

# Young People and Social Capital

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Discussions about social capital and its impact on people's lives and communities are having a growing influence on government policy in regeneration programmes, youth and community development, health promotion and the probation service.

Whilst this is important it quite often creates a huge burden upon practitioners which is about how to apply this theoretical concept and establish whether it has any relevance or use in practice and for the people you work with.

Within an ESRC funded study we investigated how young people manage risk decisions and the resources they draw upon to manage the uncertainty of their lives. We argue that one of these resources is social capital. In this leaflet we aim to throw some light on the links between social capital and risk with a special focus on practice. All the quotes in this leaflet are from interviews with young people as part of this project.

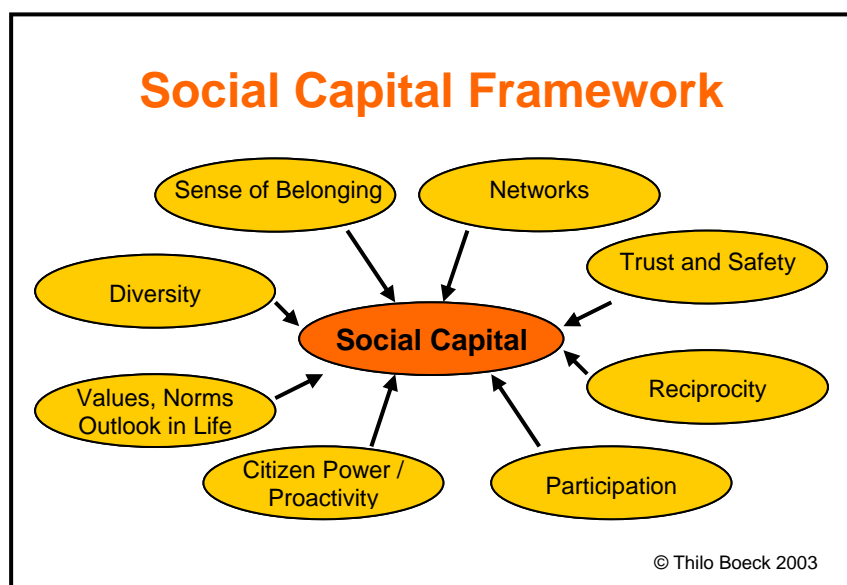
**'Social Capital can be defined as the bulk of social interactions, networks and network opportunities that either people or communities have within a specific environment. This environment is characterised by a commonality of mutual trust and reciprocity and informed by specific norms and values.'**

There are different types of social capital which are important in different situations, or moments in our life. These types are shaped through:

- The types of networks (similar or diverse, outward or inward looking)
- Specific and shared norms and values
- The type of community (location, interest, identity, faith, etc.)
- Power and economic resources

Young people engage with others through a variety of associations forming many different types of networks. Sometimes each of these networks have different sets of norms, trust and reciprocity. Social networks are not only important in terms of emotional support but also crucial in giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.

With practitioners and through research we have developed a social capital framework for research, evaluation and practice. This framework contains elements that are used to explore social capital and aspects that are seen as related to social capital or that might influence the enhancement and development of social capital.

