JRF programme paper:
Poverty and ethnicity

Social networks: their role in addressing poverty

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This paper:

- explains what social networks are, and their benefits;
- explores how social networks can help address poverty and be made more accessible; and
- discusses the impacts of government spending cuts on social networks.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned this paper as part of its programme on poverty and ethnicity which aims to understand the underlying reasons for variations in low income and deprivation among different ethnic groups in the UK and the problems caused. It also aims to contribute towards solutions to these problems.

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Introduction

Background

Perhaps future generations will look back on early 2011 as a turning point: the time when British society, faced with the prospect of the deepest public spending cuts in decades, rediscovered a talent for self-help and mutuality. We did it during the blitz, we can do it again. Statements by the Government's newly launched Big Society Network are not short on aspiration in this respect: "Our aim is to not only create the largest co-operative or mutual in Britain, but to create a mutual that is Britain". In other words, in these times of austerity, people will need to be prepared to help each other more.

From the 'Big Lunch' to 'enterprise clubs', 'social networks' – the ties between individuals or groups – are receiving more attention in public policy discourse (Broome *et al.*, 2010) as people are encouraged to help each other. This paper examines whether and how social networks help people cope with or move out of poverty. Is the power of social networks being overstated? What, if anything, could government and other organisations be doing to enhance social networks that tackle poverty and disadvantage? Evidence and ideas are needed to ensure that strategies intended to do more with fewer public resources do not have a negative effect on the most vulnerable.

In preparing this paper it became clear that there are gaps in available research and evidence on this specific subject, particularly in a UK context. While drawing upon existing literature, this paper should be read primarily as a reflection of brap's views on the subject.

About brap

A Midlands-based national equality and human rights charity, brap (formerly Birmingham Race Action Partnership) has 12 years' experience of participating in and co-ordinating voluntary sector-based community groups and networks aimed at addressing inequality and poverty experienced by marginalised groups in the West Midlands, particular minority ethnic (BME) groups. The charity also plays an active role in national policy development on issues of poverty, inequality and human rights (www.brap.org.uk).

Some definitions

This paper refers to a number of different types of social networks – defined as the ties between individuals or groups. These include 'formal' networks (e.g. voluntary organisations and associations) and 'informal' networks (e.g. family, friends and work-related ties) as well as, to a lesser extent, internet-based social networks. This paper focuses particularly on experiences of minority ethnic communities and civil society organisations/networks (reflecting brap's area of expertise). However, the paper draws broader conclusions equally applicable to a range of vulnerable groups in the UK.

It also discusses the role of social networks in helping people to cope with, prevent, combat, move out of, and avoid going back into poverty. All of these different activities are described under the catch-all description of 'addressing poverty'. Particular activities are described separately where relevant.

The benefits of social networks

It is increasingly claimed that electronic connections and changing social behaviour have made the network a ubiquitous organising principle, the dominant means not just of getting things done, but also of thinking about how things can and should be achieved in a networked age. Consequently, it is perhaps to be expected that the existing research base on social networks and network theory is enormously wide and varied. While there is some consideration of social networks in the context of poverty and disadvantage this is not strictly speaking the primary focus; far more literature is concerned with the broader benefits and utility of social networks.

The most relevant of these benefits and uses are considered below including:
- Improving access to employment opportunities.
- Improving service delivery.
- Mentoring and raising aspirations.
- Mutual support.
- Collective action and campaigning.

Improving access to employment opportunities

In social network theory, a key distinction is made between networks of 'weak bonds' and 'strong bonds' (Granovetter, 1973). Strong bonds are most closely associated with family, kin, and an immediate circle of friends; weak bonds with more distant contacts and acquaintances.

Paradoxically, the most valuable contacts are not necessarily those with whom individuals have the strongest ties. People also have networks of people from different walks of life, casual acquaintances and friends of friends. And empirical studies – particularly from the US – increasingly demonstrate that it is social networks comprising these weak bonds that have the greatest potential to deliver longer-term material gains, such as employment opportunities (Fernandez *et al.,* 2000 and Calvo-Armengol *et al.,* 2004).

Other research, however, indicates that in some circumstances – such as in newly-settled immigrant communities – networks of strong bonds comprising largely kith and kin can also deliver economic and employment benefits (Waldinger, 1997).

Social networks can provide income where formal work is not available. An organisation called Community Links (www.community-links.org) has supported people to build on the skills developed through this kind of informal work. They have educated informal workers regarding the benefits of transferring to the formal economy, while also raising awareness more generally (amongst businesses and government) about the causes of informal working. Coupled with activity to ensure they can be assisted in locating and retaining fulfilling formal work, the use of social networks in this context could

help people to generate income or achieve a more secure income where they otherwise may have failed.

