

Young Australians' Neighbourhood Social Capital

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Abstract

Social capital is often used as a reference to create policy and interventions to improve social well-being of the community members. This paper focus on whether social cohesion and perceived neighbourhood safety make a difference to young people's levels of neighbourhood social capital. Young Australians and permanent residents aged 16 to 25 (N=283) participated in this study through an online survey. The findings support previous literature, which found cohesive neighbours are more trusting than less cohesive neighbours. The results also indicate that the young people who perceived their neighbourhood as safe were relatively more trusting than those who perceived their neighbourhood as less safe. These suggest that creating neighbourhood 'togetherness' and preventions on crime promotes could promote more neighbourhood social capital.

Key words: Young people, social cohesion, neighbourhood social capital, community, trust and reciprocity, perceived neighbourhood safety.

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Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the overview of young people's neighbourhood social capital levels. I examine and discuss five factors in influencing levels of neighbourhood social capital: number of close neighbours, residence period, social cohesion, participation in neighbourhood activities, and perceived neighbourhood safety. These results will provide a better overview of which factors are important to boost young people's neighbourhood social capital and from there more policy could be made to improve young people's social well being. I found that the length of time that young people had lived in a neighbourhood correlates with their levels of neighbourhood social capital in their neighbours and that young people tend to be more trusting when they know more people in their neighbourhood. I argue that social cohesion is the strongest element in neighbourhood social capital for young people, more so than feelings of safety. Young people contribute to neighbourhood social capital through strong social connections with their neighbours and they also benefit from it through these same connections. My conclusions highlight the multifaceted nature of neighbourhood social capital for young people.

Neighbourhood Social Capital

Social capital is the norms of trust and reciprocity held by a group of people. The analysis of social capital can use varying approaches or levels including individual, informal social group, formal organisation, community, ethnic group and nation. In this paper, I aim to argue that neighbourhood social capital is shared by all the residents in the neighbourhood. Thus social capital is not the property of any one

person but rather is characteristic of a group of people. One group is the set of neighbours in a neighbourhood. People who belong to a neighbourhood characterised by high social capital have better social outcomes, such as better education levels, lower urban poverty, and lower unemployment, than those who belong to neighbourhoods characterised by low social capital (Putnam 1995).

According to Putnam,

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals -- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (2000:19).

Putnam (2000:93-147) then measured social capital by community organisational life, engagement in public affairs, community volunteerism, informal sociability and social trust. Putnam (2000:277-284) found evidence that the decline of civic engagement was caused by the generational change in America, the long-term effects of television, structural change in the family due to work and suburban sprawl. He defines social capital as “the features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993: 36).

I define neighbourhood social capital as the norms of trust in and reciprocity with neighbours: the expectation that the trusted neighbours would act in the best interest of the truster (young person) and that the truster and the trusted exchange favours asynchronously. In this paper, trust in and reciprocity with neighbours was operationalised as the ‘three-part relation’ which is one of the elements in Hardin’s idea of encapsulated-interest (2002): A trusts B to do X. The subject “A” refers to respondents in this survey, while “B” refers to their neighbours. “To act in one’s best interest” covers the action domain that B will take A’s interest into account (e.g. B is aware of and cares about A’s well-being and would not do anything detrimental to A).

In this paper, I will examine and discuss two factors influencing levels of neighbourhood social capital: social cohesion and safety. Social cohesion refers to dense social connections between neighbours which provide a sense of identity. Forrest and Kearns (2001:2130) argued that “residentially based networks [are]...arguably the basic building blocks of social cohesion – through them we learn tolerance, co-operation and acquire a sense of social order and belonging”. Through relationships with their neighbours, young people are able to build trust and understanding. Ongoing interactions with neighbours provide chances for young people to develop broader social networks. Neighbours learn to know one another through dealing with daily life matters. Small business centres, schools, the community library, sport and recreation centres, parks, and community centres are examples of the meeting points where neighbouring takes place and neighbours develop their neighbourhood networks. Moreover, neighbours might build more than one connection with others at the same time in some social settings. For example, Robert is the bookshop owner in the neighbourhood business centre and Rose is his customer, and, at the same time, Rose is also music teacher of Robert’s son.