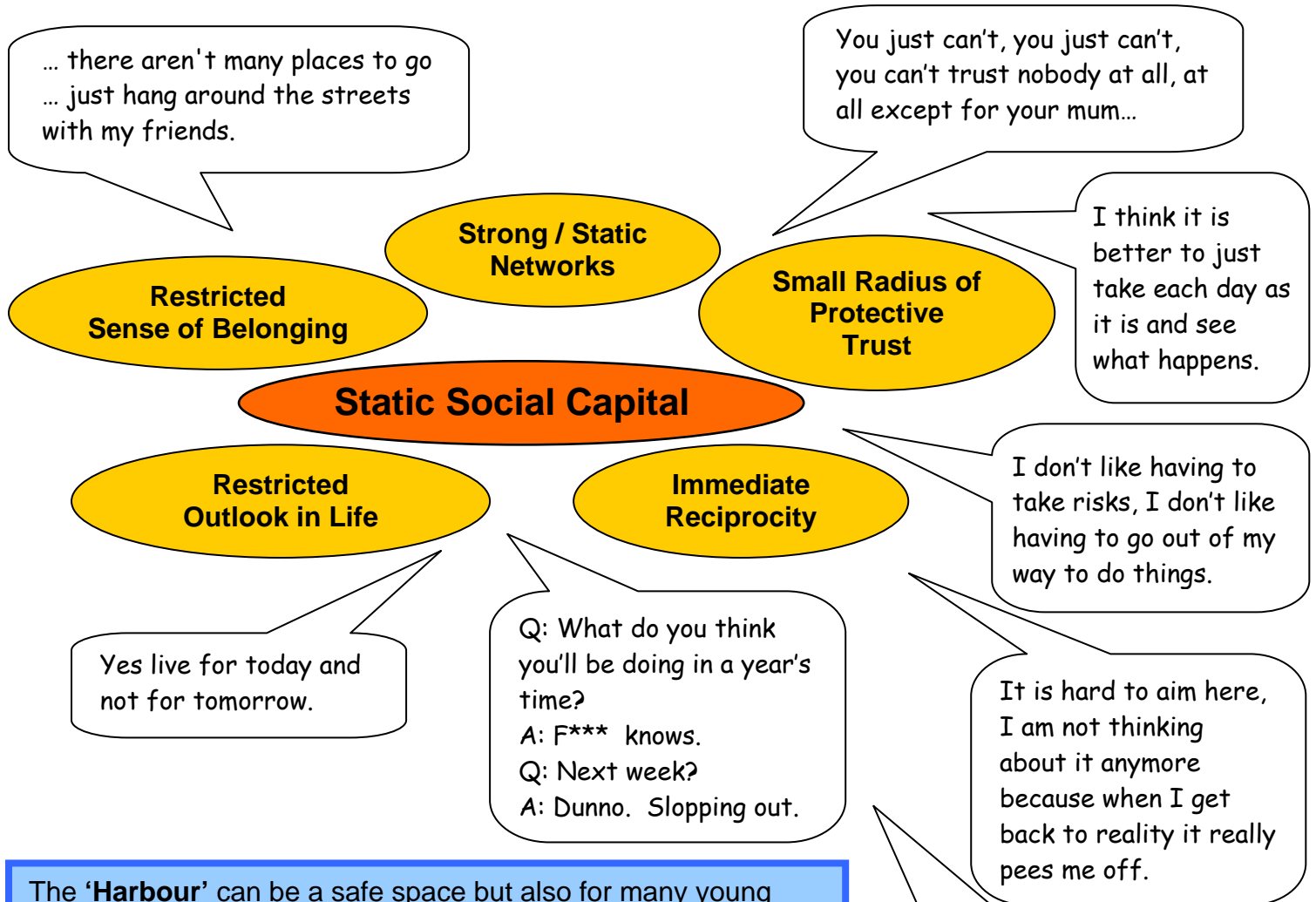


Current youth policy and practice is infused by the association between youth and risk. There is a “moral panic” about young people either presenting a “risk” or being “at risk”. Young people are often characterised as imprudent and irrational, failing to calculate risks properly or to act wisely by taking on board the array of risk information (for example in respect of drug risks).

Policy mainly focuses on:

- Education campaigns to encourage young people away from risky behaviours
- Corrective programmes using cognitive behavioural methods
- Prevention targeting “at risk” youth for interventions, and “dysfunctional” families for parenting programmes

## The Harbour



The ‘Harbour’ can be a safe space but also for many young people a place where they feel trapped. The social capital is more static and young people tend to interact with other, similar young people. Networks are based upon their immediate locale of the street, local park and home. These tight networks are often small, static in nature and engage in a narrow range of activities. It is also characterised by a more ‘protective/narrow trust, which is more inward looking. Reciprocity is characterised by an immediate or even no sense of return. The neighbourhood is a place to socialise but these young people quite often don’t feel that they belong to the neighbourhood, but rather feel quite detached from it. Their outlook in life tends to be more restricted and often less optimistic with a feeling that their own actions would have little impact on their life course. Their future aspirations tended to be unrelated to present skills and competences.