Using the power of social networks in service delivery

In recent years many voluntary sector agencies and some public service bodies have recognised the role improved social networks can play in supporting families and communities.

The Revolving Doors Agency's 'Think Family' approach (www.revolving-doors.org.uk), for example, seeks to combine more effective inter-agency working in adult services with family-focused approaches that help build family relationships, social networks and cohesion for some of the most excluded and marginalised clients (Herlitz and Jones, 2009). This work has prioritised those whose 'multiple needs' – mental health problems, homelessness, drug use, lack of legitimate income – perpetuate inter-generational exclusion and disconnectedness from public services, mainstream opportunities and wider social integration.

Other types of voluntary sector provider also utilise social networks in how they deliver services. Development Trusts, for example, contribute to tackling wealth inequalities by assisting residents to take up benefits to which they are entitled, helping them reduce their outgoings, strengthening the local economy by offering skills development programmes and starting-up social enterprises, and helping people into employment (Quatermain, 2008).

An exemplar of this approach – and recently one of the most widely covered examples – is Acumen Community Enterprise Development Trust (www.acumentrust.org.uk) in the former coal mining area of Easington in County Durham (Hetherington, 2008). Acumen recognises that poverty reduction starts with building social capital and by getting people involved in community projects. In this way, the trust is able to engage with local people and help them gradually move towards economic activity.

There has also been something of a growth in mutual support 'circles' based broadly on the old 'local exchange trading scheme' (LETS) model of barter and exchange. Here, social networks (also utilising the additional power of online communication) bring participants together to provide and exchange services such as childcare and other forms of support and welfare. Southwark Circle (www.southwarkcircle.org.uk) extends this idea with local Neighbourhood Helpers and a social network for teaching, learning and sharing. However, it should be recognised that models like this may require a relatively large amount of investment to activate network activities.

Mentoring and raising aspirations

Mentoring programmes make strong use of social networks to provide befriending and role model support especially for disadvantaged children and young people. For over thirty years, 100 Black Men 'chapters' across the US have provided mentoring, educational, anti-violence and economic

development programmes aimed at addressing the persisting disadvantage of pupils from minority ethnic groups in the educational system, those excluded from school, and minority ethnic group disadvantage in the labour market. There are now 100 Black Men chapters active in a number of major cities in the UK.

These kind of mentoring schemes focus on personal and skills development as a means of addressing poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. Recent years have also seen the adoption of mentoring, often as in-house 'peer mentoring' arrangements in universities, blue-chip corporations and some public sector bodies.

Business peer mentoring has also become increasingly fashionable in virtually all parts of industry, but especially in the business development world – for example, with Chambers of Commerce and related services. As well as reflecting an appetite for peer support as a means of sharing skills and expertise and improving business performance (whether for those already in business, or for would-be entrepreneurs, particularly from groups under-represented in business), it is also likely that peer mentoring at least – to some degree – indicates providers' efforts to identify successful but less costly business support services. This has become increasingly necessary in the current climate of public spending cuts and following the closure of the Regional Development Agencies, previously key funders of business support and development services.

Mutual support and comfort

There is an extensive body of research that examines the role of social networks amongst older people in particular. Pensioner poverty and the diminishing of networks that tends to happen as a consequence of ageing contribute directly to social exclusion, which is especially relevant in terms of elderly care, emotional support, and well-being (Hoff, 2008). And as Patsios (2006) has observed, '…there is one group of pensioners which should be the focus of any comprehensive policy aimed at alleviating social hardships: poor single pensioners who are not able to participate because they lack a social network and/or are in poor health. Arguably, among pensioners, these are the most socially deprived and excluded.'

Social networks also help many others who are living in or at risk of poverty, helping them, at different stages of their life, to access things like information about benefits (via 'weaker bonds' with 'looser' contacts) through to childcare and emotional support (from family and friends via 'stronger bonds') (Cattell, 2001). Some of these bonds and linkages can be improved. In New Cross Gate, south-east London, for example, the RSA has drawn up a detailed map of the neighbourhood's social networks in order to identify the individuals and places that can link people up to each other. It believes that this will allow more isolated individuals to benefit from other residents' connections (Williams, 2010).

Collective action and campaigning

Social networks – and especially networks facilitated by online social media – have an increasingly dominant role in activism and campaigning.

For example, the use of social networking to co-ordinate Obama's successful presidential campaign is well known (Carr, 2008). Make Poverty History's Campaign for the G8 summit reached some 800,000 activists online and 500,000 signed up to an email list (Leadbeater, 2007).

More recently, the growing student movement against tuition fee increases and UK Uncut, the broad coalition of activists opposing government public spending cuts and austerity measures, have used social networking and social media to reach out to new supporters, widening their campaigning to include issues such as corporate tax avoidance and broader issues to do with 'marketisation' and privatisation (English Islam Times, 2010).

Shirky (2010) argues that new social media and social networking technology is creating a 'cognitive surplus' – an increase in 'thought power' and collective creativity – which massively increases and accelerates the 'leverage' that can be applied to social problems in the form of campaigning or activism.

Do social networks address poverty?

The discussion above demonstrates some of the clear and diverse benefits that social networks bring to a wide range of people. But while all of this may be positive, it does not tell us about the relative value of using social networks as a way of addressing poverty. This is because for some people, social networks may well provide a way out of poverty – but for others, they may offer, at best, only a temporary mitigation of its worst effects. What implications does this have for 'using' social networks to address poverty? How many 'eggs' should be put into this particular 'policy basket'?

There are two key questions that help us to start to consider this. Firstly, what role do social networks play in addressing poverty? And secondly, can anything be done to change or make social networks more accessible to those in or at risk of poverty?

How do social networks address poverty?

From the examples above, there are three main ways that social networks can address poverty:

- They can enable the sharing of resources (time, expertise, support) and information (job opportunities, benefits advice, influence).

- They can provide mutual support and opportunities to learn or develop skills (support to start a business, for example).

- They can create strength in numbers and enable collective action or voluntary effort (improving a local area, for example, or social campaigning, or ensuring a voice in local affairs).

A virtue of social networks often covered in the research is that creating the right kinds of 'weak ties' can help people gain access to work and other mainstream opportunities. The potential of social networks to provide access to employment opportunities will become an increasingly important issue as the current austerity measures begin to impact on the wider economy and result in mounting redundancies.

Yet employment on its own does not necessarily offer a sustainable route out of poverty if job security and low pay (issues related largely to the economic climate and labour market supply and demand) are not also addressed. For many – around one-fifth of those in poverty – their poverty is recurrent (Tomlinson and Walker, 2010). The type of work that people who are unemployed or in low-paid jobs access through informal social networks is often low quality – poorly paid, insecure, offering little opportunity for progression. It is very difficult to move from these kinds of jobs to the more secure, better-paid jobs that do give an opportunity to progress. Creating social networks that lead people towards better quality work could be a very positive step, but there is little evidence on how to do it. Cuts to working tax

credit and childcare support are also likely to make the challenges faced by working families even harder to deal with.

Social networks may also help to ameliorate the impact of poverty by improving access to other types of 'social assets' like childcare or neighbours who will look after your property. Yet, as Saegert points out, these are collective assets that can't be 'owned' by individuals, instead they help people to make the most effective use of the 'human capital and household financial resources' they do have. Such social assets are 'not an alternative to providing greater financial resources and public services to poor communities' (Saegert *et al.,* 2001).

This health warning about seeking to utilise social networks as a key response to poverty reflects a more fundamental point – the need for poverty prevention strategies to deal with the underlying causes of poverty. And this is something not generally evident in the examples of social networks in action described above. To address the causes of poverty, social networks would need to be able to effect wider changes in resource distribution across society – not only for those living in poverty. And even assuming they had the power to do this, wider society remains largely hostile to notions of redistribution – a persisting belief that 'elitism is efficient, exclusion necessary, prejudice natural, greed good, and despair inevitable' (Dorling, 2010a).

Can social networks be made more accessible?

But if a kind of 'network poverty' is known to exist, and some people's quality of life and opportunities are reduced by having insufficient involvement in social networks, this should prompt us to ask whether social networks can be made more accessible – and also, at least by inference, whether government has a role in fostering social networks where they are weak or eroded.

This is problematic because social networks are not inherently inclusive and many cannot be made more accessible. It is widely documented, for instance, that many influential social networks are not predicated on equality of opportunity. Tilly (1999) describes the important role networks play in transmitting and sustaining power relations, characterising this as 'exploitation' and 'opportunity hoarding' (in relation to labour market opportunities, for example, or other forms of social influence). Networks, he says, rely on their exclusivity in order to create useful monopolies and do not necessarily create equal benefits for all of their participants.

