Connected Communities

From bridging social capital to co-operative social capital? Mapping emergent connectivities across communities

Derek McGhee and Pathik Pathak
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Executive Summary

Our project consisted of a research review and a scoping study. The focus of the research review was on the place, role and significance of social capital in the Labour and Coalition Governments. We examined two ‘policy areas’, namely community cohesion (Labour) and ‘The Big Society’ (Coalition). For each policy area we examined an archive of documents, reports and speeches. With regards to the Coalition Government our major finding was that there was a concerted effort to avoid certain terms and concepts that were associated with the Labour administration. However, we did note that aspects of the Coalition Government’s emphasis on localism and the ‘Big’ citizen were closer to, for example, Putnam’s emphasis (in his book Better Together) on bottom-up and spontaneous examples of social capital, than the Labour Government’s top-down attempts to re-orient what they viewed as ‘bad’ (bonding) social capital to facilitate ‘good’ bridging social capital in a range of socially excluded and allegedly ‘culturally’ segregated communities. Our major recommendation was that many more policy areas across the two Governments should be examined in a more comprehensive review.

Key words

FROM BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL TO CO-OPERATIVE SOCIAL CAPITAL? MAPPING EMERGENT CONNECTIVITIES ACROSS COMMUNITIES

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We were funded under the Connected Communities programme to undertake a research review and a scoping study. In this report we will describe the work undertaken for the research review and the research and findings that have emerged from the scoping study.

The Research Review

We hired a research Assistant (Jenny Freeman) to undertake this research review under our guidance. We met on several occasions with Jenny to agree the focus and parameters of the research review. We followed closely the outline for the research review stipulated in our proposal. That is, that part one of the research review would comprise of a literature review in which we examined the various definitions, meanings, applications and measurement of social capital and the work of the key social capital theorists and the various criticisms of their research, especially criticisms of Robert Putnam’s influential work. In parts two and three we examined the place, role and significance of ‘social capital’ in Labour Government and Coalition Government policies. To create a focused review we identified two main policy areas for each government, namely ‘community cohesion’ for the Labour Government and ‘the Big Society’ for the Coalition Government. In part two we proceeded to critically examine the relationship between social capital and various Labour Government produced and commissioned reports in the time period between the aftermath of the riots in 2001 (mostly associated with Oldham, Burnley and Bradford) to John Denham’s white working class focused Connecting Communities programme launched in 2009-2010. In part three of the review we critically examined the relationship between social capital in the Coalition Government reports, documents and speeches on the theme of the big society. The time frame we adopted for part three was we examined a small number of David Cameron’s speeches (on the Big Society) when he was leader of the opposition to some of Cameron and others speeches after the August riots in 2011. Thus, the research review started with riots in 2001 and ended with riots in 2011.

Our major finding in part two of the research review was that although the Labour Government was the more explicit in their use of social capital than the Coalition Government, over time, the Labour Government’s reliance on social capital changed. We noted that whereas the Labour Government promoted simplistic ‘cultural’ explanations associated with the much maligned ‘contact hypothesis’ associated with the ‘parallel lives’ discourse (popularized by Cantle) in the post-riots (2001) period; this emphasis was to change over time, and as a result the links to social capital approaches became more and more implicit in subsequent Labour Government reports and speeches, until 2008, where the CLGD’s *Face to Face* report (2008) on inter-faith dialogue made explicit reference to bridging and linking social capitals. The central problem with the Labour
Government’s interpretation of Putnam’s work, was there top-down approaches to facilitating bridging and disrupting bonding social capitals. Putnam in contrast championed the bottom-up and spontaneous examples of social capitals ‘on the ground’. Between 2001 and 2010 the Labour Government’s explanations and recommendations with regards to how to create a more ‘cohesive Britain’ became an amalgamation of top down approaches which not only focused on building community cohesion, but also focused on increasing integration, ‘race’ equality (which in turn shifted from an exclusive focus on BME, to minority faith communities to eventually also include disadvantaged white British communities).

Our major finding in part three of the research review where we examined the place, role and significance of social capital in various Coalition Government documents, reports and speeches, was we noted a consistent avoidance of terms and concepts that were popularized by the Labour Government, for example, social capital. That being said we were able to identify through our examination of the ‘Big Society’ discourse in this archive a residual implicit presence (just as we had found in the ‘later’ Labour Government archive) of social capital theory. We also noted that the Coalition Government’s emphasis on the local (Localism) and the bottom-up mobilization of ‘Big citizens’ (rather than, ‘active citizens’ in Labour Government ‘speak’) was more in keeping with Putnam’s original formulations, However, their are some scepticism with regard to whether the Coalition Government’s big society discourse has become and ideological cover for the spending review. We also note that the Coalition Government’s response to the August 2011 riots take us closer to Coleman’s approach to Social Policy than Putnam’s, especially Coleman’s emphasis on local, familial sources of support.

**Recommendations for future research – Research review**

1. We recommend a more comprehensive analysis of the place, role and significance of social capital in many more policy areas (than ‘community cohesion’ and ‘the Big Society’) across the Labour and Coalition Governments.

