Unravelling Social Capital: Disentangling a Concept for Social Work

Robert L. Hawkins* and Katherine Maurer

Robert L. Hawkins holds a junior endowed chair as the McSilver Assistant Professor in Poverty Studies at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. He is also affiliated with the McSilver Institute on Poverty Policy & Research at the Silver School. Katherine Maurer is a doctoral student at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University and a Research Fellow at the McSilver Institute on Poverty Policy & Research.

*Correspondence to Robert Hawkins, Silver School of Social Work, New York University, 1 Washington Square North, New York, NY 10003, USA. E-mail: Robert.hawkins@nyu.edu

Abstract

Over several decades, social capital has gained intellectual currency as a means to understand the dynamics of individual and community resources. While prevalent in other disciplines, social capital, however, has been used less often in social work to inform practice or policy development. In this paper, we argue that social capital is an efficacious construct for integrating the separate aspects of social networks and support so as to analyse the by-product of social relationships in the field of social work. We draw distinctions between social capital and conceptualisations of social networks and support and explore the concepts of social capital and present the usefulness of the concept as an analytical and theoretical model for micro and macro practice. We purpose that understanding the role of social capital can help social workers connect individuals to resources, but that it can also be used as part of established practice models. We conclude that essential to using social capital is the understanding that the concept (i) is different and distinct from social networks and social support, (ii) has both positive and negative elements and (iii) operates at the individual, community and institutional levels and can be relevant in all social work settings.

Keywords: Social capital, social support, social network

Introduction

Over several decades, social capital has gained intellectual currency as a means to understand the dynamics of individual and community resources. The concept has been applied in disciplines ranging from sociology to economics to psychology to public health (Kawachi *et al.*, 1997; DeFilippis, 2001; Lin, 2001; Muhkerjee, 2007). Social capital, however, has been used less often in social work, either as a research variable, a practice tool or to inform policy development in the USA (Loeffler *et al.*, 2004; Muhkerjee, 2007).

In this paper, we argue that social capital is an efficacious construct for integrating the separate aspects of social networks and support so as to analyse the by-products of social relationships: access to resources and opportunities. Further, the multidimensionality of the construct facilitates expanding the understanding of the outcomes of social relationships beyond the individual-centric approach common to social work applications of ecological theory to include the macro and mezzo-level dynamics of structural barriers of ethnicity, class and gender (Hero, 2007; Loeffler *et al.*, 2004; Muhkerjee, 2007). We draw distinctions between social capital and conceptualisations of social networks and support, explore the concept of social capital, primarily as defined by Lin (2001), and present the usefulness of the concept as an analytical and theoretical model for social work practice.

Social capital has been defined multiple times across disciplines (Putnam, 2000; Small, 2004; Brisson *et al.*, 2009), often conflated with social networks and social support, or oversimplified, particularly as solely an individual or community element (Lochner *et al.*, 1999; Lin, 2001). Simplification of the concept has led to an emphasis on strengthening social ties, disregarding structural barriers such as income, ethnicity/race and gender, to access resources and opportunities, which limits the usefulness of social capital generated in low-resource communities (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010, 2011). Rather than presenting a further critique of the conceptual controversies generated by the inter-disciplinary study of social capital, we will present a definition applicable to social work and grounded in the work of Lin (2001) that owes more to Bourdieu (1977, 1985) and Coleman (1988, 1990) than to Putnam (1995, 2000).

Prior to exploring the concept of social capital and its utility in social work, it is necessary to better understand the commonly used concepts of social support and social networks. Social work has long made use of these concepts, as they fit well with the person-in-environment perspective. Several scholars use social network, support and capital interchangeably (Emlet, 2006; Lindsey *et al.*, 2008; Castillo, 2009). Though these concepts are indeed contiguous, delineating distinctions between them is essential to assessing the utility of social capital theory. As we will discuss, the

theory offers a conceptual measure of the by-product of social support and social network interactions that is not captured by those constructs and has significance for social work practice.

