

# Social capital, citizenship and continuing education: What are the connections?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this short article is to consider the concepts of social capital and of citizenship, and to identify connections with continuing education, post-school education, and lifelong learning. The core of the article comprises three parts: first, the concept of social capital is considered, together with the related concept of cultural capital; second, the concept of citizenship is considered, together with the related concept of active citizenship; and finally, using examples chiefly from the United Kingdom, the article considers the policy and practice of “continuing education” and their connections with the theoretical concepts considered earlier.

*Keywords: social capital, continuing education, lifelong learning, cultural capital, citizenship.*

## What is social capital?

Although by no means new as a concept, social capital has received increasing attention in the United Kingdom in recent years, following North American examples, with the growth of public concern about *marginalization* and *alienation* in contemporary British society. However, it is still relatively vague and under developed as a concept of policy value. As a preliminary, a number of key questions are considered. First, are there any useable definitions of “social capital” and how is it derived from or distinguished from other forms of capital? Second, how and why is it accumulated and by whom? It should be noted that the literature on social capital is now very extensive and this short article can only identify some of its key features briefly.

Two of the key figures in developing contemporary social capital theory are the American social scientists Robert Putnam and James S. Coleman. A basic definition that emerges from Putnam’s work is that “social capital” represents the norms and social relations of groups and communities that enable the achievement of common goals (Putnam, 1995).

If such a definition is accepted as a starting point, then three further categories stand out. These are associated particularly with the work of James S. Coleman, who argued that social capital is “defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—within the structure” (Coleman, 1997, p. 81). The first of these are *bonds* or links with others based on a sense of common identity. Among the most powerful of these are shared ethnicities or again a common religious faith. Social capital of this type focuses on horizontal associations among such people and their networks of engagement. These enable norms and societal rules to be generated that reinforce trust in the network relationship which allow it to function to the benefit of the participants.

The second of these are *bridges*, or those horizontal connections that extend beyond such fundamental shared identities. For example, the practice of a common profession, such as medicine or the law, may provide a bridge between people of different ethnicities, languages or religious faiths. Lastly, there are the vertical *linkages* which connect people or groups higher up or lower down the social structure. For example, the connections between master and servant, between landlord and tenant, and between employer and employee. Coleman reminds us that the key to social capital, as to other forms of capital, is that it is productive: “making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1997, p. 81). Again, as with other forms of capital, social capital is not completely transferable, but may be specific to certain activities. As Coleman says: “A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others” (Coleman, 1997, p. 82).

It is well known that social, cultural, and religious factors are *fundamental* influences on family values, and on the morals and goals of individuals and of communities. Given our definition, it follows that they are also key to the creation of social capital. An example may be found in the *wider benefits* of education and of learning to communities and to society as a whole. These are not necessarily measured in economic or monetary terms. As an OECD report, *The New Economy: Beyond the hype: Final report on the OECD Growth Project*, quoted by Keeley, comments: “Social capital provides the glue which facilitates co-operation, exchange and innovation” (Keeley, 2007, p. 104). It goes on to claim that “Communities with high levels of social capital tend to achieve better school outcomes than communities which face social fragmentation and isolation” (Keeley, 2007, p. 106). It has been argued further that the size of *public subsidies* to education should be determined on the basis of calculating the associated social benefit.

Individual social capital comprises the *skills* and *networks* that enable an individual to gain market and non-market benefits from social interaction with others. Such skills might best be seen as part of an individual’s human capital

account. For example, as *The Well-being of Nations: The role of human and social capital*, another OECD document quoted by Keeley, argues: "Access to information and influence through social networks also confers private benefits on individuals and in some cases can be used by individuals or groups to exclude others and reinforce dominance or privilege" (Keeley, 2007, p. 104). The Chinese concept of *guanxi* might be compared here. This was done in an interesting paper by Yandong Zhao that measured the social capital of laid-off Chinese workers. He argued that although the concept of social capital originated in occidental societies, in recent years it has drawn the attention of researchers from different cultural backgrounds including China. He comments that "Chinese society has a tradition of emphasizing the importance of inter-personal relationships and personal networks..." and goes on to say that "Meanwhile, it is now undergoing a great social transition, in which social institutions are playing very important roles in social life" (Zhao, 2002, p. 555).