Current literature debates the importance of social cohesion in determining neighbourhood social capital. Forrest and Kearns (2001:2137) presented evidence to show social cohesion can be viewed as either as “a bottom-up process founded upon local social capital” or “the downside of social capital”. The former view of social cohesion, led by Putnam’s work, argued that “engaged communities produced cohesive societies of active citizens” (Forrest and Kearns, 2001: 2137). Neighbours come together to contribute to the democracy of society. They cooperate with one another to overcome neighbourhood issues. In other words, self-help and mutual aid increase the ability of a neighbourhood to overcome poverty, crime and low standards

of health (Putnam 1995). The latter argument on social cohesion, as the downside of social capital, drew on Fukuyama's evidence showing the "apparent paradox between increased associational activity and declining levels of trust and civic engagement" (Forrest and Kearns 2001: 2137). Neighbours form groups and cliques based on their common interests. Contrasting interests in different groups and cliques can destroy the norms of trust and reciprocity. Further, social exclusion might occur when the group's interests solely and exclusively benefit only group members. I agree with Putnam that social capital enables neighbours to work together among themselves, but at the same time the strong trust among neighbours can cause distrust towards those from other neighbourhoods.

The second factor which might influence neighbourhood social capital is feelings of safety. Having a sense of security in one's neighbourhood encourages neighbours to interact freely and openly beyond their own walls. Ziersch et al (2005) argued that perceptions of safety increase with the level of neighbourhood trust. They also found that there are gender differences in perceived safety; women reported lower levels of perceived safety than men. Morrow's (2000) research also found that young girls showed more concern than boys regarding neighbourhood safety. In addition, Kanan and Pruitt (2002:543) revealed that gender is related to the perceived personal risk of being alone in the neighbourhood at night. Kanan and Pruitt (2002:545) also investigated the length of residence and found that it is not a significant factor in the perception of neighbourhood safety. Neighbourhood connectedness and period of time living there were associated with neighbours' feelings of safety in neighbourhood (Ziersch et al 2005). On the other hand, fear and insecure feelings about crimes destroy trust amongst neighbours (Ross and Yang 2000).

The study

An online survey was used as the research method in this quantitative study. Two hundred and eighty three young people aged 16 to 26 to complete this survey. Snow balling design was used as the research method. To promote the survey website, flyers, posters, invitation emails and letters were sent to university students, city councils youth centres, churches, city councils sports and recreation centres in Melbourne.

Participants

Two hundred and eighty three young people (N=283: 86 male, 194 female) completed the survey between January 2006 and May 2006. Most participants (N=206) were university students. The majority of respondents lived in Victoria (N=267), with the remainder living in other parts of Australia. Slightly over a half of the respondents lived in inner metropolitan area and about 30 per cent of them lived in the outer metropolitan area. Only about 10 per cent of respondents lived in a large town or rural area. The majority of the participants (87.6%) were born in Australia and respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21. Most respondents (N=232) claimed that they only speak English at home, but only 65.7% reported that their ancestors were from English speaking countries.

The Questionnaire

Participants in this study were ensured that their identities could not be traced at any point. They were also told when they first entered the website; about the goals of the study and that they could skip questions or stop at any time. Respondents were estimated to take approximately 30 minutes to complete this online survey.

In short, neighbourhood social capital was measured using three variables: a) level of trust in neighbours, b) tendency to help a neighbour who is in need, c) tendency to receive help from neighbours. The measurements of neighbourhood social capital were then divided into two categories: High and Low neighbourhood social capital. Appendix I lists all the questions asked in this study.

I studied the effect that the independent variables, (number of close neighbours, length of time lived in neighbourhood, location of neighbourhood, social cohesion, and perceived neighbourhood safety) have on the main dependent variable --- neighbourhood social capital by comparing percentages of respondents in each category.

In this questionnaire, young people were asked to choose the number of neighbours whom they felt at ease with, could talk to about private matters, or call on for help, on a multiple choice answers: “none”, “one to five”, “six to 10”, “11 to 15” and “16 and above”. The majority of participants (84 percent) reported having between zero and five close neighbours. Due to the small numbers of participants in the last three groups, I collapsed the “six to 10”, “11 to 15” and “16 and above” into “six and above” for statistical purposes.

In this research, social cohesion of neighbourhoods refers to the degree of group togetherness, sense of belonging, and cooperation in the neighbourhood. Accordingly, I am interested in investigating levels of social cohesion among neighbours in young people’s neighbourhoods from the perspective of the young people. I am not measuring social cohesion in the sense of the degree of identification that young people themselves feel with their neighbours, rather I am focussing on their perception of these feelings among others.

Three variables were identified: a) the extent to which neighbours know one another b) whether neighbours share an identity as part of the neighbourhood, c) cooperation between neighbours to solve neighbourhood problems. All three variables were on an eleven point scale (1= No, not at all to 11= Yes, completely). A respondent's scores on these three variables were averaged to measure the overall social cohesion variable. Then social cohesion was classified into two categories: High and Low levels of social cohesion.

