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**Volunteering for a Job:  
Converting Social Capital into Paid  
Employment**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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in Sociology  
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## **Abstract**

The study explores the extent to which the environment of voluntary associations promotes the development of social capital. Moreover, it asks about the extent to which an individual can convert the social capital they have developed in this environment into economic capital, via the labour market. Social capital is primarily concerned with the resources embedded in social relationships, and how individuals can access and use them.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to enquire into the experiences of volunteers affiliated to voluntary associations based in West Auckland. The findings indicate there is no simple causal relationship between an individual's voluntary activities, and the level and value of social capital they can accrue from them. Nevertheless, the findings do suggest that the social capital that is developed through voluntary activity can influence an individual's labour market outcomes.

The research reported here indicates that labour market information is not equitably distributed through society. The study suggests that social policy can help bring this information to excluded groups. Targeted government support of the voluntary sector, aimed at providing opportunities for marginalised or minority groups to develop social capital, is one important option available to government to achieve this goal.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

'It isn't what you know, but who you know'. This old truism encapsulates much of the meaning of the concept of social capital. Indeed, this thesis inquires into how the labour market outcomes of volunteers might be affected through 'getting to know' others. The truism is a simplification of the concept, of course. Social capital is primarily concerned with the resources embedded in social relationships, and how individuals can access and use them. As noted by Field (2003:44), the greatest value of social capital analysis lies in its 'interest in the pay-offs that arise from our relationships'.

One such 'pay-off' for an individual may occur through an ability to use their social capital to further their prospects in the labour market. A number of studies have shown that friends, acquaintances or relatives can offer important pathways to employment. Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999) note that a study in New Zealand found 55 percent of the participants had sourced their most recent job entirely through personal network mechanisms (as cited in Dupuis, Inkson, & McLaren, 2004). A recent study indicated that 40 to 50 percent of jobs are found in this way in the United States (Mouw, 2003).

Social relationships, developed in voluntary associations, may provide an individual with personal networks, and consequently social capital, that can influence their labour market outcomes. That local and/or central government may be able to facilitate this social capital development is of central interest to this thesis.

## 1.1 Objectives

The study focuses on the experiences of volunteers who are affiliated to voluntary associations based in the region administered by Waitakere City Council (to be referred to as 'West Auckland').

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore the extent to which voluntary associations provide an environment conducive to the development of social capital;
2. Explore the extent to which an individual can convert the social capital they have developed in this environment into economic capital, via the labour market;
3. Consider how government can actively facilitate this process through policy mechanisms.

The research is limited to a small sample, and it is restricted to participants who volunteer within one geographical region. The results cannot be considered indicative of the characteristics of the national population of volunteers. Nevertheless, the study offers a modest contribution to knowledge about the relationships between social capital developed in the voluntary sector and the labour market, and the implications for policymakers of them.

## **1.2 Overview of the Study**

To achieve the objectives of the study, Chapter Two identifies key debates within the literature on social capital. The discourse of social capital can be divided into two distinct perspectives, according to whether profit is attributed at the individual or collective level. Social capital is employed at the individual level in this research, with a particular focus on its heuristic utility. Pierre Bourdieu's (1983; 1997) seminal work on the concept is drawn on in support of this position. His notion that social capital can be converted into economic capital is central to the idea that social capital developed through volunteering can lead to paid employment.

The debate then considers the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital is socially inclusive and encapsulates relations between groups in the wider society. Bonding social capital is socially exclusive and concerned with social relations within groups. The networks in the community available to an individual through

their bridging social capital make it more likely to benefit their labour market opportunities than bonding social capital.

The same field of debate also addresses connections between the economy and social capital. The premise that social capital can be converted to economic capital links the concept to the political economy.

Finally, the discourse of social capital raises questions about the implications of cultural identity for the attribution of profit, of access to bridging and bonding social capital, and regarding groups' positions within the economy. Broadly, it suggests that these dynamics vary between cultural groups. The implications of cultural differences for policymakers are canvassed in the present research, with a particular focus on the role of the Treaty of Waitangi.

The relationships between social capital, voluntary activity, and the labour market are considered in Chapter Three. Voluntary associations are identified as an important site for the development of social capital. However, social capital development will vary according to the different characteristics of volunteers and the voluntary associations they are involved with, as they are not all alike. Social capital, through personal networks, plays a key role in the dissemination of labour market information. Pathways to employment from the social capital that is developed through volunteering are considered. The chapter then discusses the politics, and policy issues, arising from the social capital discourse.

Chapter Four develops the research methodology. The rationale is outlined for using qualitative and quantitative techniques in the study of social capital, within a broadly constructivist paradigm. In describing the methodology for the qualitative interviews, a set of themes is identified that emerged from both the qualitative fieldwork and the critical review of the literature. These themes informed the development of a set of indicators. The indicators are designed to explore how social capital is developed through volunteering, the relationship between social capital and the labour market, and the relation between social capital and the role of government. The indicators were used to develop a telephone survey

questionnaire. In discussing the construction and implementation of the survey, the choice of participants and the rationale and methodology for their selection are explained.

The findings from the research are canvassed in Chapters Five and Six. Chapter Five concentrates on the development of social capital in the voluntary sector. The findings from the fieldwork focus on how the participants developed their bridging social capital through their voluntary activities, and also on the quality of their social capital. The levels of trust found amongst them are used as a further indicator of social capital. Chapter Six asks about the role of social capital in finding employment. It considers the influence of contacts, networks, and social and cultural skills, developed in a voluntary environment, on labour market outcomes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the government and voluntary sectors can work together. Possibilities for the development of social policies that draw on social capital are suggested. The views of the participants in the study on government involvement in the voluntary sector are considered alongside these suggestions.

Finally, Chapter Seven draws the conclusions together, merging the conceptual foundations of the thesis with the findings from the fieldwork.