Social networks

A social network is defined as a set of socially linked or interconnected discrete individuals or groups, as well as the structure, number and character of the relationships that link members of the network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Lin, 2001; Cleak and Howe, 2003). Social work application of the theory emphasises the structural or morphological aspects of networks (size, centrality, directionality, density, direct and indirect contacts) and the interactional characteristics or attributes of social networks (role composition, reciprocity, value of relationships and frequency of contact) (McIntyre, 1986; Auslander and Litwin, 1987; Tracy and Whitaker, 1990; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). The measure of networks is largely objective and quantitative. Analysis of the subjective quality of relationships and exchanges within a network is captured by measures of social support.

Social support

Social support is embedded in and accessed via social networks (Granovetter, 1985). The embedded nature of support explains much of the conflation of the two concepts and the frequent adoption of the term 'social support network'. While network analysis includes reciprocity and the value of network connections, the analysis of social support consists of more qualitative measures of social interactions. The literature identifies social support as the provision and receipt of assistance to and from individuals (e.g. emotional encouragement, advice, information, guidance, concrete aid); these exchanges are understood to mitigate stress and to be reciprocal (Belle, 1982; Tracy and Bell, 1994; Findler, 2000). Characteristics of support, such as emotional, informational or instrumental, formal or informal, structural or functional, and objective or subjective, are common features of social support discussed in the social work literature (Auslander and Litwin, 1987; Findler, 2000).

The interaction between social networks and social support

Neither the concept of social networks nor social support captures the impact of structural forces on network formation and subsequent availability of actual resources or access to those resources. An analysis of

social networks or of social support is not a sufficient means to assess the value of the resources garnered via a network or to fully understand how a network functions to help or hinder positive outcomes. Social support and social network situate social interactions, which have the capacity to generate social capital. The concept of social capital provides a means to analyse the effect of network and support factors on the quality and availability of resources for individuals and communities that are embedded in social interactions rather than possessed by individuals (Lin, 2001). The relationships between the various aspects of social capital generation are dynamic, interdependent and mutually influential with multiple feedback loops, rather than linear and independent (see Figure 1).

What is social capital?

As social capital has begun to be applied across multiple disciplines and in social welfare policy agenda, conceptual confusion has grown. Both the aetiology of the concept and the controversies arising from multiple definitions have been covered elsewhere more thoroughly than space allows here (e.g. Portes, 1998; Schuller *et al.*, 2000; DeFilippis, 2001; Lin, 2001; Webber, 2005; Hawkins *et al.*, in press). Thus, we have chosen to adapt and operationalise the definition put forth by Lin (2001) and use it to argue for the inclusion of the concept in social work practice. We define social capital as *the by-product of social interactions that are embedded in and accessed via formal and informal social relationships with individuals, communities and institutions.* Our definition rejects the claim that social capital is a solely community resource (Lochner *et al.*, 1999) and builds on Lin's (2001) multidimensional framing of social capital as 'resources embedded in one's network or associations . . . accessible through direct and indirect ties' (Lin, 2001, p. 56) and Szreter and Woolcock's (2004) distinction of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. This definition includes the process of embedding and accessing social resources for
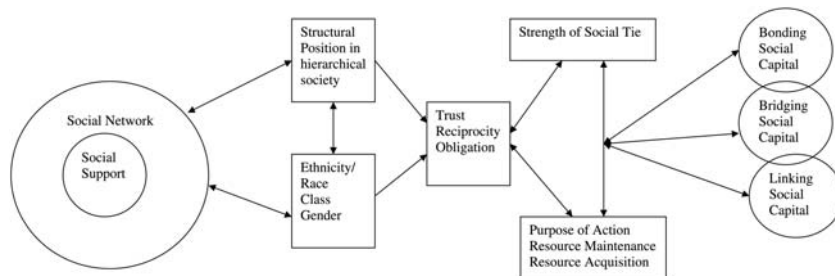

Figure 1 From social network/support to social capital

'expected returns' or 'purposive action', as well as the outcome of accessing resources (Lin, 2001). Access is gained to resources that are inhered in network connections that are not possessed by an individual or for which an individual exchanges their own resources.