**The scoping study**

In his scoping study we set out to examine emergent connectivities between particular types of communities in Southampton. We chose to focus on Faith Communities. We were aware that in a very active ‘Council of Faiths’ (an inter-faith council) existed in Southampton which is a crucial forum for contact, discussion and dialogue across different Faith groups in the city. Our focus in the scoping study was to explore the extent to which the different faith communities also work collaboratively on social innovation projects, for example, for the relief of poverty in Southampton. We are delighted to report that we managed to conduct twenty interviews with various Faith Leaders, Faith-based Community Development Workers/Coordinators and Faith-based Project Directors across Southampton. The vast majority of these interviews were conducted at churches and other places of worship and at the sites of various projects,
however, some interviewees preferred to be interviewed at the University of Southampton. All interviews were conducted by McGhee and Pathik (together and separately). We noted in the process of our fieldwork that non-Christian Faith Groups were reluctant to take part in the research. We managed to interview the Director of the Council of Faiths, a representative from the Sikh Community and a Muslim Community Development Worker. The remaining seventeen interviews were with Christians from a variety of denominations from new Black-majority evangelical churches to the established Catholic Church in Southampton. We think that the information sheet that we produced perhaps put a number of non-Christian faith Groups off participating. In this information sheet we set out our research problem with regards to examining the type and extent of collaborations with regards to Faith-based projects in the city for alleviating poverty (and other projects). The reluctance of non-Christian groups to participate in the research was explained in our interviews with Christian groups in which it soon became apparent to us that the two major collaborative Faith-based projects in the city were ‘Basic Bank’ (which consisted of collection points for food and clothing located in Church premises across the city) and ‘Street Pastors’ (a group of Christian volunteers who provide a comforting and sometime practical presence in the cities night-time economy hotspots) and although the beneficiaries of these projects could be from all faiths (and none), these were exclusively Christian-based projects involving most of the Christian denominations across the city to varying degrees. The reluctance of non-Christian groups to participate in the study was explained to us by members of the Council of Faiths (and the non-Christian interviewees). We were told that minority Faith-groups in the city were taken up with the considerable demands of looking after ‘their own’ to have the capacity to work collaboratively with other Faith groups for the benefit of ‘generalised others in need’ across the city. A number of the Christian interviewees, when pressed on why non-Christian groups were not actively involved in, for example, Basic bank and Street Pastors, told us that the presence on non-Christians could be disruptive to the organization and support (from volunteers) for such projects. When we asked why the Christian interviewees responses opened out onto what we have, in our analysis, described as rich and complex social capital explanations (we greatly benefited from part 1 of the research review in this analysis) of how a number of established and evangelical Christian groups and individuals have been able to put aside their differences, forge relationships of trust and respect in order to work collaboratively to set up networks and collaborative projects for responding to particular sources of need and vulnerable communities, families and individuals for what they view to be the greater good of the city. The Christian interviewees talked of a gradual process of breaking down denominational difference to establish working relationships on the basis of shared norms, values and approaches (for example, prayerful discernment) for evaluating, testing and inspiring their collective ‘doing good work’. They also informed us that these working relationships and ways of working that have been negotiated by Christians over time could be disrupted by the presence of non-Christians amongst them. The major finding from the research conducted during the scoping study was that there was an interaction between what Baker would call ‘religious capital’ (that is, outworkings in network or institutional form that support ‘practical’ work in communities) and ‘spiritual capital’ (that is, the values, ethics and beliefs of a Religious Community) that leads to simultaneous bridging social capital (in terms of inter-denominational Christian networks
and collective projects) and bonding social capital (in terms of defensive, insular and exclusively ‘Christian’ activities and networks) in these projects.

Our other major finding was the avoidance of statutory funding in many projects. We did find examples of some ‘single Church’ secular partnerships and funding, for example, in one of the evangelical community churches (partnership with Oasis academies) and also in the Catholic Church (statutory funding for an elderly home care programme). In our fieldwork we found very little by way of frustrations with regards to the pressures of ‘institutional isomorphism’ whereby religious institutions are said to reshape themselves to fit government policy’ (Bretherton 2010: 43) in what Davis et al call ‘the contract culture’ introduced by ‘the commissioning State’(2008: 15, 43, 46). Most of our participants relished their independence ‘to make a difference as the people we are’ (City Centre Christian Minister). For example, one participant told us:

> there is a sense that certain kinds of social engagement, if they are funded by the state, you can feel that you have to jump through so many hoops that by the time you actually get to giving the food parcel to somebody you’re barely doing it with a Christian face, whereas with something like Basic Bank that’s within the Church buildings, its funded by the Churches …we are free to be ourselves.

(City Centre Christian Minister)

What we found was a great pride in ‘self-funding’ niche activities and projects involving Christian Churches that targeted particular groups of individuals and families deemed to be in the greatest need in the city. For example,

> Our work is issue driven, I think it is niche activity, and it normally comes out of a concern shared by one or two people, who say ‘I feel we can make a difference here’, and if there is enough willingness to take it forward then it will be taken forward at whatever level.

(Christian Development Worker).

In many ways, the comments with regards to ‘making a difference as the people we are’ opens up analysis to the interdependence of, as noted above, spiritual capital (associated with who ‘they are’, what motivates them) and religious capital (their social action, in the form of outworkings). The relationship between their spiritual and religious capitals was explained to us on a number of occasions through ‘a car and petrol’ analogy. The spiritual motivation is the petrol/fuel and the outworkings is the car without one the other will not work. Statutory sources of funding were described to us as not only potentially ‘unstable’ and ‘fickle’ sources of funding due to disinvestments following policy change, but also involving too much compromise and restrictions on the projects churches either together and separately choose to start up.
Recommendations for Future Research – Scoping Study

1. This single city research should be expanded – it is essential that a comparative study be undertaken involving a range of research locations.
2. The apparent barriers to Christian and non-Christian social innovation and other projects needs to be critically examined from the perspectives of Christians and non-Christians across a range of research locations.
3. With regards to 1 and 2, this is an ideal opportunity for action research and knowledge exchange, which could take the form of setting up workshops/sand pits in various research locations in which ‘social innovators’, project coordinators and community development workers from across the major Faith Groups could make contact, share ideas and be set the task of examining and overcoming the barriers to developing, and actually developing, inter-faith social innovation projects in their areas.
References and external links


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx