



The measurement of Social Capital in the United Kingdom

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Summary

This paper outlines the approach adopted by the United Kingdom (UK) to defining and measuring social capital. A team to lead all aspects of the work on social capital was established in July 2001 within the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Progress to date includes:

- Agreement on adopting the OECD definition of social capital as our operational definition
- Agreement on a framework for its measurement
- An interactive social capital question bank (see www.statistics.gov.uk/scqb)

The measurement and definition of social capital are part of a wider research programme at the ONS, more information can be found on the social capital website www.statistics.gov.uk/socialcapital.

Background

The need for a more consistent approach to the conceptualisation and measurement of social capital was one of the key conclusions from the joint ONS/Home Office Social Capital Workshop held in November 2001. The literature review prepared for the workshop showed that many government surveys were including questions of a social capital nature. However, a variety of approaches were being used to measure different aspects of social capital. In some surveys, the questions were explicitly intended to measure aspects of social capital. In others, they were not explicitly labelled as social capital although they were essentially measuring different facets of it.

This difference in approach reflects the fact that these surveys were designed at different times and to meet different needs. However, this leads to a lack of cohesion, with differences arising in concepts and definitions. A more harmonised approach would make the interpretation and analysis of these data easier; allow users of published sources to see a more coherent picture of British society; and help users plan surveys (e.g. at a local level) that can provide data comparable with national surveys.

Within the UK, ONS has a co-ordinating role in the work on social capital. The approach adopted has been to establish an inter-departmental Social Capital Working Group to oversee this work. The overall aim of the group is to ensure a more harmonised approach to the measurement of social capital. Its specific objectives are to develop: an agreed operational definition of social capital for use across UK government departments; a framework for measurement; and a set of fully tested questions consistent with that definition and framework. The work was split into three stages:

1. Operational definition
2. Development of a framework for measurement
3. Question development and testing

These three stages are considered in more detail below.

Stage one: Operational Definition

The aims at this stage were to agree an operational definition of social capital. In order to be able to measure social capital in a consistent and coherent fashion across UK government departments, it was important that there was a shared understanding of what is meant by the concept. This is not necessarily straightforward as there is still considerable debate in the academic community about what is included within the term "social capital". This lack of conceptual clarity has contributed to accusations of over-versatility, in that social capital can end up meaning all things to all people. However, within the social sciences, there is convergence towards a definition which emphasises social networks and civil norms. Social capital is considered to involve social networks and support structures, community participation, civic and political involvement, trust in people and social institutions, and norms of reciprocity (Scull, 2001).

Putnam, who popularised the concept of social capital, defines it as "networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 1996:56). The World Bank is more expansive and suggests that "social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society; it is the glue that holds them together." The Australian Bureau of Statistics adopted the following definition "social relations of mutual benefits characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity" (ABS, 2000). Statistics New Zealand consider social capital to be "relationships among actors (individuals, groups, and or organisations) that create a capacity for mutual benefit or a common purpose". Further to this they suggest that "social capital is the social resource that is embodied in the relations between people. It resides in and stems from contact, communication, sharing, co-operation and trust that are inherent in ongoing relationships" (Spellerberg, 2001).

Rather than invent a new definition, it has been agreed that the OECD definition be adopted for use across UK government departments. The definition is as follows:

"networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (Cote and Healy, 2001:41).

There are several reasons why this definition has been chosen. Firstly, it was produced by a well recognised organisation and respected publication, *The Well Being of Nations* (Cote and Healy, 2001). The definition is premised on an extensive international literature review covering both the conceptual issues and frameworks for measurement. Secondly, it is succinct and written in a language which is accessible to most people. Thirdly, although there is debate in academia about definitions of social capital, the OECD definition is sufficiently supported for it to be adopted by the UK government. Finally, it suggests social capital is an attribute of the group rather than the individual.

Within the definition, the phrase "facilitate co-operation" refers to the resource aspect of social capital, with a resource being defined as a stock or supply that can be drawn upon. Other key elements of this definition are considered in more detail below in order to help clarify what is, and what is not, included within this definition of social capital.