Social capital can offer only temporary access to resources owned by other individuals or embedded in networks (Lin, 2001). For example, the reputation of a group (university graduates) or an individual (the Vice-Chancellor of a university) can be accessed for an employment reference but is not exchangeable or transferable from individual to individual. A secondary-school drop-out cannot become a university graduate through social exchange, but can borrow a graduate's reputation for an employment reference.

Figure 1 offers a diagram of the interactive relationships between the multiple aspects of social capital generation. We conceptualise embeddedness through an ecological depiction of the relationship between social network and support and include Lin's (2001) structural analysis factors as influencing the measure of trust, obligation and reciprocity. Rather than a linear relationship to the strength of ties and the three forms (bonding, bridging, linking) of social capital, we posit a dynamic interactive relationship between the elements that results in specific types of social capital generation.

In the 1990s, social capital was propelled into the spotlight in social science as an oversimplified 'cure all' for structural economic, racial, ethnic, gender and geographic disparities (DeFilippis, 2001; Mowbray, 2004; Farrell, 2007). Theorists (e.g. Putnam, 1995, 2000) posit that, when social connections exist, life is good and the absence of these connections keeps you 'bowling alone', which is bad (DeFilippis, 2001; Farrell, 2007; Hero, 2007). This conceptualisation has seen harsh criticism (e.g. Portes, 1998; DeFilippis, 2001), particularly that this framing sidesteps the power dynamic of social hierarchies that constrain network resources and their potential benefit. Several studies posit that strong ties, high levels of trust and reciprocity within networks, can be as hurtful as helpful in generating social capital (e.g. Portes and Landolt, 1996; Rochelle, 1997; Hawkins and Abrams, 2007). For example, a network of low-income individuals may have high levels of trust, obligation and reciprocity that aid in their mutual survival. Due to low social and economic position, however, the resources of this group do not improve life chances for group members and may impede quality of life in some cases.

The use of trust, reciprocity, obligation and social networks/support as synonymous with social capital has led to considerable conceptual confusion. Critics have asserted that clarity is gained by reverting to a definition of social capital firmly rooted in the neo-capital theory from which it came (Portes, 1998; DeFilippis, 2001; Lin, 2001). Trust, obligation and reciprocity are preconditions for the generation of social capital but are not forms of capital per se (see Figure 1). Whereas Coleman (1988) and Putnam's

(2000) definitions of social capital combine resource type and characteristics of the exchange, Lin's (2001) framing allows for a structural analysis of the interaction between micro and macro factors grounded in economics and power differentials. It is the structural analysis elaborated by Lin (2001) that we find most useful for application in social work because it includes an analysis of the impact of ethnicity, class and gender, among other structural factors on social capital generation and utilisation (see Figure 1).

Social capital model of structural analysis

As with our earlier discussion of the utility of drawing distinctions between social networks and social support, Lin's (2001) model of social capital operationalises the separate roles of the characteristics of networks (homogeneous, heterogeneous, dense, sparse, etc.) and the strength of social ties (degree of trust, reciprocity and obligation) that set up the generating conditions. Figure 2 offers a simplified illustration of the flow of these conditions. Lin (2001) also includes the structural position of an individual or network in the overarching social hierarchy. Homo- or heterogeneity of network members and the strength of social network connections, measured by trust, reciprocity and obligation, inform the likelihood and value of resource exchange. He uses network and social exchange analysis as factors, including the purpose of the exchange (emotional or instrumental), to predict whether or not a particular social tie will result in an exchange that will generate social capital. These distinctions maintain Bourdieu's (1985) characterisation of social capital as the by-product of social exchange, not that which is directly exchanged, and the inherent power dynamics of capital generation (DeFilippis, 2001).

