ✿ Child's values and norms (including compliance and commitment, sense of belonging, self-esteem)
  - ✿ Child's work and responsibilities
  - ✿ Child's risk taking behaviour and exposure to threats
    - ✿ Nature of role models



### CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES:

- ✿ Physical health (including nutritional status, accidents)
  - ✿ Mental health
- ✿ Life skills (including literacy and numeracy)
  - ✿ Child's perceptions of well-being
    - ✿ Developmental stage for age

### 3. Issues in measuring social capital

An elaboration of key issues in the measurement of social capital is provided in Harpham et al (2002). One of the key issues is to ensure that measurement keeps pace with theoretical development. This means, for example, that measurement of social capital should be able to differentiate between structural and cognitive social capital. Structural social capital reflects the connectedness of individuals within a given community (participation in organisations etc. and networks), while cognitive social capital taps into the feelings of a sense of community (perceptions of reciprocity, norms, and trust etc.). It can be hypothesized that structural social capital may be more associated with say, physical health (use of networks to access services), while cognitive social capital may be more associated with mental health. These potential different effects means separation of the two components is important. Another important differentiation is that between bridging and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital represents connections within the community, while bridging represents outside community links.

The ability to be comprehensive in the measurement of social capital (by, for example, capturing the different components noted above) is another issue. Many studies that examine social capital (e.g. Kawachi et al 1997, Cooper et al 1999) have used secondary data collected in surveys, which were intended to meet other objectives. For example, a large household survey might include one question on “can people around here be trusted?”. It is only recently that surveys explicitly designed to measure social capital have been implemented (see for example, Onyx and Bullen (2001) and Krishna and Shrader (2000)).

Another key issue in the measurement of social capital is to ensure that determinants, consequences and outcomes of social capital (such as length of residence, satisfaction about services, being a victim of crime) are not mixed in with the measurement of social capital itself. Figure 1 emphasized the need to separate out social capital, intermediate variables and outcomes.



Is social capital an attribute of a community, a household, or an individual? This is a key debate (Harpham et al 2002), and to date, truly community (ecologic) measures of social capital, which use observations of behaviour (e.g. how long it takes for a 'lost' child in a supermarket to be attended to) and do not rely on mere aggregates of individual perceptions are limited and tend to be culture-specific (e.g. asking garages if they give petrol on credit to locals). Moreover, in the debate about whether social capital is an attribute of an individual or group, taking the latter stance leads to circular reasoning (Portes 1998), and directs attention away from the core question of how and why individuals acquire social capital (Astone et al 1999). The rest of this article assumes that individuals vary in their level of social capital and that it can be captured in a quantitative manner, and that some groups (e.g. some ethnic groups) have more social capital than others.

## 4. Issues in measuring the social capital of children

There is very little experience of measuring the social capital of children. Issues around the social capital of children include: separation of intra- and inter-household social capital; recognising the role of social capital for children; and the influence and meaning of ‘community’ for children.

Most studies have measured social capital outside the family, though Coleman (1988) does make the distinction between social capital within the family and outside the family: social capital within the family is ‘the relations between children and parents (and, when families included other members, relationships with them as well)’ (p.110). Winter (2000) provides an excellent critique of the little research on family social capital and criticizes Coleman’s over-reliance on a simple parent-child ratio to demonstrate the importance of social capital within the family. Morrow (1999) has shown how both Putnam’s and Coleman’s work have taken a top-down view of the effect of parents on children with the focus being on parents’ ability to invest in their children’s well-being or future. ‘A more active conceptualisation of children, drawing on the sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1990) would explore how children themselves actively generate, draw on, or negotiate their own social capital, or indeed make links for their parents, or even provide active support for parents’ (Morrow 1999 p. 751). Morrow goes on to suggest that many of the studies that measure social capital seem to assume that individual children are only influenced by family structure and school. They do not give an account of the broader social context, such as friends, social networks, and out-of-school activities like paid work and children’s activities in their communities. In other words, they play down children’s agency and overemphasise the influence of parents on children’s lives. In her comprehensive article, Morrow suggests that social capital is currently poorly specified as it relates to children and that any future empirical measure of the social capital of children should include tapping into sense of belonging and integration into local communities and sense of self-efficacy. In her later work, she incorporates these measures into a qualitative study of 102 children in the UK (see table 1). These qualitative methods were able to capture: contact with adults versus ‘peers’; the separation

between structural and cognitive social capital (networks and norms); and definitions of community. However, all the concepts measured appeared to be ‘bonding’ social capital – raising the question of the extent of children’s bridging social capital.

**TABLE 1. MORROW’S METHODS FOR MEASURING CHILDREN’S SOCIAL CAPITAL**

<b>QUESTIONS/TASKS</b>	<b>ASPECT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL</b>
<b>Structured methods</b>	
Who is important to me and why?	Social network and support
What is a friend and what are friends for?	Social network and support
Where do I belong?	Sense of belonging (cognitive social capital)
What do I do when not at school?	Membership of clubs, etc. (structural social capital)
Aspirations for the future	Not stated
<b>Visual methods</b>	
Photograph places that are important to them and describe why	(definition of community?)
Draw maps	(definition of community?)
<b>Group discussions</b>	
Use of and perceptions about their town and neighbourhoods	Sense of belonging. Availability of facilities and utilization. (both structural and cognitive social capital)

Source: adapted from Morrow 2001

In addition to Morrow, Teachman et al (1996) and Astone et al (1999) also criticise Coleman’s specification of the social capital available to children. They point out that Coleman measures children’s social capital by indicators of group membership, specifically whether or not the

children are from a non-intact family or attend Catholic school, asserting without evidence that membership within these groups provides more social capital than their alternatives. The use of group membership alone as an indicator of social capital is problematic because it does not reflect current theory of social capital as indicated above (it only measures an aspect of structural social capital and does not touch upon cognitive social capital).

It is those researchers who have considered neighbourhood and community effects that offer a major contribution to our understanding of social capital and children. Aber et al (1997) describe how family-level factors are expected to be dominant in early childhood (family-level factors may be affected indirectly by neighbourhood insofar as parents and caregivers are affected) and neighbourhood effects are then expected to emerge with greater force in middle childhood (mainly through schools and peers), with factors beyond the neighbourhood (bridging social capital) coming into play for older adolescents. For example, social capital in the neighbourhood has been found to help American youth negotiate their way out of disadvantage (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995). Chase-Lansdale et al (1997) confirm the expected dominance of family effects in early childhood development and found only modest neighbourhood effects for early school aged children. However, they did not uncover clear evidence of increases of the strengths of neighbourhood effects with the child's age; indeed, effects among early school-aged children were stronger than anticipated. The empirical record on the relative importance of family versus neighbourhood/community social capital is therefore somewhat mixed.

The measurement of children's social capital provides an opportunity for new ways of thinking about the measurement of networks. An interesting slant is given by Gephart (1997, p. 8), who discusses the idea of social capital being formed by 'intergenerational closure' of individual social networks, with closure being defined as linkage by a child to at least two adults not in her family.

Another main consideration in the measurement of social capital for any part of the population is the definition of community or neighbourhood. Putnam's (1993, 2000) and indeed, most

other researchers' work on social capital assumes a geographically bounded community. Morrow (2000) points out that 'young people's 'communities' more often constitute a 'virtual' community of friends based around school, town centre and street, friends' and relatives' houses, and sometimes two homes, rather than a tightly-bound, easily-identifiable geographical location' (p 150). The definition of neighbourhood may have multiple meanings that vary depending on the socio-economic and physical circumstances of individuals. Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) report upon research undertaken by the MacArthur network on American adolescents at risk, which shows very different levels of agreement among residents about the size of the 'neighbourhood'. They point out that there is also evidence of large differences within census tracts on definitions of the neighbourhood. Furthermore, adults and youth (even adults and youth in the same household) do not necessarily share the same definition of neighbourhood. They argue that geographic neighbourhoods are not highly relevant entities for many individuals because their ties extend beyond their neighbourhood. Important social institutions are often located beyond the confines of the neighbourhood. In the terminology of social capital, this would be captured by the separation of bonding social capital (within the neighbourhood) and bridging social capital (outside the neighbourhood). An added complication is that neighbourhoods, however defined, are themselves nested in, or overlap with, broader communities. Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) point out that as children grow older, their behaviour may reflect the influence of local labour market conditions or public policy mandates that apply to larger geographical areas. Thus, a pre-requisite in any study of children's social capital is a clear definition of community, which is probably best determined by qualitative research with the relevant children.

## 5. Discussion-a way forward

With growing interest in the measurement of social capital in both developed and developing countries, it is likely that the issue of the social capital of children will be increasingly raised in the future. Very little research has been undertaken in this field and any future work will have to be experimental. Quantitative measures of children's social capital need to build upon the qualitative work available to date. Qualitative work has demonstrated the difference between home-based and community-based social capital of children and it has confirmed that it is possible to capture both structural and cognitive aspects of children's social capital. In the quest for understanding more about the role of children's social capital in their future development, we need more studies to experiment quantitatively with questions that tap into various aspects of children's social capital. Ideally, such studies should be longitudinal in order to analyse longer-term effects of different levels of social capital at different ages. One example of such an initiative is an international study of child poverty, implemented in Vietnam, Peru, Ethiopia, and India (Andhra Pradesh only). This project ([www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)) is tracking 2000 children in each of the four countries. Children aged eight years and above will be asked questions about: contact with adults other than parents; contact with friends; support from their community; sense of belonging; and level of trust of their community. The social capital of the main caregiver of the child will also be measured in order that comparisons between adult and child's social capital in the same household will be possible.

The fact that adults' social capital should not be used as a proxy for children's social capital is only slowly being recognized. There is a need to acknowledge this fact and to develop exploratory quantitative research on measuring children's social capital. International comparative research will be particularly important for illuminating cultural differences in the role children's social capital plays in their future development.

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