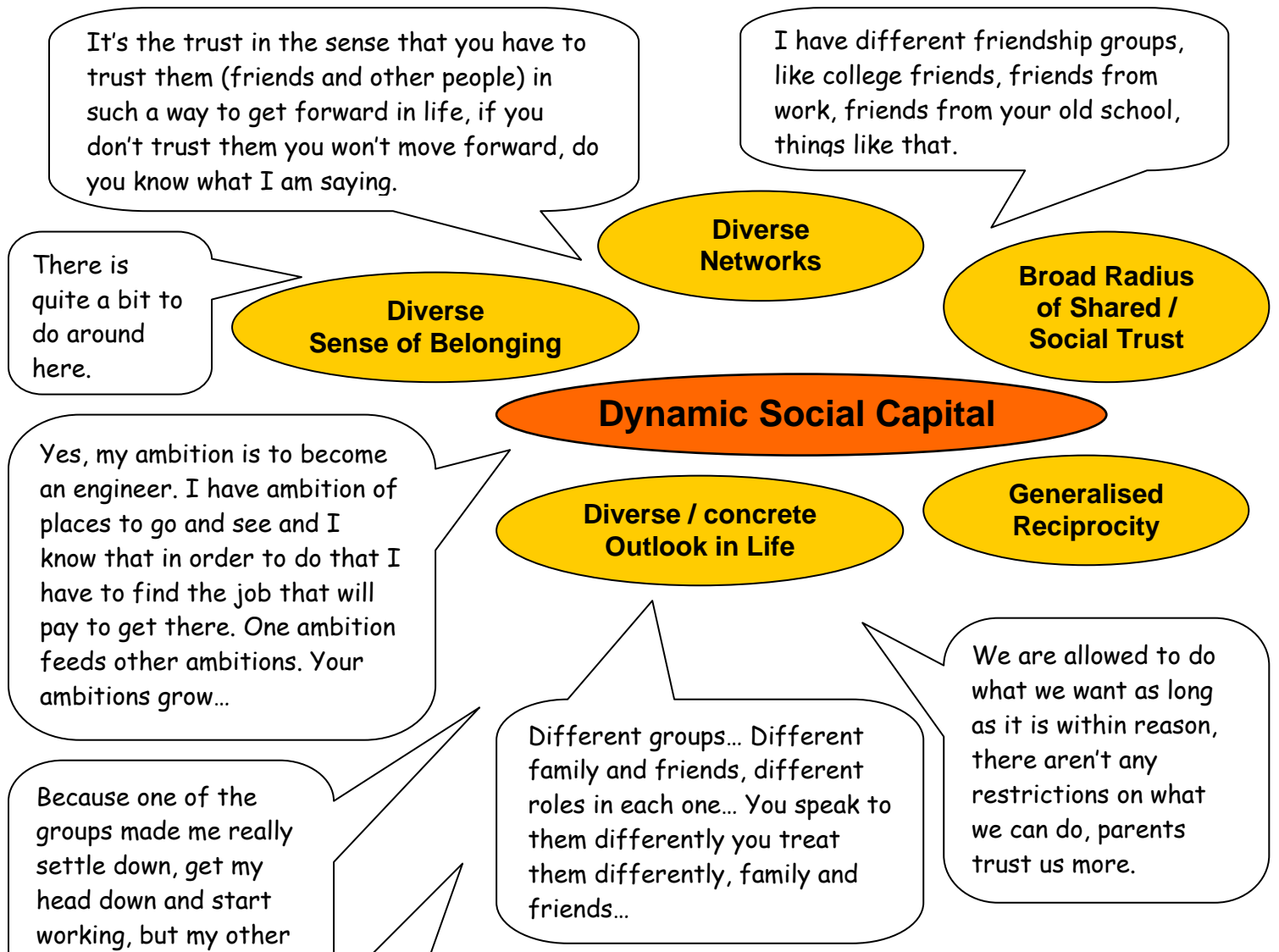
...we are all alike, because we like to go out and have a good time together... We know the same people, we hang around the same area, we like the same things, we like the same ...clothes. I don't know, some people I can trust, some people I can't.