Networks

Formal and informal networks are central to the conceptualisation of social capital. They are defined as the personal relationships which are accumulated when people interact with each other in families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meeting places (ABS, 2000).

Recently, networks have been re-categorised to distinguish between different types of social capital. These networks are:

- *bonding* social capital - characterised by strong bonds e.g. among family members or among members of an ethnic group; good for "getting by"
- *bridging* social capital - characterised by weaker, less dense but more cross-cutting ties e.g. with business associates, acquaintances, friends from different ethnic groups, friends of friends, etc; good for "getting ahead"

- *linking* social capital - characterised by connections between those within a hierarchy where there are differing levels of power. It is different from bonding and bridging in that it is concerned with relations between people who are not on an equal footing. An example would be a social services agency dealing with an individual e.g. job searching at the Benefits Agency.

The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is important because the impact of social capital depends on the form it takes in different circumstances. For instance, in childhood and old age, bonding social capital is more important to health and, as people seek employment, bridging social capital is more important (PIU, 2002). It should also be noted that strong bonding social capital may serve to exclude, and this is often considered a "downside" of social capital. For instance, there is likely to be strong bonding social capital within communities in North Belfast, or the Northern industrial towns, where there were riots in 2001, but weak bridging social capital. For some analyses, it could be important to distinguish between these two types of social capital. Linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001) is a relatively new addition to the debate and grew out of a World Bank agenda looking at sustainable development in developing societies. It is important in the development context because people working in agencies and institutions play a major role in trying to engage local communities in development projects.

Shared norms, values and understandings

Shared norms, values and understandings relate to the subjective dispositions and attitudes of individuals and groups, as well as sanctions and rules governing behaviour, which are widely shared (Cote & Healy, 2001:41). The role of sanctions in underpinning norms is important. Examples of how these manifest themselves are: not parking in a disabled parking space at a supermarket; giving up your seat for an elderly person; tolerance of people of a different race, religious group or sexual orientation; looking after each other's house when neighbours are absent; and doing voluntary work.

Groups

Groups in this context are very broadly defined and can refer to: geographical groups (e.g. people living in a specific neighbourhood), professional groups (e.g. people in the same occupation, members of a local association or voluntary organisation), social groups (e.g. families, church based groups, groups of friends) and virtual groups (e.g. the networks generated over the internet in chat rooms through common interest groups).

The use of the term "groups" encourages social capital to be seen as a resource/stock which can be drawn upon by all either individually or as a group. Everyone living in an area of high social capital benefits even if individuals within the group have "low" social capital (e.g. few networks). The benefits (e.g. less graffiti) are not restricted and hence are available to all members of the community indiscriminately. This is not to say that individuals do not differ in their ability to generate social capital; nor that they do not have differential access to the benefits which social capital can bring.

Stage Two: Framework for Measurement

The aims at this stage were to agree which specific dimensions should be measured and the facets of social capital to be covered within these dimensions. This would then provide a framework for the development of a harmonised set of questions. Social capital is generally recognised to be a multi-dimensional concept and that a single measure cannot provide a complete picture. It was important to distinguish between different aspects of social capital as some are more relevant to different policy areas. The framework built on the agreed operational definition, taking account of approaches adopted elsewhere, and the need to cover all the key aspects of social capital.

Within the UK the concept of the "survey matrix" was developed. The categorisation used in the matrix was based on the typology devised by Blaxter *et al* (2001) as part of research funded by the Health Development Agency. This generated a six way typology which was amended to five by combining trust with reciprocity and social cohesion. Each theme illustrates a particular facet of social capital and contains between eight and twelve types of question. The five themes are:

- Participation, social engagement, commitment- involvement in local groups, voluntary organisations, clubs, taking action about a local issue
- Control, self-efficacy - perceptions of control and influence of community affairs, health, satisfaction with life

- Perception of community level structures or characteristics - satisfaction with local area, perceptions of local services and local problems
- Social interaction, social networks, social support - contact with friends, family, neighbours; depth of socialisation networks; perceptions of social support
- Trust, reciprocity, social cohesion - trust in other people, confidence in institutions, confidence in public services; perceptions of shared values; length of residence in area

Twenty one surveys (the majority commissioned by the UK government) containing questions relating to different aspects of social capital were identified and combined with the typology outlined above. Most of these surveys were not explicitly trying to measure social capital but a handful had a specific framework for the measurement and analysis of social capital. These are listed in Annex A.

