

Community efficacy and social capital

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Abstract

It has been suggested that the quantity and quality of a community's social capital has a large impact on that community's capacity to manage change. Despite many attempts, social capital remains notoriously difficult to measure. There is general consensus that social capital is the 'property' of a community or collective, yet in measurement frameworks social capital is normally aggregated up across individuals and different levels. Communities are not homogeneous; we argue that the differential capacity of various groups within the community to participate should be considered. Any measure of community social capital must take account of the diversity of the community and potentially unequal access of groups and individuals to community social capital: the nature and quality of opportunities is not uniform. Further, the validity of social capital depends in fact on its contextualisation – social capital resources that are effective in one context are not necessarily effective in another.

In this paper we present a new way of thinking about the social capital of a community, linked to the community's capacity to deliver favourable outcomes for its members. We use the term community efficacy for this capacity to manage change and influence the future of the collective and community members. We present a framework that describes the nature and quality of the factors that influence community efficacy and are at the heart of a community's social capital resources. The framework recognises that social capital resources are used at the point of interaction between community members; hence opportunities for interaction are important. We suggest that the framework can be applied to measure community efficacy in various contexts, and discuss how it can be applied to a rural community's ability to foster successful transitions to young adulthood for its young people.

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Links between well-being and community

Concerns about the social and economic viability of rural, remote and ‘peripheral’ communities in the national and global political economy are not new. Two decades ago Cohen and his colleagues, writing of the cultural identity, sustainability and systems of meaning of rural and remote communities in Britain, opposed the position that “the character of a community is conditioned by the forces exerted upon it from the political and economic centre” (Cohen 1982, p.12). Stressing the centrality of a community’s culture to its socio-economic resilience, they argue that community members’ sense of belonging and solidarity based on the “the discreteness of local experience is all the more important in societies whose communities see themselves as peripheral or marginal” (Cohen 1982, p.13). This description might well be applied to many of Australia’s rural and remote communities today.

The observations are all the more relevant when we examine the contribution which a community’s social capital and social cohesion make to community members’ sense of social and physical wellbeing and to measured outcomes of community development and growth (Eckersley 1998). Misztal (1996) relates this phenomenon to the development of trust which occurs over time within relationships of positive co-operation. Misztal asserts that trust “is a by-product of behaviour towards others based on the norm of reciprocity and networks of civic engagements, which can be facilitated by the nature of governmental institutions and the level of socio-economic development” (Misztal, 1996, p.199). In turn this contributes to a growing sense of what she calls ‘solidarity’ which she claims is “a condition of the good and decent life” (p.213). While this may be facilitated by government institutions and interventions it is not dictated by it – it is created and re-created by the quality of community interactions. Herein lies the dilemma for those who research and who develop policies and practices to enhance the ‘good and decent life’ in rural communities and country towns. How do we unravel the impact of those elements which make up the community infrastructure and those which make up the sense of community resilience, belonging and solidarity (its social capital) as they interact together to produce development or decline? Our research within Tasmanian rural communities has led us to distinguish two main dimensions within a community’s capacity to work co-operatively to produce significant educational, health and wellbeing outcomes for its members, especially for young people. This aspect of community capacity building we have termed ‘community efficacy’ and the two interacting dimensions are community activity infrastructure and community social capital. The one dimension ‘facilitates’ and the other ‘operationalises’. The separation of these two dimensions helps us in our search for answers to difficult questions about the capacity of some communities to produce positive wellbeing outcomes for residents despite relatively poor infrastructure and others to produce less satisfactory outcomes with a more developed infrastructure.

We have asked why some rural communities produce young people who move confidently from school to further study and/or work, while other demographically similar communities are blighted by youth under attainment and unemployment? Research has demonstrated the interrelation between post-school education programs, including vocational education and training, whole-of-community life-long learning initiatives and the development of individual and family resilience and social capital in disadvantaged rural areas (Abbott-Chapman 2001; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002; Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk 1999; Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott 2002; Lane & Dorfman 1997; Miller 1995). Other outcomes of community based education initiatives include increased youth self-esteem and self-

concept, increased levels of inter-generational trust and leadership development (Dumbrell 2000; Lane & Dorfman 1997; Miller 1995). Beneficial outcomes from education programs for communities have been identified that are not captured by traditional statistical or performance measurement frameworks (Figgis 1998; Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott 2002; Lane & Dorfman 1997; Miller 1995).

