

BENEFITS FOR ALL: HOW LEARNING FOR FARMING CAN BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL IN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Social capital helps communities respond positively to change. Our research into managing change through learning in communities and in small businesses, particularly farm businesses, has highlighted the importance of relationships between people and the formal and informal infrastructure of communities to the quality of outcomes experienced by communities, businesses and individuals. Communities can be geographic communities or communities-of-common-purpose, such as agricultural commodity organisations or discussion groups. In this paper we present our model of the simultaneous building and use of social capital and explore the ways in which learning as part of an agricultural community can be used to bring benefits to geographic communities.



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Social capital

Papers presented at the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia conference in 1998 suggested that local initiatives and local actions can improve the fortunes of rural communities. Examples include linking research to farmer training in the grains industry (Berrisford, 1998), using the internet in rural Canadian communities to expand small business opportunities (Bruce, 1998), and working with local employers to provide training for youth (Stokes and Wyn, 1998). Such initiatives and actions involve the participants in informal learning through social interactions. These interactions draw on community 'social capital' and at the same time build additional social capital.

There has been considerable interest, nationally and internationally, in the concept of social capital. In Australia, the Prime Minister convened a social capital round table in 1998 and more recently the Department of Community and Family Services hosted a forum which considered how social capital could be used to improve the effectiveness of policy design and implementation. Internationally, social capital is seen as useful in developing and developed nations. The World Bank has a social capital unit and an email discussion group on social capital (worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/list/).

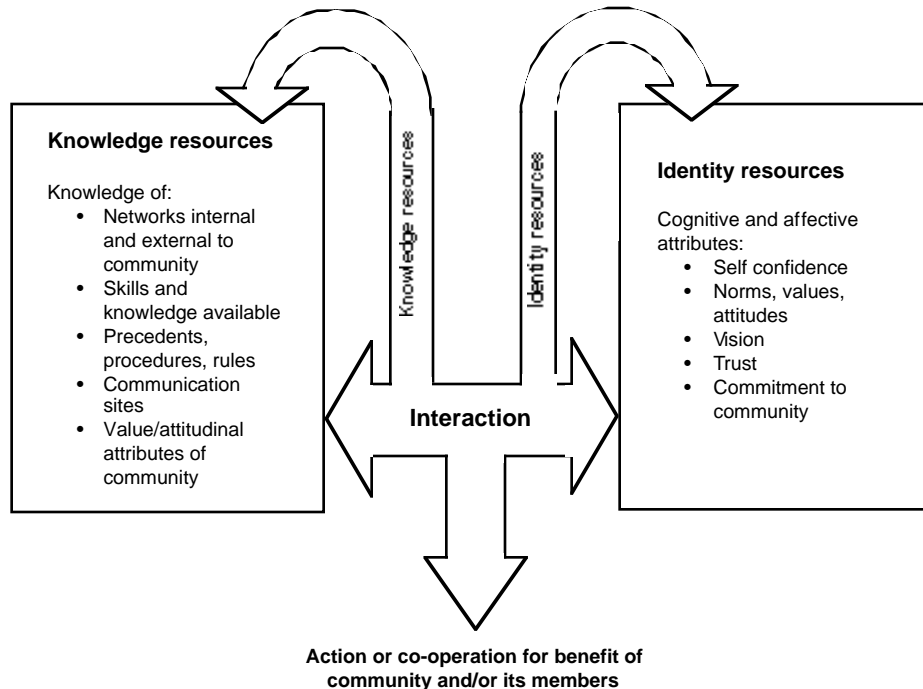
There is a rapidly expanding body of research into social capital, much of which examines outcomes for families, communities, regions or whole nations. This research commonly attempts to establish a link between the quality of the outcomes and the networks and levels of trust that can be observed within the family, community, region or nation being studied. Examples include Putnam's (1993) study of regions in Italy, Uphoff and Krishna's (1999) study of an Indian community and Narayan and Pritchett's (1996) study of families in rural Africa. These studies have informed attempts at theoretical synthesis of how social capital works at family, community, regional and national levels and efforts to define just what it is, such as Woolcock (1998). It is clear from this work that networks and trust are significant components of social capital. Networks and trust are operationalised in interactions between people, and as Kreuter et al (1997) note, attempts to measure social capital have generally been at two levels: community and individual. Put another way, social capital is embedded in relationships between people, however there has been little work to date which examines the micro level of interactions between individuals within a community. The Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia has been working to fill this gap with studies such as those reported in Falk and Harrison (1998), Falk (1999) and Kilpatrick et al (1999).