Gitell and Vidal (1998) and Szreter and Woolcock (2004) espoused a similar model of three different levels of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. *Bonding* social capital is generated from exchanges
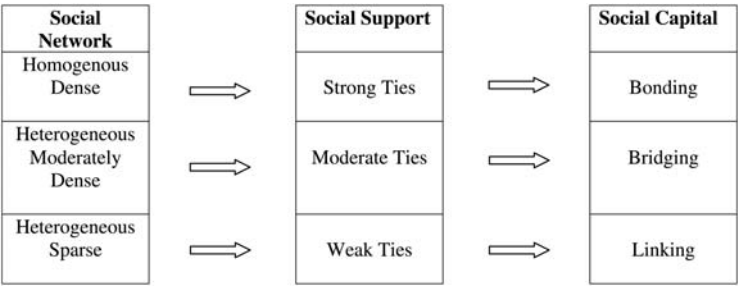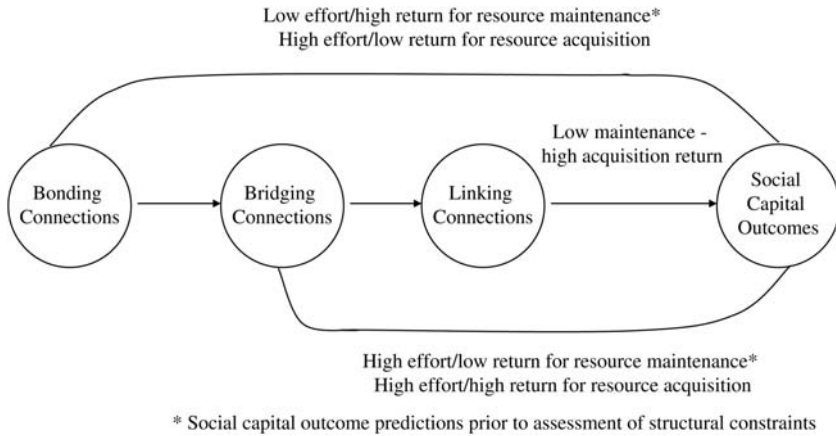

Social Network		Social Support		Social Capital
Homogenous Dense	⟹	Strong Ties	⟹	Bonding
Heterogeneous Moderately Dense	⟹	Moderate Ties	⟹	Bridging
Heterogeneous Sparse	⟹	Weak Ties	⟹	Linking

Figure 2 Generating social capital from the relative strength of social ties

Figure 3 Relationship of social network connections to resource maintenance and acquisition

amongst members of a group or network who see themselves as similar. *Bridging* social capital occurs in relationships between people and groups of people who are dissimilar in some demonstrable fashion such as age, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, education, etc. (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). *Linking* social capital is the by-product of exchanges that arise from relationships that individuals and communities build with the institutions and people who have relative power over them (e.g. to provide access to services, jobs or other resources) (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). All of these levels can lead to different outcomes, depending on the relative socio-economic position and power that the populations hold. Ideally, individuals and communities should have network connections that generate social capital and productive outcomes at all three levels (see Figure 3).

Lin (2001) posits that the value of social capital generated is determined by (i) network characteristics, (ii) strength of social ties, (iii) network member assets (social, economic and political) and (iv) the goal of the purposive action that motivates the capital-generating social exchange (see Figure 1). In any homogeneous network, generating bonding social capital is a low-effort activity because the social ties are strong (trust, obligation, reciprocity), yet the value of the capital differs depending on the purpose of the action and the position of the individual and network in the social hierarchy (see Figure 3). Thus, in a homogeneous group that lacks economic, social and political power, an action that is instrumental—aimed at gaining resources—will require low effort but will generate low-value bonding social capital. For example, if an unskilled worker receives an employment reference from within that worker's network of peers, it is likely only to be useful in procuring

low-wage employment, the attainment of which requires little social, economic or political status.

The worker's network may be dense, supportive and have strong ties with high levels of trust, reciprocity and obligation, which ensure a recommendation for employment. The network, however, cannot generate resources that will produce something of greater value beyond its own stock of resources. Therefore, in societies that are structured hierarchically, low-resourced individuals and communities need access to individuals and networks with more wealth, power and reputation. Ethnicity, class, gender and culture, among other factors, interact with hierarchical structural social position to influence access to other networks and individuals outside of one's own. Because of their social position, a member of a network of university graduates is able to access a reference for much more valuable employment than an unskilled worker, regardless of either individual's particular skills. Any differences in ethnicity, class, gender or culture between the individuals, however, will alter the value of the reference reflective of the dynamics of a given society.