Young people's sense of space and place, and attachment to location, which is evident in rural and remote communities, helps to create a sense of belonging and identity (Abbott-Chapman 2000, 2004; Abbott-Chapman & Robertson 1999, 2001). This has both positive and negative impact: positive in creating 'local' social cohesion, but negative if and when the young person has to re-locate in order to compete in a national and global economy (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002). A cohesive community with a shared vision for its youth is more likely to provide social and community activities that give young people a sense of place, belonging and self-efficacy, and allow them to make the most of the opportunities available (Lane & Dorfman 1997). Youth expectations and aspirations for study and work are shaped by the community conditions in which they live (Andrews, Green & Mangan 2002), and there are high rates of youth suicide and mental ill health in depressed rural areas (Moon, Meyer & Grau 1999, Glover, Harris & Tennant 1999). However, involvement in youth programs has been found to help young people overcome feelings of social isolation, develop a sense of belonging and so experience reduced anxiety and increased wellbeing (Mapstone 1999). These studies demonstrate the socially reproductive effects of community social capital and the cyclical two-way process of individual and community development.

Problems in identifying and measuring such community inputs and outputs in relation to education, health and other dimensions abound (ABS 2001, 2002, 2004). This underlines the need to draw together, into a coherent framework, findings from a variety of projects on specific educational, economic, social, health and cultural outcomes for individuals *and* communities, which may go beyond the statistical to include subjective responses to life experiences within a multi-dimensional model. Existing frameworks normally aggregate outcomes for the individual; the outcome of educational participation is typically measured in terms of qualifications or employment participation (Black & Hughes 2001, Environment Canada 2001 Kreuter, Lezin & Koplán 1997,). Whilst individual outcomes can be aggregated into educational retention rates and similar measures, measures based on individuals fail to capture beneficial outcomes of education programs that accrue to communities as a whole.

Other measurement problems arise from the fact that as communities are not socially homogeneous some groups have manifestly more social and/or economic power than others and the nature and quality of their opportunities are unequal. Community "can look very different depending on where one is sitting" (Walter 1997:72). Therefore, the differential capacity of various groups within the community to access opportunities, information and social networks and participate (Herbert-Cheshire 2003) must be fully factored into the social capital equation. Models and measures of community social capital must therefore take into account the diversity of the community, its subgroups and subcultures and the potentially unequal access of groups and individuals to the available community social capital. Our research suggests that it is possible that 'community' social capital may exclude some groups, including youth (e.g. Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002). This is the dark side of social capital referred to by Putnam (2000). Groups excluded from aspects of community social capital are likely to be excluded from related social and economic wellbeing. Models need to be able to identify this and usually cannot.

Policy-makers are looking to research to establish ‘what works’ in terms of social policy interventions, and social, education and health service delivery; how to intervene in communities effectively and how to work with communities through community participation and community capacity building (Reddel 2002). Research has shown that provision by government of facilities and services within a community, such as health services and educational institutions and courses, will not ensure take up, effective utilisation and community benefit. Thus the degree of social impact and community outcomes will vary from community to community. How do we explain this? It has been argued that the quantity and quality of a community’s social capital, and the nature of its leadership, have a large impact on that community’s capacity to take up social and economic opportunities and to manage change (Gittell & Vidal 1998; Falk & Kilpatrick 2000; National Statistics 2001). This has practical relevance for adolescents facing the challenges of transition to adulthood at a time of great societal change.