However this fails to explore how such decisions are made over time, the pathways young people take into and out of risk and the social and structural contexts in which these happen.

We encourage practitioners to consider that:

- Risks are not only a matter of personal assessment, adequate reflection and choice, but also a matter of social position or structural inequalities
- Failure to adequately negotiate a risk is not an individual failure but a result of social processes, often outside of the individual's control.

# Navigation



Because one of the groups made me really settle down, get my head down and start working, but my other group offered me fun.

Q: do you have the feeling in general that there is somebody who would help you out.  
 A: Yes I was going to say that, it's not like oh it will always be my mum but it could be your mum or your dad, your grandma, your friends, it could be anybody, it could be anybody that you know it could be that person.

To '**Navigate**' means that the social capital is more dynamic and young people tend to interact with different groups of other young people and adults. Networks are based upon their school, neighbourhood, identity groups, sport groups etc. The diverse networks are varied and dynamic in nature and engage in a varied range of activities with more choice in how to spend the free time. Trust is more about feeling comfortable with each other and a sense of camaraderie. Reciprocity is characterised by generalised and positive sense of return. Friends are more diverse within the family and school environment. This combined with a more supportive neighbourhood environment and seeing themselves as part of the school community and other alternative communities and groups creates the necessary field for young people to develop bridging social capital.

# How to Enhance Social Capital:

## Setting Sail

'Setting sail' is about **enhancing dynamic social capital**. This is one of the factors (amongst economic, political etc.) which will support young people's ability to navigate the challenges everyday life presents them. This is not about 'avoiding' risks but about having the resources to cope, manage and make informed choices in their lives. **It is about working with young people and not for them** so they can set sail and have **more power and opportunities** in their lives.

Because it's different, you get sick of the same place. If I was to stay round my house, because I've been round mine all my life you just say oh God, I want to get away, I want a change, I want to get away from this, I want to meet new people so you just go away. See new people, meet them, say hello, get their numbers and meet up again sometime.

I think certain people don't have as many aspirations and goals, and they just see things at the time and the moment, and not think about it in the long term ...Lack of aspiration and lack of stimulation, it's just that they have nothing to stimulate them or motivate them, then they'll do stupid things.

I don't think that I've got to a point where everything is closed off and the end of the line, there are end of line signs written all over the place. I think there are things that are closed now that weren't before, but it's not terminal, it doesn't stop quite as much, the sidings on some of the lines don't work whereas they would have done before, now they don't so you've got less options but still a big range, there's still a lot of them. It's not like there's only one option and that's it.

If you have got something to look forward you are more willing to do it aint you ?  
If you aint got nothing to look forward to there is nothing to live for is there?  
If you aint got nothing there for you, no family, no job, no education no anything...

Alternative  
Sense of Belonging

Diversification  
of Networks

Enlargement of  
Trust

Dynamic Social Capital

New / more focused  
Outlook in Life

Generalisation of  
Reciprocity

### What can you do? Five interconnected areas in which this might happen:

- 1) **Diversification of Networks:** Enhance networks of support and interaction. Discuss with young people, who is supporting them? Who is important to them? Explore ways for young people to meet and interact with new people and groups, different from their immediate locale of street, school and family.
- 2) **Enlargement of Trust:** Explore with young people who they trust and the meaning of trust. Work towards establishing strong trusting relationships within safe environments. Do they only trust a small number of people? How will they be able to take the risk to trust new people?
- 3) **New, more focused Outlook in Life:** How do they see their future? Do they think they can influence their future? This is about working with them in building their self confidence, relating it to new networks and new trusting relationships. Work with young people to discover their unique skills and thus enhance their aspirations by encouraging them to take the risk of change.
- 4) **Alternative Self and Sense of Belonging:** How do they see themselves? As active or passive? If they feel trapped, work in building up resilience, setting positive goals with a sense of achievement. Can they see themselves differently from how they are now?
- 5) **Generalisation of Reciprocity:** Do they feel that they give and never get anything back? Do they always expect an immediate return? Do they feel that it is worth contributing to their groups, communities, society? Work with young people in participative ways to engage with others, work towards change in their neighbourhoods, communities or other groups. Encourage them to do things with other people.