Individual social capital also includes *cultural* capital as suggested by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who has been very influential on educational sociology in the United Kingdom and Europe generally, as well as in North America (Bourdieu, 1997). As derived from Bourdieu, cultural capital may be defined briefly as the shared meanings that shape a group's attitudes and internal discussion and communications. It is acquired primarily through socialization in the family and its associated groups such as religious affiliation or other membership societies, and is reinforced by formal schooling. These include accepted manners and behaviour, good taste and discrimination, the use of language, special skills or knowledge. In short, the badges of cultural distinction which, once acquired, denote group acceptance and membership.

Success in the formal educational system according to Bourdieu's analysis is determined by the extent to which individuals appropriate the *dominant* culture. This leads to cultural and social reproduction. He states that notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to him, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis to explain "the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success...to the distribution of cultural capital..." (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 47). However, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had long before argued that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 64). Bourdieu's theoretical debts to Marx and Engels, and to Antonio Gramsci's concepts of cultural *hegemony* and of the formation of intellectuals, derived from the same source (Gramsci, 1971; Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002) are obvious, and yet are not always perceived by academics and, more understandably, almost certainly not by policymakers.

However, as Coleman indicates, there are also negative or at least exclusive aspects to the concept of social capital. For example, tightly-knit communities can prove *hostile* to the new ideas and the changes that education and training bring. This is an issue among some ethnic minority and immigrant communities in the UK. Networks may be used to advance the interests of their members to the *exclusion* and detriment of outsiders. It is also an aspect of the debates in the United Kingdom about state versus private schools, about so-called “faith” schools, and also about bilingual schools in Wales. Again, networks may be used for *criminal* purposes; for example, drug or people trafficking or for violent ideological and political purposes.

### What is citizenship?

As Kivisto and Faist (2007, p. 1) point out in a stimulating recent analysis of contemporary citizenship, there has been a significant revival of interest in the concepts of citizenship and of the related concept of civil society. In the specific context of the United Kingdom, this was “stimulated by the deepening inequalities brought about by the *laissez-faire* economic and social policies that dominated British politics in the 1980s and 1990s” (Morgan, 2003, p. 28). One example of this is the *Report of the Commission on Citizenship*, established by the then Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill. This stated that citizenship was a concept that should be applied not only to an individual’s direct relationship with the State, but “to the great range of voluntary bodies and independent associations, and above all, to individual citizens of all ages” (Commission, 1990, p. vi; Morgan, 2003, p. 28). This assumed an “active” citizenship beyond the core contributions of voting, being entitled to a passport, respecting the law, and paying taxes. The extent to which such citizenship had contributed to a deep-rooted civil society in the United Kingdom, not least through a long tradition of non-formal political education, was perhaps ignored (Morgan, 2003).

Explanations of *active citizenship* fall broadly into two categories. First, the participation of the individual citizen in civic or public affairs is seen as a consequence of *choice*. This is determined by an individual’s *rational* assessment of the costs and benefits of participation. Individuals are also influenced by *norms* and *beliefs* about the *rights* and *obligations* of citizenship. Second, civic participation is seen as a consequence of the *dominant structure* of society. The individual members of a society, or rather a community organized as a political *state*, are *socialized* into the norms, values and behaviour of the social groups to which they belong and to those of the wider society. A social capital *model* may be used to explain this.

As all commentators agree, *trust* is a key indicator of social capital. It encourages individuals to *extend* their networks with confidence and provides an *incentive* to individuals to participate, since they will expect that this will bring benefits. Participation in turn *fosters* a sense of trust which builds an *authentic* community of citizens; one in which social, economic and political life is not based on remote or merely commercial transactions. Participation is seen as *meaningful*. Such communities are *more likely* to be safe, well-governed and maintained, affluent and generally successful. Although Putnam admits that it is far from conclusive that social capital is “a strong predictor of everything”, he still argues that it is “a powerful predictor of many things, enough to make it well worth our attention” (Putnam, 2001, p. 51) We should note therefore that the United Kingdom has maintained a long tradition of such *associational* or *civil society* activity, which should be distinguished from direct political activity. It has, since the Civil Wars of the 17th century, also developed a system of democratic parliamentary, devolved, and local government that, despite (or perhaps *because* of) regular criticism, is accepted and trusted by its citizens (Morgan & Stevenson, 2003; Home Office, 2004).