The wider policy implications of this research are found in the international literature regarding the social indicators of community capacity building. Since Putnam (1993) linked social capital to differential regional outcomes, policy makers have looked to social capital to explain and solve a range of societal and community social ills, despite uncertainty about exactly what social capital is and how it operates (Johnston & Percy-Smith 2003). The OECD (2001), World Bank (2001) and National Statistics (2001), all note the link between economic outcomes and social capital. These studies define social capital as the shared information, norms, values and social networks that enable people to work together to achieve beneficial outcomes for the collective. In Australia, as in many other countries, the concept of social capital has been incorporated into government policy and programs of social development, as by the Department of Family and Community Services (Winter 2001). A sound conceptual model of how social capital and other community factors operate to produce individual and community outcomes will facilitate effective policy design.

In this paper we report a pilot study that addresses the need to measure, in more precise ways than we have been able to do previously, the interaction and impact of community factors, including social capital, which are able to produce and to reproduce beneficial social, educational and health outcomes for youth and for the community as a whole.

Conceptualising community efficacy

Our concept of ‘*community efficacy*’ is the product of the observed interaction between the two dimensions of Community Activity Infrastructure and Social Capital. It challenges the view of social capital as merely a ‘social glue’ which binds social networks together and allows us to discriminate between the ‘expert’ and the ‘lived in’ constructs of community cohesion. Our conceptualisation of community efficacy differs from Sampson’s ‘collective efficacy’ as ‘shared expectations for action among neighbours’ (2003:S55) in that we analyse how community efficacy is constructed and operationalised in context. In our model community efficacy produces various social outcomes which may be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Community Activity Infrastructure includes the government, community and commercial institutions in the community, the physical and socio-economic resources, places available for people to interact, and the power and class structure of the community. The quantifiable aspects of Community Activity Infrastructure are the physical presence of institutions and services of various kinds, their level of sophistication, the ease of access to institutions within and outside the community (e.g.

physically by public transport and socially by access to information) and number and type of club and sports meetings and community events. *Social capital* elements relate to the nature and quality of associations and participation, networks and leadership, including youth leadership, partnerships, advocacy, diversity and inclusiveness and balance of internal and external focus of activities, or their 'local' or 'cosmopolitan' orientation (Gouldner 1957,1958). Qualitative aspects also relate directly to individuals' subjective experience of the Community Activity Infrastructure and hence their 'quality of life'. This is also the focus of aspirations and visions for the community future. Hence the wellbeing of the individual and the community are inextricably linked.

Different levels of community participation, differences of social stratification and social access are incorporated into our model in an attempt both to observe and to measure the different dimensions and expressions of social capital at the grass roots of community activity. This is as opposed to 'ideal type' models (Weber 1949) emanating from 'top down' concepts of power brokers, opinion makers and 'experts'. Drawing on our own and international work on social capital we applied the concept of Community Activity Infrastructure (facilities, services and resources) to the behaviour settings (Wicker 1991), social structures and socio-economic resources which are available to youth in the sample case study communities. In this we are mindful of Giddens' theory of 'structuration'; of structure as 'both enabling and constraining'; and the "mutual dependence of structure and agency" (Giddens 1990:69) in seeking to explain the relationships between systems, structures and the interactions of individual actors, in particular communities. The community activity structure sets boundaries to, or acts to enable, the development of community capacity, well-being and social capital, through what we have called community efficacy, modifying and applying Bandura's famous concept of individual agency or efficacy (Bandura 1977,1982) at the level of community.

Measuring community efficacy

As a first step in the challenging and complex task of measuring community efficacy, with the help of an Institutional Research Scheme grant in 2003, we re-visited theories of social capital as a multi-dimensional rather than uni-dimensional concept, in the context of rural communities and their capacity to provide successful transitions to young adulthood for their youth. The investigation sought to identify the contribution made by community social capital to positive outcomes for youth and conversely the benefits for community development of youth participation in education and training and transition to work. Youth outcomes may be categorised in four domains: education, employment, social/community and health (OECD 1999; Kilpatrick, Abbott-Chapman, Williamson & Bound 2003). The aim was to model and measure the effectiveness of resources and structures which are designed to achieve the goal of successful youth transitions as expressed in education, employment, social/community and health/wellbeing outcomes.