A model of the building and use of social capital

The Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia has studied the informal learning process that builds resilient communities and has developed a model to conceptualise the way in which social capital is used and built in interactions between individuals. There are two stages to the model. The first stage depicts social capital at the micro level of one-on-one interactions where it is built and used (Figure 1). The second stage of the model is about the interrelationship of micro level social capital processes with the community and societal level social capital resources (Figure 2).

Interactions build and use social capital

Figure 1: Simultaneous building and using of social capital in interactions between individuals



The social capital resources used in interpersonal, one-on-one interactions are (1) a knowledge of who, when and where to go for advice or resources and knowledge of how to get things done, called *knowledge resources*, and (2) *identity resources*, that is, being able and willing (committed) to act for the benefit of the community and its members. Knowledge and identity resources allow community members to combine their skills and knowledge (human capital) with the knowledge and skills of others.

There are two sorts of outcomes possible from interactions that use social capital, one is some action or co-operation for the benefit of the community or its members, the other is the building or strengthening of knowledge and identity resources. Informal or deliberately arranged interactions help people get to know each other, and develop networks. The interactions also increase people's confidence to act for the benefit of the community and its members, and build a commitment to members of the community and the community as a whole. Thus social capital is dynamic, and is both used and built through learning processes.

It should be noted that not all interactions have positive or beneficial outcomes for individuals or communities, neither do all interactions build social capital. The quality of the action outcome and the quality of the social capital resources that are built depend on the social capital available and drawn on in interactions. We suggest that the quality of the knowledge and identity resources (micro level social capital), accessed in the interaction, and the quality of the community and societal level social capital determines the quality of the outcomes.

Our study of the farmer learning group Executive Link™ (EL), which is reported elsewhere (Kilpatrick et al 1999; Kilpatrick and Bell, 1998), found that

issues were introduced or discussed by group members. Changes in these sensitive areas were the changes that lead to major improvements in performance. Members had to get to know each other before they could regard each other as credible sources of advice and support for sensitive issues; that is before they would actually use each others' skills and knowledge. Getting to know each other is building knowledge resources.

As people got to know each other, they developed a sense of belonging and commitment, and a sense that all group members could make valued contributions, that is, they built identity resources. Participation in community activities provides opportunities for interaction, these being, opportunities for using social capital to enhance economic or social outcomes. One member's business was struggling to meet the information sharing and 'reporting back' expectations of the group. Other members went to the member's property to help the business 'fit in' to the group:

There was tremendous commitment to... go to that place... most of us were in the middle of shearing... I had to get people to do my work for me and the other members of the board were in the same boat, so it really was a crisis as far as the group itself went, so we just had to do it, and it worked really well and we all gained from it. (EL member)

The outcomes of this opportunity for interaction extended beyond better reporting for the target business to building knowledge and identity resources ('we all gained from it').

Community level social capital

Individuals' knowledge and identity resources and community and societal social capital resources are interdependent. Interactions inevitably draw on the social capital of the community or organisation and society to which the interacting parties belong. Knowledge resources consist largely of knowledge of community (or organisation) and societal level social capital; the networks, procedures, rules and precedents, and other interactional infrastructure available in the community and beyond, and knowledge of the value/attitudinal attributes of the community which will influence actions or their outcomes. Identity resources (trust, norms, values, attitudes and vision) are shaped by the community and the wider society. The degree to which values, norms and visions are shared with the community will influence the actions arising from interpersonal interactions, and their outcomes.

We suggest that community (or organisation) level social capital that is drawn on and added to in interactions is of two types: interactional infrastructure and value/attitudinal infrastructure. Interactional infrastructure provides networks that help identify people with whom to interact, sites and opportunities to come together to interact, and guides for the interactions in the form of procedures and leadership. Value/attitudinal infrastructure underlies all interactions; the degree of trust and sharing of norms, values, attitudes and visions determines the ease with which community members interact.