### How does continuing education connect?

Continuing education is a *resource* for social capital development and active citizenship. It both *stimulates* interest and provides knowledge and skills that *enable* people to participate confidently and effectively. Continuing education, especially non-formal and informal, is also a *product* of social capital and active citizenship. It builds confidence, trust, and further participation. Consequently, policy interventions which improve educational attainment and develop learning and skills can assist this *benign cycle* of interactions.

What do we need to know in order to achieve this? Since it came to power in the United Kingdom in 1997, the British Labour Party has considered “social inclusion” a key objective. The policy aim is to make *equal opportunity* in education and employment more effective and, to achieve this, government needs to know more about educational *needs* relating especially to social class, gender, ethnicity, migration, age, disability and other special needs. It also needs to know more about those factors which *cut across* the priority categories, such as basic skills, transitions to learning, and skills shortages. Cost benefit analysis and comparative international evidence are also important factors (Morgan, 2002).

If United Kingdom policy targets are to be achieved, it is necessary to explain and to predict how educational participation fluctuates over time. This means accurate data on what determines participation in education and training; what

motivates or deters specific groups from doing so; the extent to which participation *differs* according to geographical location or patterns of educational financing—for example, fee exemptions, educational maintenance allowances, child care assistance; the extent to which *potential* students follow work-based routes; the value of integrated guidance, support and advice on access, retention and achievement; and the effectiveness of specific programmes, such as the *New Deal for Young People* (Nicholls & Morgan, 2000; Morgan, 2001).

Information is also needed about the attitude of British citizens towards: their rights and responsibilities; capacity to influence political decisions and level of institutional trust; their perceptions of racial prejudice and discrimination; their involvement in local neighbourhoods, in social networks and active participation in communities; and their involvement in family networks and in parenting support. Such information is, for instance, collected through the *Home Office Citizenship Survey: People, families and communities* (Home Office, 2004).

### Continuing education, lifelong learning and skills needs

Understanding the effects of education and of learning at *all ages* on employment, earnings, and productivity is a policy priority in the United Kingdom—as elsewhere. This requires analyses of the *impact* of different forms of vocational education and training and their delivery, together with the effect of subject choice at school and on entry to higher education. The role of general transferable skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and computer competence, as compared with specific knowledge; the *effects* of education on skills acquisition; and which learning styles work best with older people, with limited formal education. *Lifelong learning* is a key concept which may combine with social capital formation and the practice of “active citizenship” to reduce poverty and inequality, while also strengthening civil society. We may note Oduaran, who points out that lifelong learning requires the development of both formal and non-formal education. In the developing world and in Africa, with which he is most closely concerned, the latter has “endured substantial neglect and under-funding for too long”, a problem aggravated by the indiscriminate effects of globalization (Oduaran 2003, p. 20; Sives, Morgan & Appleton, 2005, pp. 350–351).

The practice of lifelong learning reduces the artificial boundaries between the formal and the non-formal in education. Instead, it offers the possibility of a human development model that recognizes the right of all citizens, of whatever ethnicity or religious affiliation, young or old, male or female, to the opportunities of education and the possibilities it offers for a better life. Formal education alone, no matter whether provided universally or for an extended period, cannot eradicate the multiple problems that come with social and economic change, nor even fully

prepare citizens to recognize and to adapt to such change. However, as argued elsewhere, “an integrated, effective and equitable system of formal and non-formal education can reduce inequalities, develop shared values, bring home and school closer together and increase the participation of the community in decisions about education policy and practice” (Sives, Morgan & Appleton, 2005, p. 351).

This will not be easy to achieve—as Jacques Delors, the former president of the European Commission, pointed out over a decade ago. While culture was steadily being globalized, Delors recognized that this had still been achieved only partially and that there were attendant risks. He commented presciently:

People today have a dizzying feeling of being torn between a globalization whose manifestations they can see and sometimes have to endure and their search for roots, reference points and a sense of belonging. Education has to face up to this problem now more than ever as a world society struggles painfully to be born. (Delors, 1996, pp. 16–17)

As the second decade of the 21st century approaches, the world society that he anticipated has still not emerged healthy and ready for development to maturity.

Again in the context of globalization, the employers’ demand for *skills* need to be identified within the context of a dynamic economy, which is to the common, if not equal benefit, of citizens. In addition to potential employers, such information should be available to both individuals in search of employment and to education and training providers, with its implications for student numbers and for curriculum. Again, policymakers need to know how much employers actually *spend* on training and how they measure and perceive the commercial benefits. It should be noted that there are many more students and potential students in the further education sector in the UK than in higher education. The sector is one of great potential importance as it can reach large numbers of citizens quickly, conveniently and cost effectively. Yet compared with higher education provision, relatively little is known about it. For example, why are drop-out rates so high and how may retention be improved? These are key questions for policymakers and for education and training providers—and not only in the United Kingdom. They also indicate the connections between social capital and the creation of human capital (Coleman, 1997).