The frequency of participation in neighbourhood activities was measured on a four point scale (0=Never, 1=At least once a month, 2=A few times in 6 months, 3=A few times in a year). There was a very small number of young people who participated in their neighbourhoods "at least once a month" (N=22) or who had participated "a few times over six months" (N=36). Thus, for my analysis, I collapsed this variable into a 3-point scale (0=Never, 1=Not frequent, 2=Frequent).

There are three variables which measured perceived safety in the neighbourhood after dark (up to midnight), where respondents feel safe to: a) walk alone in neighbourhood, b) stay at home after dark, c) ride on public transport. These three questions were asked on the same 11-point scale. Once again, these three variables were averaged and then classified into High and Low level of perceived neighbourhood safety.

Results

Number of close neighbours

In this study, I was interested in how many neighbours a young person had in their neighbourhood. Neighbours could be part of a young people's support system providing both emotional and practical resources. In terms of emotional resources, a

young person might need a neighbour whom they can talk with about private matters.

When a young person needs help, his or her neighbours might provide the practical resources which he or she needs.

Table 1 Neighbourhood social capital by number of close neighbours (per cent)

Neighbourhood social capital	Number of close neighbours			
	None	1-5	6 and above	Total
Low	62	21	20	32
High	38	79	80	68
Total	100	100	100	100
Total N	84	145	45	274

Note: Missing data (n=9) not included in subtotals.

Table 1 shows the proportion of young people who had different numbers of close neighbours in their neighbourhood network according to their levels of neighbourhood social capital. Generally, the majority of young people had high levels of neighbourhood social capital (68 per cent). However, only 38 percent of young people with no close neighbours reported high levels of neighbourhood social capital. On the other hand, those young people who had at least one close neighbour were likely to have high levels of neighbourhood social capital. Seventy-nine per cent of young people who had between one and five close neighbours had high levels of neighbourhood social capital. A similar percentage (80 per cent) was shown in young people who had six and above close neighbours.

Residence period

Fifty two per cent of young people who had lived in a neighbourhood for less than a year indicated high levels of trust in their neighbours whereas 63 per cent of young people who had lived one to 10 years in their neighbourhoods had high levels of neighbourhood social capital (see Table 2). Those young people who had lived in their neighbourhoods for less than ten years seem to have similar levels of neighbourhood social capital. This implies that the mobility of young people in neighbourhoods does affect their levels of neighbourhood social capital. In fact, 80 percent of young people had lived 11 years plus in the same neighbourhood.

Table 2 Neighbourhood social capital by period of residence (per cent)

Neighbourhood social capital	Period of residence			
	Less than a year	1-10 years	11 years and above	Total
Low	48	37	20	32
High	52	63	80	68
Total	100	100	100	100
Total N	58	104	112	274

Note: Missing data (n=9) not included in subtotals.

Social cohesion

Young people who lived in neighbourhoods with low social cohesion tended to report low levels of neighbourhood social capital. Table 3 shows that 98 per cent of young people who lived in high social cohesion neighbourhoods reported high levels of neighbourhood social capital. More than half of the young people who had lived in low social cohesion neighbourhoods had low levels of neighbourhood social capital.

Table 3 Neighbourhood social capital by neighbourhood social cohesion (per cent)

Neighbourhood social capital	Neighbourhood Social cohesion		
	Low	High	Total
Low	57	2	34
High	43	98	66
Total	100	100	100
Total N	151	110	261

Note: Missing data (n=13) not included in subtotals.

Participation in neighbourhood activities

Table 4 shows that fewer than half of the young people (43 per cent) who never participated in neighbourhood activities had high levels of neighbourhood social capital. Much higher percentages of young people who had participated in neighbourhood activities at least once (87 per cent and above) reported high levels of neighbourhood social capital than those who never participated (43 per cent).

Table 4 Neighbourhood social capital by frequency of participation (per cent)

Neighbourhood social capital	Frequency			
	Never	Not frequent	Frequent	Total
Low	57	12	12	29
High	43	88	87	71
Total	100	100	100	100
Total N	82	76	57	215

Note: Not applicable data was counted as missing data (n=68) not included in subtotals as respondents claim that there are no neighbourhood activities in their neighbourhood.

Perceived neighbourhood safety

As shown in Table 5, a larger percentage of young people (82 per cent) who had more trust in and reciprocity with their neighbours perceived that their neighbourhood was safe than those who reported low trust in and reciprocity in their neighbours.

However, it is worth noting that in general, the majority of young people had high levels of perceived neighbourhoods as safe.