The following quote, from a farmer interviewed as part of the project reported in Kilpatrick and Johns (1999), illustrates how events or meetings, in this case a training course, provide opportunities for interaction which build networks and change values and attitudes ('really opened your eyes').

... through a network of people that you meet, because on this course [about financial management]... there might have been 2 cane farmers all the rest were from other industries and it's the interaction that you got from those people that really opened your eyes up a bit, what's happening and different ideas, you've not got blinkers on all the time (Cane grower)

Trust permeates all levels of our social and commercial world, and without it our society cannot achieve the social cohesion that many believe modern communities have lost. The second quote, from the same project, is a practical illustration of how trust is accessed in a community group for the individual benefit of all its members.

We have a group of farmers ... We're at that stage now where we've got all our financial reports together and put them all on paper and we compare production between the farmers.... And just seeing, you know, where we can improve each other. ... it didn't happen immediately like that but it's gradually worked its way to ... where we can trust each other with each others' figures. (Queensland dairy farmer)

The third quote, from an EL member, illustrates how a sense of belonging influences attitudes and changes identity as the member comes to regard themselves as like others, instead of alone. Values, norms, attitudes and visions are shared.

[It's] getting the big picture, how other people do it. You get the feeling that you are not just rowing your own canoe, there are others there doing the same thing... it makes it much easier to be positive. (EL member)

Events and meetings and the networks of the type mentioned in the first quote above are part of the community's interactional infrastructure. The trust mentioned in the second quote and the shared values, norms, attitudes and visions represented by the third, are part of the community's value/attitudinal infrastructure. Other elements of value/attitudinal infrastructure are the levels of trust in the community, the degree to which community members are prepared to act on behalf of others without an immediate return (reciprocity) and the related concept of commitment of the members to the community.

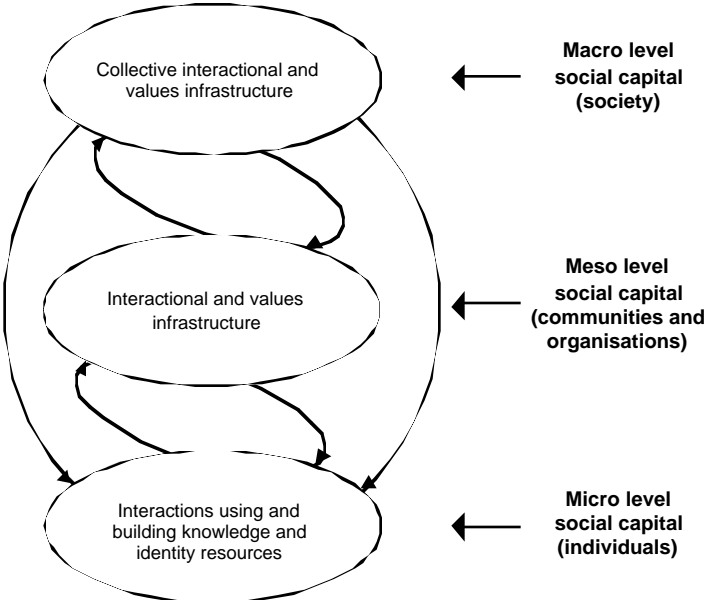
Social capital is created by members of a community and is available for the benefit of members of the community. It is mutually built and owned. Its use on any one occasion can be for the benefit of the whole community, or for some of its members.

External links that cross the boundary of the community

Social capital is not restricted to the knowledge and identity resources available within a community. Indeed, our data suggest that external interactions are essential if communities are to adapt and change. A community which has access to knowledge and identity resources from the broader society has a wider pool of social capital upon which to draw, and potentially better outcomes. Drawing on external resources delineates our view of social capital from the view of social capital as simply another term for 'social cohesion' or 'social solidarity'. Without the dimension of externality, (closed) communities are more likely to perpetuate local prejudices and other anti-social values.

Figure 2 suggests how community level social capital interacts with the societal level social capital, or collective interactional and values infrastructure. Figure 2 also illustrates the interrelationship between the interactions that build and use

Figure 2: Societal and community level social capital resources sustained by interpersonal interactions



The elements of community (or organisation) level social capital are listed in Table 1, and then described in more detail below.