## Can social inclusion be achieved through education?

The *political* objective in the United Kingdom is to make equal opportunity in education and employment meaningful and thereby reduce or even eliminate social

exclusion. This in turn should build social capital and enhance active citizenship. Longitudinal data sets are essential to understanding the issues and possible remedies. For instance, policymakers need to know *what does or does not work* at key moments in individual life histories, such as the transition from school to work or from secondary to higher education. There are also the *fundamental* questions of cumulative disadvantage and of differences among minorities. This is of growing importance as British society becomes more culturally diverse.

The United Kingdom government recognizes that the achievement of such objectives requires substantial investment of *public resources* and therefore *public support*. The key to all policy decisions is whether the benefits achieved will *justify* the costs. There are important and complex methodological questions about how to estimate this. It is especially difficult with the *indirect economic* and *non-economic* effects of education and training, such as on health awareness, crime rates and other broad social issues, which are part of the social capital and citizenship accounts. It is easier said than done. This is why *research* and *comparative* studies are essential.

In the context of Britain's *New Deal for Young People*, noted earlier, it is interesting to note a relatively recent statistical profile report of Hong Kong's Commission on Youth. The *Appendix* to that report devoted three of its seven chapters to analyses of human, cultural, and social capital in the context of youth policy in the Special Administrative Region. It concluded that "Measures should be implemented to encourage them [youth] to participate [as citizens] in more active ways" (Commission on Youth, 2003, p. 90) The *Report* argued also that otherwise the "lukewarm attitude and engagement of the youth towards society will not only weaken their ethnical identity of being Hongkongese/Chinese, but also lower the efficiency in generating social cohesion and trust in society" (Commission on Youth, 2003, p. 90).

As for the further education sector, as argued elsewhere, the American community college may be a model for Britain. It has been claimed that the evidence shows that, despite criticisms and shortcomings, many millions of Americans "have benefited intellectually, culturally and vocationally from the programmes of their community colleges, which have also made a major contribution to civic education and to economic development" (Morgan, 2000, p. 233). This is a contribution to social capital formation and to citizenship awareness, as well as to economic well-being. The task lies in providing and encouraging educational provision that succeeds in meeting "the many and diverse educational needs of ordinary people in the capitalist democracies in which they live and work" (Morgan, 2000, p. 233).

## Conclusion

The issues considered here are not unique to the United Kingdom, but are seen elsewhere in Europe, in North America, and in other states and societies with developed economies. Whether the policy responses are the same is another matter, as much of the policy inspiration of recent British Labour governments has come from the United States rather than from Europe (Morgan, 2000). There is, however, a continuing commitment in Britain to the essentials of a “social market”, evidenced by government policies for both the management of the economy and to educational policies designed to make the United Kingdom both more competitive and more equitable. The emphasis in both spheres is on equality of opportunity and on social integration and citizenship.

This approach has its critics, notably from a residual “Old” Labour left-wing which would prefer more commitment to redistribution and egalitarianism, both economically and educationally. The successive electoral victories of the Labour Party have been, at least until recently, evidence of public support for the main thrust of its policies. These remain directed towards maintaining a basic standard of living and to compensatory services in support of human and social capital development among the socially excluded. The purpose is both normative and pragmatic, working towards the objective of a cohesive and prosperous society based on a shared sense of citizenship (Morgan & Atkin, 2006). Whether the Labour Party continues in office will be decided at the next General Election, which cannot be postponed indefinitely. However, whatever the outcome of the election, it is likely that the basic policy direction will continue to be followed, although with greater allowance for individual choice.

As argued elsewhere “Citizenship is the essential means to political debate and to the reconciliation of opinion democratically so that society may function” (Morgan, 2003, pp. 28–29). The successful unification, towards these ends, of active citizenship with a culture of lifelong learning, and with a social capital formation that is inclusive rather than exclusive, is a key challenge of the coming decades. A continuing lack of clarity and unity of purpose on the part of citizens as policymakers, together with the increasing dominance of a post-modern cultural relativism, will aggravate the task.

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