The UK framework is set out below, and has drawn heavily on the work of Blaxter *et al.* (2001) and the UK's General Household Survey and Citizenship Survey. Five dimensions are listed, and, for each, the main aspect of the operational definition to which the dimension relates and an example of the facet is given. The aspect of the operational definition shown in the table should not be considered to be the only aspect to which the dimension relates, each dimension may relate to other aspects in different contexts. It has been developed by identifying what appear to be the main dimensions for the measurement of social capital and then considering what aspects of those dimensions we should be looking to measure.

Dimension (aspect of operational definition to which the dimension relates)	Facet for which measures may be developed
Social participation (networks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of cultural, leisure, social groups belonged to - Frequency and intensity of involvement - Involvement with voluntary organisations - Frequency and intensity of involvement - Religious activity
Social networks and social support (networks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequency of seeing and speaking to relatives, friends or neighbours - virtual networks – frequency and intensity of contact - how many close friends or relatives live nearby - who can be relied on to provide help - who provide help to - perceived control over life - satisfaction with life
Reciprocity and trust (shared norms and values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trust in other people who are like you - trust in other people who are not like you - people will do favours & vice versa - perception of shared values
Civic participation (co-operation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - confidence in institutions at different levels - perceptions of ability to influence events - how well informed about local or national affairs - contact with public officials or political representatives; involvement with local action groups; frequency - propensity to vote
Views of the local area (shared norms and values)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - views of physical environment - facilities in the area - enjoyment of living in the area - fear of crime

The dimensions include both behavioural questions and attitudinal or subjective questions. It is important that both types of question are covered because the core components of social capital (networks, shared norms and values) cover both.

The dimensions can also be sub-divided into those associated with the individual and those more closely associated with the community. This distinction is a recognition that individuals vary in their ability to generate social capital, making it important to examine social capital at an individual level as well as a community level. The first two dimensions (social participation, social networks and social support) can be

considered to be measuring individual level characteristics while the last three (reciprocity and trust, civic participation, views of the local area) are more closely related to community level attributes.

Finally, the dimensions, like the operational definition, cover both sources of social capital (e.g. family) as well as outcomes closely correlated to the core components of social capital (although for some elements such as higher trust or better educational achievement, there is debate whether they are outcomes or sources). Views of the local area has been included because they were important variables in the logistic regression carried out on the GHS social capital module. In addition, Blaxter *et al* (2001) found satisfaction of living in an area important in their review of 40 research studies looking at social capital. Such views are a correlate of social capital and not a source but are essential in empirical analysis. One of the purposes of the framework is to aid the general analysis of social capital by indicating areas for measurement which have proved important. This is a recognition that social capital is not easily measured and that a variety of approaches are required to provide a comprehensive picture. Each of the dimensions are considered in more detail below.

Social participation. Some facets of this are measuring sources of social capital e.g. those indicators related to the personal contacts and interactions that are made by meeting people through clubs, churches, organisations, etc. Other facets are measuring outcomes of social capital. For instance, voluntary work is an important indicator of people's willingness to undertake activity that benefits another.

Social networks and social support are seen as important sources of social capital as the number and types of exchanges between people within the network, and shared identities that develop, can influence the amount of support an individual has, as well as giving access to other sources of help.

Reciprocity and trust are core elements of social capital. Trust is seen as being closely linked to social capital, either as a direct part of it or as an outcome. Reciprocity measures people willingness to co-operate for mutual benefit and is a core component of social capital.

Civic participation is measuring individual involvement in local affairs and perceptions of ability to influence local affairs, and the confidence in civic institutions.

Positive *views of the local area* are likely to be a good correlate for how happy, safe and secure people are with the environment in which they live. As Green *et al* (2000) stress, an individual's answers to questions about the local area will partly depend on their own characteristics - for instance, the extent and quality of personal relationships in the area. However, it will also reflect the impact of the area in which they live, some aspects of which will be influenced by the levels of social capital in the area.

Specific issues related to measurement

An important issue for the UK Social Capital Working Group to consider when developing the question set will be the measurement of bonding and bridging capital. This would require information to be collected on the characteristics of people in the survey respondent's networks. To date, few surveys in the UK have explicitly attempted to collect such information.

Another important aspect to consider is that measures of social capital need to be related to the cultural context in which the behaviour or attitudes are being measured. This will be particularly important to consider at the question development stage of this work. The cultural specificity of social capital has been raised by Robinson (1997) in his work on social capital from a Maori perspective. In this he highlights that the Maori concept of social capital stresses the importance of extended family relationships as these relations are the basis of all other relationships. Measures of voluntary activity have little meaning in this context, since much of what normally is considered to be voluntary activity in the West (for instance, helping others in the community) is done as a matter of familial duty in Maori society. Similar issues may apply when considering the levels of social capital amongst particular ethnic groupings in the UK.

Stage Three: Question Development

The aim of this stage is to develop and test a harmonised set of questions for each dimension of social capital identified in stage two. Question development and testing will be undertaken by Social Survey Division (SSD) of the ONS. They will be guided by the general principles for the development of harmonised questions laid out in the National Statistics booklet, *Harmonised Concepts and Questions for Government Social Surveys* (see www.statistics.gov.uk/Harmony/Introduction/principles.asp)

The first part of the question development work will involve the analysis of questions already being used in government surveys. This is based on the interactive question bank (see www.statistics.gov.uk/scqb), which contains questions relating to social capital used in the main surveys. It allows the content of surveys to be analysed to examine which questions are commonly used. ONS is developing a numbers bank which will contain the results from each of the questions listed in the question bank. This will allow for a comparison of the results from apparently similar questions used in different survey contexts and illustrate which questions produce similar results in different survey contexts. It will also be important to consider those questions which do not produce similar results and to examine the context in which the questions were asked. Finally, long-established questions will be identified which it will be important to retain in order to maintain a consistent time series.

Having identified which existing questions we wish to examine further, there will be an assessment of gaps with regards to the measurement framework. This will take place in partnership with other government departments. New questions will be developed where necessary. A series of cognitive interviews/focus groups will follow to examine people's understanding of the questions. This cognitive work will need to be particularly aware of the cultural specificity of any questions and as such we will need to include people from a range of backgrounds, including those living in rural areas.

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ANNEX A. Frameworks for the measurement of social capital in the UK

General Household Survey 2000-01

The module on social capital, funded by the Health Development Agency, identified the following five dimensions of social capital:

- Views of the local area e.g. perceptions of the physical environment, facilities in the area, feelings of safety
- Civic engagement e.g. influence over events in the community, knowledge of local affairs, taking action, involvement in local organisations
- Reciprocity and local trust e.g. how many people are known in the locality, can they be trusted, would people do favours
- Social networks e.g. frequency of seeing and speaking to relatives, friends or neighbours; how many close friends or relatives live nearby
- Social support e.g. who would provide help if needed

Health Survey for England 2000

This identified the following dimensions of social capital for analysis:

- Perceived social support
- Contact with friends
- Trust
- Participation in organised activities
- Neighbourhood problems
- Ease of access to services

Home Office Citizenship Survey 2001

This included an “active community and social capital” module. Several sections relate to social capital. The module included the following sections:

- Social capital e.g. neighbourhood, sense of others in neighbourhood, informal socialising, helping others
- Participation in civic affairs e.g. contact with public officials or political representatives; involvement with local action groups or rallies; frequency, perception of ability to influence political decisions, trust in institutions of the state
- Participation in groups & formal volunteering e.g. involvement with groups, clubs or organisations; frequency of participation, involvement in voluntary work; frequency and intensity of participation
- Informal volunteering e.g. type of unpaid help provided; frequency and intensity of involvement, barriers and incentives

In addition to the above there are sections on voluntary schemes connected with work; former volunteering, barriers and incentives; and receipt of voluntary help.