Table 1: Community and organisation level social capital

Interactional infrastructure

- Relational networks (external and internal)
- Events and meetings
- Communication sites
- Procedures, rules, precedents
- Leadership

Value/attitudinal infrastructure

- Shared values, norms, attitudes
- Shared vision
- Trust
- Reciprocity
- Commitment to community

Relational networks include formal and informal groups (including electronic groups) within a community or organisation and networks extending beyond the boundaries of the community or organisation;

Events and meetings are scheduled and unscheduled occasions for ‘social’ engagement;

Communication sites include local radio, newspapers and Web sites and electronic communication infrastructure such as bulletin boards, meeting places including halls, meeting rooms, malls, main streets, skate parks;

Procedures, rules, precedents. The institutional structures present in a community can facilitate or hinder both interactions and implementation of the outcomes of interactions. Histories of past courses of action are vital for determining future actions;

Leadership quality and distribution can facilitate and coordinate access to other social capital resources within and outside a community. Leadership can help focus the energies of a community.

The model built in Figures 1 and 2 and Table 1 applies to both geographic communities and communities-of-common-purpose, such as professional associations, industry or local commodity group communities.

Social capital and transfer of learning for farming

Rural people and rural communities are heavily reliant on agriculture. The agricultural industry is a community-of-common-purpose, with many sub-communities-of-common-purpose, for example, commodity groups and discussion groups such as dairy benchmarking groups. There are also communities-of-common-purpose, such as landcare groups, that cross the boundary between agricultural and the rest of the geographic community. All these communities can build and use social capital for the mutual benefit of community members.

Agriculture has a history of learning through extension. In recent years we have observed an increasing interest in learning, and participation in activities that are best described as training (Kilpatrick and Johns 1999). The farming community

is used to learning together and building social capital. Can this evolving learning culture in agriculture be used to build social capital for the broader rural community and for individual geographic rural communities? These quotes from the project suggest it can:

Every district would have a Cotton Growers Association to varying degrees of success. They do a lot of community work to make sure that the industry is part of the community rather than just an isolated business group. (NSW cotton grower)

My role is probably important... I see mine as the personal relationship side, because having been in partnership all my life, I know that it's pretty important to work on that part of it, and I see that as my chief role to make sure that everyone's getting on well together. I'm quite involved in community work too. (Tasmanian cropping farmer)

The next quotes show social capital resources including leadership, communication sites, trust, shared values, trust and commitment to a community which have the potential to transfer beyond the farming community:

Interviewer: I'd be interested to know a little bit more about your discussion group.

Farmer: It's been going for about 10 years, my husband and one other community member are sort of the leaders of it and always have been and I think that's probably the reason why it's survived like it has because these two people have been driving it all the time. (SA dairy farmer)

There's four couples get together every two or three months... we have gone chemical free with our wool. We have tried a number of revegetation projects that we are still working on... we run management decisions past each other... it makes you stop and think about your operation... there is too much reading for one person now so we all subscribe to different journals and we... pool our knowledge and it saves everybody a lot of extra reading... (NSW sheep grazer)

Where to from here?

Garlick (1997) drew attention to the confused and 'dilettante' approach toward local and regional communities by Commonwealth and State governments in recent years. He suggested that community objectives needed to be integrated with institutional (government) objectives at the regional level to produce superior collaborative outcomes. Economic survival and natural resource management are two of the biggest issues facing rural Australia. They are issues where there are benefits to be had at a local level from a coordinated and united response from agricultural businesses and the local community. In line with Bruce's (1998) strategy of 'government as partner', benefits are even greater if there is coordination between local efforts and the policies and actions of players at regional, state and national levels. Consider as an example natural resource management, which is a farm, community, regional and national issue. The actions of individual landholders, the three levels of government and food and fibre processors and consumers all impact on our natural resource base. Natural resource management requires a 'bundle' of policies and practices that are integrated at the farm, community, catchment and regional levels.

Our model shows that social capital resources from community and society levels are used in productive interactions. Such interactions occur at many levels, including in regional or national policy development. Building social

built and used by communities-of-common-purpose that extend across local, regional, state and national levels. This is a challenge that we have to meet if we are to retain an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable rural Australia.

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