Table 5 Level of perceived neighbourhood safety by neighbourhood social capital (per cent)

Level of perceived neighbourhood safety	Neighbourhood social capital		
	Low	High	Total
Low	30	18	22
High	70	82	78
Total	100	100	100
Total N	81	180	261

Note: Missing data (n=22) not included in subtotals.

Discussion

Young people who know their neighbours are more likely to trust their neighbours, even if they have only one close neighbour. This result is expected because it makes sense that if you know more of your neighbours you are more likely to trust your neighbours. Furthermore, young people only needed to have one neighbour who they could call on, to make the difference. In other words, young people only have to be close to their neighbour next door in order to boost neighbourhood social capital as a whole.

How long a young person had lived in their neighbourhood had an impact on how much they trusted their neighbours. There is a clear pattern which shows that, as the number of years of living in their neighbourhood increases, the percentage of young people who had high neighbourhood social capital also increases. By far the highest percentage (80 per cent) of young people who had high levels of neighbourhood social capital fell into the category of those who had lived in their neighbourhoods for more than 11 years. Looking at the age range of young people in this research (16 to 26 years old, mean age 21 years), those young people who had lived more than 11 years in a neighbourhood probably had lived there for most of their lives. This suggests that growing up in the neighbourhood does make a difference to social capital. The sense of familiarity in the neighbourhood provides a greater chance for young people to build neighbourhood social capital over time. In sum, the longer young people live in a neighbourhood, the higher their levels of neighbourhood social capital will be.

Cohesive neighbourhoods enjoy more social capital. This is not a surprising result because living in a cohesive neighbourhood shows that most neighbours know one another, and they are actively involved in neighbourhood matters and adopt the same

neighbourhood identity. Thus, living in this cohesive environment enhances neighbourhood social capital.

Young people who had participated at least once in any neighbourhood activity were more likely to have high levels of neighbourhood social capital. It seems that young people only needed participated once in neighbourhood activities in a year and it contributes to the accumulation of social capital in their neighbourhoods.

It appears that perceived neighbourhood safety is positively correlated to social capital, the higher the perceived neighbourhood safety the more social capital. Ziersch et al. (2005) argue that perceptions of safety increase with the level of neighbourhood trust. The existence of neighbourhood social capital therefore very much depends on perceived safety in the neighbourhood as fear and insecure feelings about crime destroy trust amongst neighbours (Ross and Yang 2000).

Conclusion

This study supports the macro theory of community by arguing that social cohesion relates significantly to neighbourhood social capital. Moreover, young people who feel safe in the neighbourhood are more trusting. In the mean for community cohesion, more community development could focus on how to create a sense of togetherness in the neighbourhood like promoting more neighbourhood activities which involve more young people. In addition, neighbourhood safety is not merely a security issue but it affects the social wellbeing of all the community members. With the high levels of social capital in the neighbourhoods, or high trust in and reciprocity with neighbours, better social connectedness could be formed, which will promote better health (Baum 1999; Cooper 1999). Nonetheless, more empirical work on the nature of neighbourhood (i.e. diversity and homogeneity of groups) should be carried

out to provide a clearer picture of what group features contribute to neighbourhood social capital.

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Appendix I

Neighbourhood social capital (Questions A to C)

Question A. "To what extent do you trust your neighbours to act in your best interest?" (11-point scale, 1=, No, not at all, 11= Yes, completely)

Question B "To what extent would your neighbours would be willing to help you? (e.g. by lending toolbox, collecting post for neighbours who are on long holidays)"

Question C "To what extent would you yourself be willing to help your neighbours? (e.g. by lending toolbox, collecting post for neighbours who are on long holidays)".

Number of close neighbours

Question D "To what extent do the residents in your neighbourhood know one another?"

Residence period

Question E How long have you been living in your neighbourhood?

Social cohesion (Questions E to G)

Question F "Thinking now in your neighbourhood, do you think there is a community spirit in this area?"

Question G "If there was a problem in this neighbourhood (e.g. people dumping garbage in the park

Question H "To what extent would you and other neighbourhood residents cooperate to try to work on the problem?"

Participation in neighbourhood activities

Question I "In last 12 months, how often have you or anyone living with you in your household participated in any neighbourhood activity? e.g. parties at neighbours houses, community festival."

Level of perceived neighbourhood safety and gender

Question J Do you feel safe to walk alone in your neighbourhood after dark (say up to midnight)?

Question K Do you feel safe at home after dark (say up to midnight)?

Question L Is it safe to use the public transport at night (say up to midnight)?