In order to be able to measure and to monitor these two-way effects it was necessary first to develop a device for modelling and measuring community inputs and outputs that would take account of the many factors involved in social capital and of community members' own sense of what is good about their own community. This we achieved, in relation to two case study communities, through the development of a measurement matrix relating a community's efficacy to the quality of its social capital (Figure 1 overleaf). As far as our study of the international literature has allowed, we believe that this has not been attempted in this way before and that it presents a novel approach to the study of social capital.

The measurement matrix we developed and trialled relates the quantifiable aspects of Community Activity Infrastructure along one axis and the elements of Social Capital (encompassing the qualitative aspects of community activity) along the other. The first dimension measures facilities, services and resources which are available, the other the take up of those facilities, services and resources, revealing the process of direct and indirect influence on outcomes for the community and its youth as part of an iterative process. The model is consistent with the Productivity Commission's observation that 'social capital could be either a cause or a consequence (or both) of high levels of social and economic wellbeing' (2003:xiii). Social capital is depicted at the centre of the process, with its elements of networks, community vision, trust, community identity, culture and value sets (Lane & Dorfman 1997; Kilpatrick & Falk 2003).

Figure 1 Measuring community efficacy – a framework

Community Activity Infrastructure		Social Capital (encompassing Qualities of Community Activity)						
		Physical and economic access	Social access and access to knowledge of	Diversity of opportunities/experiences	Balance of local/cosmopolitan focus	Partnerships and linkages (internal and external)	Leadership /influence	Advocacy /support
Education and training	Senior secondary school							
	Vocational Education and Training							
	Higher education							
	Structured and informal learning opportunities outside the formal education and training sector							
Employment	Workplaces							
	Job agencies and employment services							
Community/Social	Clubs and community groups (civic / service, sport, cultural/social, religious)							
	Government and not-for profit services and programs (e.g. welfare, business development centre, youth support programs)							
	Commercial services (e.g. banking services, retail, post office)							
	Physical interactional infrastructure							
Health	Clinical/medical/mental health							
	Allied health services							
	Alternative medicine							

Our Community Efficacy measurement matrix differs from current statistical measures and models in that it attempts to measure the processes and community resources that generate the commonly measured outcomes. In bringing together in one matrix the two interacting dimensions of community activity infrastructure and social capital our matrix reveals what goes to make up social capital rather than merely its outcomes. In a dynamic process of social capital formation the model is cyclical. The model also emphasises access to choice among diverse activities in the community. In this way we hope to clarify what has been reported to be a degree of ‘confusion about what social capital is as distinct from its outcomes and what the relation between social capital and its outcomes might be’ (Fenton, Macgregor & Cary 2002:118).

Measurement practicalities dictated the sort of data which is available in the public domain or might be collected by purposive surveys. Our aim was to simplify the Community Activity Infrastructure and Social Capital elements and their quantitative and qualitative components in order to distil ‘cells’ in which an assessment of community efficacy, relating the intersection of the relevant row and column, could be made. This raises complex methodological issues in terms of standardisation of data collected and the possibility of developing scores and ranking scales which allow the quantification and comparison of data across widely differing communities. These are currently being refined.

We trialled the measurement matrix in two rural Tasmanian communities, concentrating on four cells in the matrix. Two related to the Community Activity Infrastructure row Vocational education and training: social capital columns Physical and economic access and Social access/access to knowledge. The other two related to the Community Activity Infrastructure row Government and not-for-profit services and programs: social capital columns Partnerships and linkages and Diversity of opportunity and experiences. We found secondary source data were more likely to reveal quantifiable aspects of community efficacy, such as statistical measures of participation, training courses available, the number and range of services, and the number of formal partnerships, published in the public domain. Such data provide a useful initial overview from officially available sources of evidence. Secondary data provide much information about the formal structure of opportunities within a community, but less about the nature and quality of opportunities.