The positive power of social capital

The promise of social capital lies in what Granovetter (1985) called 'the strength of weak ties' such as occurs in bridging and linking social connections. Individuals make connections or join networks that are dissimilar or heterogeneous in some manner. The dissimilarities reduce the levels of trust, obligation and reciprocity amongst members, which increases the amount of effort necessary for interaction to occur (see Figure 2). Dissimilarity, however, means greater variation in the value of network resources, which may result in higher-value social capital being generated. In the USA, for example, school social workers play various roles, including providing academic guidance for children whose families are at economic and social risk. A student from a low-income community may be assisted by a school social worker in applying for a university scholarship (bridging social capital); if a scholarship is attained, the student gains access to a network of college students/graduates (bridging social capital) and the university (linking social capital). This student will have to do the work to graduate (high effort) but, upon graduation, will be able to access the reputation, power and wealth of former classmates, the alumni network and the university (high return). The student then enters a resource feedback loop, which creates even more potential for social network connections and support (Lin, 2001). Putnam (2000) refers to this as the difference between 'getting by' through bonding social capital exchanges and 'getting ahead' through bridging and linking connections. One gets ahead via heterogeneous social interactions that generate asymmetrical returns,

producing a higher return for the individual with fewer resources (Lin, 2001).

Yet, therein lays the challenge of social capital generation as expressed by DeFilippis (2001): 'Why would those who benefit from the current structures that produce and distribute social capital willingly turn over their privileged access to it?' (DeFilippis, 2001, p. 801). This is the most pressing question that faces those desiring to apply the concept of social capital in practice and policy to improve the lives of resource-poor individuals and communities. Variables such as ethnicity, gender, social class, income, sexual orientation, political and religious beliefs, as well as age, simultaneously function as characteristics around which homogeneous networks are established and serve as barriers to entry or access to these networks.

Limitations and the negative impact of social capital

The maintenance of resources as a motivation for social interaction can be understood through the preconditions of social capital, trust, reciprocity and obligation. We assume that these conditions are strong in a homogeneous network and constrain network membership and access to its resources. Networks are constrained simultaneously inclusively and exclusively (Farrell, 2007). When a network is low-resourced, due to high levels of reciprocity and obligation, assets accrued by the individual will be subsumed by members in an inclusive manner. And, because demand for network resources is high, the individual will have difficulty accessing those resources. The high demand for network resources limits the ability to make connections outside of that homogeneous group, thus excluding access to outsiders.

When that network is highly resourced, containing much wealth, power and reputation inhered in the relationships of its members, some actions undertaken by the group will be explicitly aimed at protecting and replenishing those resources (Putnam, 2000; Lin, 2001). Thus, members engage in social interactions that inclusively allow access to the network assets only to similarly endowed individuals, excluding those with dissimilar resources. Though a prestigious university may offer scholarships for low-income individuals, the school admits primarily students that have access to wealth, power and reputation of a similar scale to past students. Admitting homogeneous high-resource students maintains the resources of the network and is a low-effort/high-value exchange (Lin, 2001). Strong ties in homogeneous networks are beneficial because they maintain the resources and access to them by the natural exclusion of non-network members. Strong ties are essential in low-resource networks because obligation and reciprocity are indispensable to maintaining and restricting access to limited resources.

Social capital, bonding and linking in particular, has been seen as an easy fix to the market and policy failure to improve conditions in low-resource communities. Yet, the difficulty of achieving those connections is rarely researched. Leonard (2004), however, explores the limitations of bonding social capital and the restrictions to access bridging and linking social capital. Her analysis exemplifies the necessity of understanding social capital as a multidimensional dynamic theory of processes and outcomes.

She compares two studies of individuals receiving unemployment benefits and their participation in informal employment, one in Catholic West Belfast, Northern Ireland, during the civil conflict known as 'the Troubles' and the other a low-income community in Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. In Dublin, despite income homogeneity, there was little social bonding. Individuals receiving unemployment benefits reported their peers who were involved in informal employment to the state. In West Belfast, network members were far more likely to engage in informal employment to supplement unemployment benefits, but this was seen as political action against the state and as evidence of a desire to work and gain self-sufficiency. Political power has a differential effect in this comparison: in the Dublin study, low political power decreased social ties, whereas low political power increased the strength of the social ties in West Belfast.

Following the initiation of the peace process, building on the strong ties in West Belfast turned out to be complicated. Informal businesses that had been strongly supported in the homogeneous Catholic community were encouraged to expand their business to other communities. Leonard (2004) explains that the expansion efforts drove up prices beyond what the originating community could pay. The outcome either benefitted only the entrepreneur, as the community could no longer afford their goods or services, or the enterprise failed because community members negotiated lower prices based on the strength of social relationships and the business operated at a loss. Leonard (2004) suggests that tension between the need of low-income networks for low-cost goods, the services and the consequent suppression of wages and the need to generate capital for expansion through price increases is insurmountable without some sort of infusion of capital from outside the low-resource network: the bridging relationships. Leonard (2004) provides an example of why social network, social support and social capital analysis should be conducted concurrently and linked to economic and human capital analysis. Her study exemplifies the impact of structural factors such as culture, class and political power on expected social capital outcomes.

Understanding social capital use in social work

To better understand the utility of social capital in social work practice, we present two versions of a scenario based on the problem of decreased

academic engagement—one of many areas of involvement for school social workers in the USA. We use the following example to show how social capital can provide useful multidimensional information for social work intervention at individual, community and institutional levels. Though the details of the example may not translate internationally given differences in education systems, the purpose of the case is to show how social capital analysis, by assessing social network and support, can be expanded beyond the individual level to include structural analyses of mezzo and macro-level interactions. This analysis can be useful in increasing access to valuable resources that may enhance clients' well-being. Such an approach is of particular importance for social work practice that most often serves individuals with less access to valuable social and economic resources such as wealth, reputation and power.

The scenarios explore how changes in networks and social supports and the interaction of structural factors can result in the generation or depletion of social capital. Given the constraints of space, we are not able to engage in the larger discussion of the relationship between social capital and other neo-capital theories such as human or cultural capital, but acknowledge their importance in the example (see Lin, 2001). Nor do we provide an analysis of the impact of other structural factors such as ethnicity, gender or culture that generally co-occur in social capital generation (for discussion, see Hero, 2007; Webber, 2005). Though we limit our exploration to the impact of income level, other structural factors function similarly and interactively as constraints or enhancements of access to socially embedded resources.

We use one scenario of similar teenage girls to explore the relative power to generate social capital of two different networks based on income levels, one low-income and the other middle-income. The girls live in socio-economically homogenous neighbourhoods. Their neighbourhoods share common characteristics: a stable population over several generations, local primary health care providers and a school with strong community connections through both teachers and staff who live locally and engage in community-centred activities. The churches our teenagers and their families attend have a membership that includes major political and business figures in the community. Our teens' social networks include parents, other family members, neighbours, doctors, school friends, sports clubs and church groups. Our hypothetical teenagers' primary network is dense and homogenous. Their social capital is the by-product of these relationships and may impact the likelihood of their academic engagement in a variety of ways that can be assessed by the social worker as potential intervention targets.

Each teen has been referred to a social worker because her academic achievement has noticeably decreased. The explanation for this decrease made by each teen is increased time spent childminding after school. For

both teens, there is strong cultural support for this activity within their bonding social capital network.

Our middle-income teen has been hired to mind children of family and friends from her dense network. The strength of the ties between her family's friends may give her employment preference over other teens in the neighbourhood and obligates the teen to responsible childminding. She gains potential future work as a by-product of doing a good job, in addition to the monetary gain from the employment. Other families in the neighbourhood will hire this teenager based on the strength of the reputations of those who employ her, which, in turn, will help her to build her own reputation. As she expands her social circle, especially with adults, she may gain access to educational, social or employment opportunities that could open even more doors for her. This teenager's group of friends have similar opportunities, largely due to the number of available resources in the neighbourhood. While there may exist the less ambitious peer amongst her friends, given the resources in the community, most of this teen's influential friends would be similar in circumstance to her (Brisson *et al.*, 2009).