Also, class differences are observable not just in the composition of people's social networks, but also to some extent in people's behaviour within social networks. One US study (Horvat *et al.,* 2003), for example, found that middle class parents in parent-school networks were more likely to react collectively in response to problems their pupils may be having with the school, while working class and poor parents were more likely to react along family and kinship lines. The middle class parents were also more able to draw on wider contacts to mobilise the information, expertise, or authority needed to contest the judgments of school officials.

Whether government has a role to play in supporting or indeed creating social networks is not extensively explored in the literature, but the inadvertent impact that policy interventions can have – for both good and bad – on social networks is a key issue. One example is that of job training programmes. Typically, job training and advice programmes bring unemployed people into contact only with other unemployed people, and any social networking opportunities that might result in producing employment prospects are consequently minimal. Moreover, few job training programmes impart the kinds of skills that people need to build valuable networks of weak ties (such as those gained via interaction with potential employers). This is just one example of the way that well-intentioned policy can inadvertently damage or reduce social network opportunities (Perri 6, 1997; Gallie, 1994).

A further example is the way that funding under the previous government (and indeed successive governments prior to that) was used to encourage and support the formation of networks of BME voluntary and community groups. Ostensibly this was intended to provide BME-led organisations and the communities they serve with a stronger voice in decision-making and policy, but arguably it served primarily to emphasise 'BME identity' over and above other things (e.g. poverty and unemployment). This reduced the likelihood that BME organisations would form useful working alliances with other groups – such as gender or disability equality groups – that are also working to address the systemic reasons for poverty and inequality in society. Requiring networks to deliver outcomes and targets closely linked to public policy also, to some degree, hampered the independent development of the sector (Afridi and Warmington, 2009). Perhaps there is no substitute for the type of real connectedness and motivation that is evident when people organise with a particular cause in mind (Gladwell, 2010).

Taking full advantage of the opportunities that social networks might create may also be problematical for those who lack other resources – personal skills, finance, the ability to attend a distant job interview in a decent suit. The transaction costs of utilising network opportunities therefore differ from person to person, and in this regard it may be the case that social networks best assist those who are already well-equipped to help themselves. While this may well be in line with emerging Coalition Government 'Big Society' ideas, whether it is a successful recipe for equality and greater social justice is another matter entirely. People may be offered opportunities, but they do not all start from the same place, and additional training or financial support may be required in order to enable some to capitalise on such opportunities.

But network participation can limit or modify individuals' behaviour in other ways too – by reducing personal autonomy. Sen (2006) cites the example of the newly-arrived immigrant woman who relies heavily on her family and friend-based networks for support and social protection, but is assigned a particular gender role within those networks and is consequently unable to benefit from the free education that her new country offers. Despite important developments in understanding the level of 'autonomy' people have when they face poverty and disadvantage (Vizard *et al.,* 2010), the role of social

networks in shaping or limiting that autonomy remains an important yet relatively unexplored avenue of study, as does the degree to which network members feel they have individual agency to shape the direction of their network and use it for their benefit.

Social networks also have the potential to normalise low expectations and reinforce negative, socially damaging behaviours as well as positive 'pro-social' behaviours. Even Putnam has noted that social capital has a 'dark side' (Putnam, 2003). For example, those without adequate financial resources to buy things – especially but by no means solely the young – may feel pressure to engage in alternative consumptive activity (often using credit at astronomical levels of interest), or to compensate for their lack of purchasing power by taking others' possessions (Miles, Cliff and Burr, 1998).

In some circumstances, social networks may also impose costs on other members of the community. Research into drug misuse, for instance (May *et al.*, 2005; Shaw *et al.*, 2007), indicates that while drug dealing markets form readily in fragmented communities where social capital is weak or non-existent, they can also form in communities where family and social ties are strong. In the former case, they develop as a consequence of neglect and inertia; but in the latter, they develop because strong social networks can also result in a form of 'collective socialisation' in which negative or anti-social behaviours become not merely tolerated but the norm.

Improving the ability of people to use social networks to their full effect will require training, financial support, a greater understanding of the 'autonomy' people have within networks and a range of investments that have thus far been associated with activities of the welfare state. There is no short cut or substitute to this kind of investment that we have identified. Helping individuals to break into social networks that have hitherto remained exclusive may be beyond the reach of government entirely. Some of those networks rely on their exclusivity and have direct control over the use of resources that affect others in society. That does not make the need to limit the effect of the 'old boys' network' and the inequality it represents any less pressing. It just recognises the places public policy has not yet been able to reach.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Social networks, then, have an undeniable importance to personal and collective well-being. It is now widely recognised, for instance, that loneliness and a lack of social networks play a key part in determining personal outcomes, and contribute to positive mental health. Social isolation is a mounting problem, and recent research by the Cabinet Office found that around 2.9m people in Britain say that they lack someone to listen, someone to help in a crisis, someone to relax with, someone who appreciates them, or someone to count on to offer comfort (Cabinet Office, 2010).

And yet there is little consistent evidence to suggest that social networks offer a reliable means of lifting people out of poverty. It would be more accurate to summarise the situation as follows. Social networks help. There is ample evidence to indicate that the lives of some people are improved, and their financial and other hardships ameliorated, by the mutual support provided by social networks. Similarly, there is ample evidence to indicate that isolation and a lack of social networks for many represents an additional kind of impoverishment – 'arguably just as serious a problem as being poor in cash' (Young Foundation, 2009). But there is little evidence to suggest that poverty can be 'solved' by participation in social networks.

Nonetheless, in a period of unprecedented austerity, the potential that social networks have to provide practical and emotional support – support that helps people 'get by', that helps build coping strategies – is clearly vital.

When the Coalition Government first outlined its plans for the Big Society there was perhaps at least some agreement that the kinds of things suggested – more volunteering, helping your neighbour, improving the degree of power and control people have over decisions about public services, people taking a more active role in their local communities – was a good thing.

Yet over the last few months in particular, as the full scale and speed of the government's austerity measures and public service spending cuts has become apparent, there has been a marked shift in public attitudes. Many are now recognising that we have to have a Big Society because in many areas public services will be massively reduced or simply won't be there. There are some things – that if we want them – we will have to do ourselves.

The disproportionate impact of the government's spending cuts on women (Fawcett Society, 2010) and on the poorest in society – recent research estimates that the poorest will be hit thirteen times harder than the richest (Horton and Reed, 2010) – is well-documented. But the impact of current austerity measures – including the cutting or termination of many programmes under which social welfare services have previously been delivered, in many

cases by voluntary and community groups – on civil society and its organisations has received less coverage in the mainstream media.

The gravity of the situation was well-illustrated in a recent *Guardian* article by Polly Toynbee (2011). She estimates that so far the voluntary and community sector has lost sources of income totalling some £4.5bn. This is money that has previously helped pay for the delivery of local services, including children's centres, elderly visiting, youth work and family support. One youth centre she cites has already laid-off half its staff as 80 per cent of its funding – drawn from 48 different funding streams and programmes – has evaporated. At precisely the moment when mutual support and the potential of social networks assumes vital new significance, civil society – the very heart of the Big Society – is being eroded by the current mix of public spending cuts and laissez-faire economic and social policies pursued by the government.

And as the axe falls on local voluntary and community groups, there will be an inevitable impact on the social networks they have encouraged, helped build up and often provided a focal point for.

It is against this backdrop that any rethinking of the role and importance of social networks now needs to take place.

Recommendations

Social capital generated through social networks is not a substitute for financial resources – and by and large, it is only those with sufficient financial resources that think it is. Investment, then, is still required. Where social networks do help people in poverty, there is no short cut or substitute for the kind of state-funded investments that have helped people to capitalise on the social networks they do have (training, financial support and effective equality practice).

Similarly, where approaches to delivering state programmes have inadvertently damaged or eroded social networks they could be improved. Service users haven't necessarily challenged this when it happens, partly because they have come to expect it. It is reinforced by our society that remains class-based. Yet take the example of the Government's new integrated welfare to work programme. Would it not be useful to assess providers of those services in terms of whether they had helped people to build and use informal contacts so that they could more easily secure jobs (rather than placing unemployed people only in touch with other unemployed people)?

Introduction of a universal benefit credit also offers opportunities. The benefit system has historically encouraged unemployed people to seek work through largely formal support mechanisms (job centres, vocational training). This is despite the fact that many who do find work do so through informal contacts and networks. A mixture of support to access formal and informal routes to employment, the kinds of approaches pursued by Community Links

(described above) may help to avoid doing inadvertent damage to social networks too.

Yet these examples of relatively minor adjustments to public policy and service delivery somewhat pale into insignificance when set against the impact that public spending cuts and the slashing of benefits have on those for whom the welfare state is most necessary.

This will be felt most heavily by the poor. Social mobility is already reduced as a direct result of income inequality in our society. Poorer people simply can't catch up at the rate required partly because the richer keep getting richer. Large-scale structural interventions and changes in our values and beliefs are required if we are to address the causes of recurrent poverty and inequality in society. Yet a frank and open discussion about the re-distribution of those resources we do have as a society seems far from likely given the current economic and political climate. This is a missed opportunity. That discussion is perhaps more pressing than ever.

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