The subjective experiences of community efficacy are harder to assess. We plan further work that will seek evidence in tandem from community surveys and consultations with community leaders. We shall draw upon the accumulated wisdom of long-settled inhabitants who will tell us about change from their perspective. In addition, assessments for some cells will be made by comparing quantifiable aspects with established benchmarks or standards for services, quality of life or community economic, social or environmental sustainability. A number of such sets of benchmarks have been developed in recent years, for example, Environment Canada’s (2001) Sustainable Communities Indicators Program which is designed for application by communities themselves and the European Union’s (2000) common indicators toward a local sustainability profile. In Tasmania, a government and community partnership named ‘Tasmania Together’ has allowed the people of Tasmania through their various communities to have a say in their long-term social, economic and environmental future. Initially the partnership process, involving consultations with more than 2,500 people, was overseen by a Community Leaders Group, and developed a document comprising eight goals with 212 benchmarks (www.tasmaniatogether.tas.gov.au). These are potential benchmarks for our community efficacy measurement matrix.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper is to present research in progress rather than final ‘results’, to discuss the concept of ‘community efficacy’ as a valuable tool in understanding ways in which communities develop or decline, and what may be done to facilitate community efficacy and capacity building using our model and the measurement matrix as diagnostic tools. We also discuss the complexity of measuring community efficacy outcomes, with special reference to youth, and our work in further development and refinement. In addition, we face the challenge of measuring community efficacy and change over time – in some cases, long periods of time – as one way of relating structural and dynamic elements and of examining changes in personnel and settings in the assessment of why one community thrives and another struggles to survive.

Why is our approach relevant to the planning of youth futures for Australia’s country towns? We contend that our model can provide a template for comparisons of community efficacy in diverse settings and regions in terms of the basic elements within the matrix. This allows for standardisation of measures in otherwise apparently incomparable situations. We argue that what planners should be focussing upon is not the quality of social capital within the community on the one hand and the quality of physical and socio-economic infrastructure on the other but the interaction of these in ways known and valued by each community. To return to Cohen’s (1982) example we need to identify ways in which government institutions and services (as part of community activity infrastructure) may be designed to facilitate the growth of community social capital and to interact positively with it within that setting, and yet not impose ‘outside’ solutions upon it. At the same time we need to respect the uniqueness of community culture and identity and the capacity of communities to contribute to, and to help shape, the local community activity infrastructure in partnership with government. This allows a flexibility of approach and a multiplicity of ‘solutions’ to the multiplicity of local situations. The notion of community efficacy as the ‘value added’ to both these dimensions when they interact positively is therefore neither a ‘top down’ nor a ‘bottom up’ approach since it incorporates both perspectives.

Rural communities throughout Australia are experiencing continuing change. Change is being driven by external factors, notably prices for commodities, globalisation, technological development, environmental concerns, and government policies. Change is affecting all areas of rural life, economic, social and environmental. A major concern in many regional communities is population decline, especially the loss of teenagers, and young adults and families, as they move away to larger centres for education, work and social opportunities (Eversole 2001). Rural communities which may begin to see themselves as more and more ‘peripheral’ are struggling to come to grips with these changes and to find solutions to protect their threatened economic and social future, and to rise above associated social ill health and lack of morale. They are seeking ways to reduce the loss of their future population base and to improve educational, economic and social opportunities. Governments are grappling with new approaches to policy and program implementation that give rural communities the opportunity to customise programs to address specific needs. Our Community Efficacy Measurement Matrix will provide an evidence base for the design of such programs as well as assist in identification of where they are needed. It is a tool that local communities can use to analyse their strengths and weaknesses in particular contexts, such as young people’s transitions, and will point to areas where changes could improve outcomes.

Our matrix will help community leaders and government planners to identify the strong drivers to community efficacy and those factors holding back positive change, without trying to apply a 'one size fits all' approach. The Community Efficacy Measurement Matrix thus fills a gap in the analysis of existing data bases and will give pointers to where new data bases need to be constructed or incorporated. It provides a template for researchers and practitioners to use in the context of community development, and will assist policy makers when making decisions about funding for community-based programs in rural communities which are directed towards youth. Expected social benefits include strategies to increase the self-help and self-esteem of rural youth, through community revitalisation which encourages retention of youth and working adults in rural communities, with longer term socio-economic benefits for whole communities.

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