The social connections garnered through her employment have great potential to generate bridging and linking social capital. This will be especially true if her community members have access to other networks with equal or greater resources. She may, for example, get a referral for an apprenticeship with a local politician through her child-care employment. In addition to the experience, contacts and access to resources the teen may gain through exposure to the new network, this local politician may be able to recommend her for entrance to a prestigious university or a financial scholarship, for which she might not otherwise be considered. In this example, the teen has employment that provides payment, but also access to resources and opportunities through bridging and linking social capital generated by her relationships in new networks.

Without an analysis of social capital, a social worker addressing this teen's decreased academic achievement would likely focus on reducing the teen's work schedule and increasing time for study. The social worker might not assess the valuable social capital that childminding is generating for this teen: access to resources for post-secondary education. The worker might suggest alternative means to access financial aid for university education, but not so readily look to the teen's community as a repository of resources. A social worker using social capital theory would assess the teen's social connections for resources that might both increase current academic achievement and provide opportunities to develop bridging and linking social capital. For example, the cumulative advantages of the apprenticeship over childminding jobs to best position the teen for university might be discussed with the teen and her family. Further, applying the social capital model, the social worker would look to engage and bolster community and institutional resources to increase the student's access to

multiple forms of social capital. In the USA, co-ordinating family, school and community is a central focus of school social work.

In our second scenario, we have a teenager who also has been referred to a social worker because her academic achievement has declined due to increased time spent childminding. Although her family and community are close-knit, they have limited social and financial resources to share with her and other family members. Thus, this teen from a low-income community may contribute time and energy to the care of younger siblings and relatives for little or no pay. Because the network is low-resourced, what can be offered as a financial or social payment to someone in the middle class may not be available in a low-income community. This teen has the same academic and economic aspirations as our middle-income girl, but not the access to the same socially embedded resources to pursue them.

In this scenario, bridging and linking opportunities are likely limited for the individual teen and for those in her community. Similar situations could exist amongst the teenager's neighbourhood friends, but, because economic resources are limited, even the ambitious have fewer options than their middle-class counterparts. For example, though the teen works for a local politician, a person elected from a poor community is unlikely to have access to resources (either financial or social) equivalent to a middle-income politician with a wealthier constituency.

A number of researchers have shown that, although social network and social support can help low-income individuals and families survive daily struggles, because of the tension of resource sharing and reciprocity and lack of structural supports, low-income bonding often cannot contribute to elevating socio-economic status (Lin, 2001; Dominguez and Watkins, 2003; Farrell, 2007; Hero, 2007; Miller-Cribbs and Farber, 2008). The support may be there at the bonding level, but it may not be enough if there is not access to bridging or linking social capital. Our social worker's challenge in working with the low-income teen will be to work within a low-resourced community to try to increase access to hetero-geneous and more valuable resources. The social worker may target resources to provide low-cost childcare for the family and community to reduce the teen's burden to provide free care. As with the middle-income student, the low-income teen would benefit from a paid apprenticeship that might improve her chances to attend university and attain financial assistance. To best serve the low-income teenager, however, the social worker may need to seek opportunities outside of the community, thus creating bridging or linking opportunities for the girl.

For the middle-class teen, the social capital generated in the present and potential future access serves as a strong incentive to increase academic achievement. Her bonding social capital (family members and friends) can lead to bridging (meeting influential others outside of her circle) and linking (being considered by the scholarship board). For the low-income teen, her bonding ties allow her opportunities as well, but not of the

same economic value as the middle-income teen. If money is available, it could be less than the middle-income teenager, given the available wealth of the community members. Individuals and communities with low incomes often do not share the same social position as those with higher incomes, so the pay-off in social connections would be lower for the second teen as well (Lin, 2001).

While social capital is generated in both examples, for the low-income teenager, the resources she gains access to are less valuable and not the sort that will likely advance the teen's socio-economic status. The girl's economic status will, of course, interact with her ethnicity, class, gender and other structural factors to impact the level of and access to resources beyond income alone. Though we have not explored these aspects here, any of the factors could be substituted for income as the focal point of the inhibiting or engendering impact on access to resources. For example, boys might find it difficult to gain employment childminding and not have access to the bridging and linking opportunities afforded the girls. Race/ethnicity, culture, gender and class will have differential interactive effects on the process of social capital generation specific to different networks, as shown in Leonard (2004).

Social capital in social work practice

Though the examples we have provided are fairly simple, our intent is to illustrate the challenge for intervention strategies to generate access to valuable resources through the mechanism of social capital. We have discussed some possible micro and mezzo-level interventions, but social capital is also useful in a larger macro context. Communities may seek to better link resources in schools, employment agencies and other institutions in an official capacity where collaboration can generate bridging and linking social capital (Hawkins *et al.*, in press). Examples of such efforts were documented by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in various European locations (Parissaki and Humphreys, 2005).

At multiple sites, with varying levels of success, NGOs, public-sector agencies and community activists focused on social capital generation to improve social inclusion, employment, equality of opportunity, and economic and regional development. Such programmes target changes in access to power, wealth and reputation that are targets of social justice interventions.

In social work practice, the concept of social capital can be used in conjunction with other clinical approaches. Social capital fits nicely with practice models such as life model assessment based on the ecological framework that focuses on a client's interaction with their environments (Germain and Gitterman, 1996). Cultural assessments, too, that emphasise

understanding clients' cultural and ethnic background in the context of their situations (Congress, 2002) can be strengthened by including the structural analysis of social capital. Narrative therapy that allows clients to externalise their 'stories' (White, 2007) offers an opportunity for practitioners and clients to identify social capital resources and challenges, understanding the interaction of individual and larger structural factors such as class or ethnicity.

Essential to using social capital in social work is the understanding that the concept (i) is different and distinct from social networks and social support, (ii) has both positive and negative elements and (iii) operates at the individual, community and institutional levels and can be relevant in all social work settings.

Social work practice would benefit from the inclusion of the multidimensional framework of social capital to enhance the understanding of social support and social networks and the by-product of their interaction (Loeffler *et al.*, 2004; Muhkerjee, 2007; Miller-Cribbs and Farber, 2008; Ersing and Loeffler, 2008). The focus of most social work measures and models is individual-centric, assessing from the standpoint of the person-in-environment, with far less attention focused on environmental interventions. This has led to much controversy in the profession regarding the commitment to and types of activism for social change and the pursuit of social justice (Reisch, 2008). Social work has lacked an integrative conceptual model to achieve these aims.

Standard analyses of networks and social support lack the comparative structural analysis of the hierarchy of wealth, power and reputation that Lin (2001) describes as central to the protection and maintenance of existing resources and assets. Thus, while much research has focused on interventions to increase network participation and the strength of ties through bolstering trust, reciprocity and obligation (Brisson *et al.*, 2009), these efforts will not necessarily generate social capital that is significantly more valuable than that to which an individual had prior access (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010). The deeper structural analysis of social connection that occurs with the use of social capital theory shows that, unless access to power, wealth and reputation of the dominant class is gained, there will be little socio-economic change for a low-resourced community or individual.

Conclusion

Understanding the generative capacity of social relationships is a valuable addition for social work with individuals, families and communities. Social capital captures the complexities embedded in social relationships. The theory adds depth to the analysis of social network and support with the inclusion of structural dynamics, which capture the nuanced interactive impact of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender.

Though we have focused on practice implications, the unique position of social workers to engage in a multilevel approach to social capital generation through research and policy are areas for future study. Social work and social welfare policy share the common goal of enhancing well-being and social justice for individuals and communities. The concept of social capital has had great appeal in some communities as a tool for understanding how to reduce the constraints on capital (economic, human and social) acquisition for historically under-resourced networks and communities. However, pursuit of this goal needs to be considered within a holistic framework that includes analysis of the structural power dynamics of individuals, communities, institutions and their interaction, of which social capital is one aspect (DeFilippis, 2001; Hawkins, 2005). To be effective, social workers must understand to what extent social exchanges augment or deplete social capital to promote socio-economic mobility for individuals and communities that have historically been excluded from access to valuable social and economic resources (Dominguez and Watkins, 2003; Miller-Cribbs and Farber, 2008).

Acknowledgements

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