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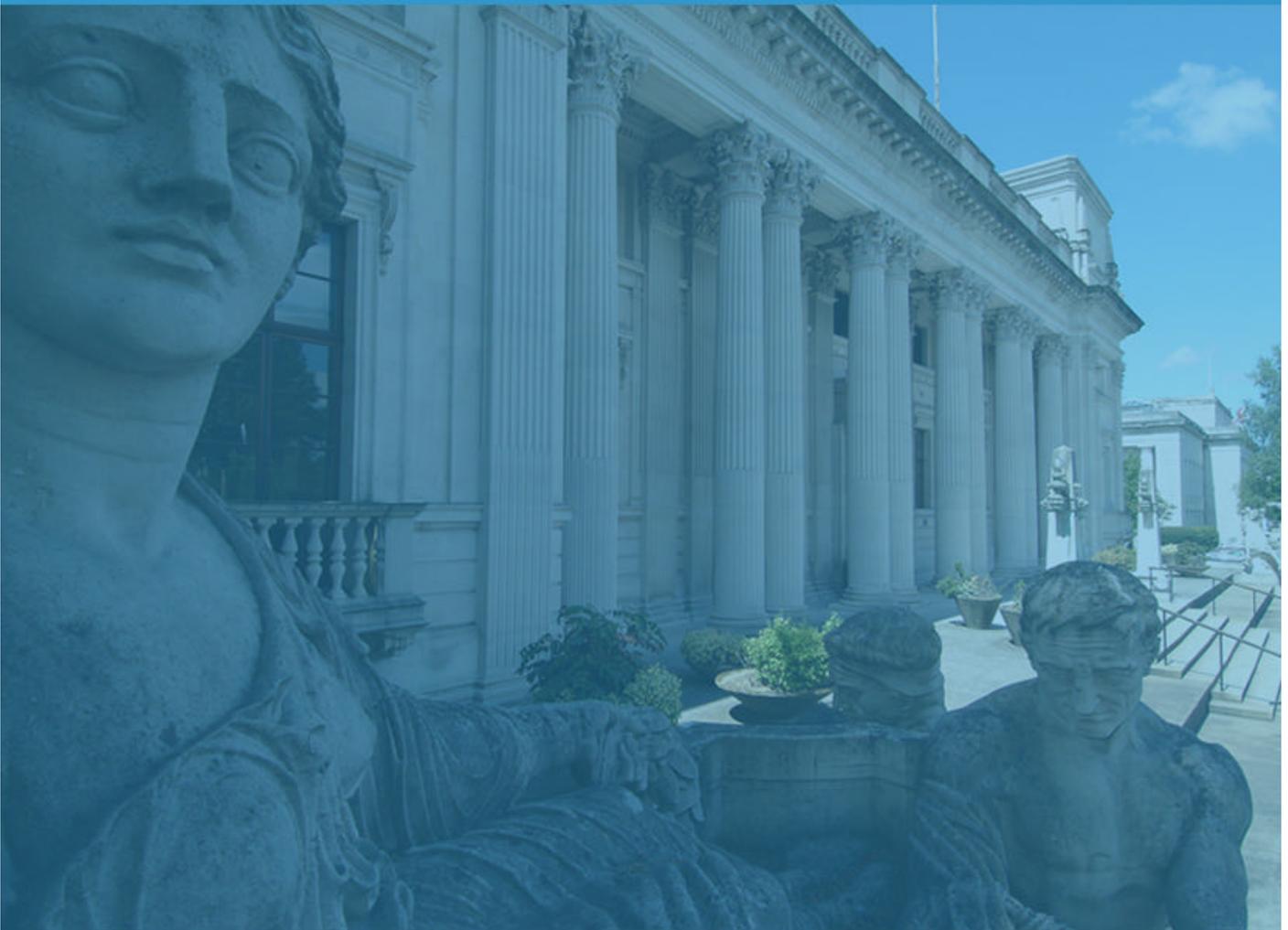
Working Paper 146: The Centrality of Social Capital - Concepts of Community in the Era of the Big Society

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The Centrality of Social Capital: Concepts of Community in the Era of the Big Society

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Abstract:

Current political agendas are focussed on empowering communities through localism and devolution, as well as encouraging civic activism, suggesting that strong communities are central to the solution for mending 'broken Britain'. However, little has been made of the theoretical concepts which are used to underpin this approach. This paper stems from a small scoping study exploring a number of theoretical concepts related to community, noting the historical context of the development of concepts and changes in their popularity. The paper delineates several of the concepts which are currently popular, exploring their connections to one another. The review highlights the continuing centrality of social capital to discussions of healthy, connected communities.

The Conservative, and subsequently coalition government, Big Society agenda aims to empower communities through localism and devolution, transferring power from central to local government, as well as encouraging civic activism, supporting co-operatives and mutualism (Cabinet Office, 2010). Many of the terms used in support of this agenda, and the Labour party's alternatively branded 'good society' approach, unreflexively position strong communities as central to the solution for mending 'broken Britain' (Grice 2010), part of which involves 'disrupting radicalisers' (Home Office news release, 2008). However, there are tensions underlying the UK government's neo-communitarian strategy of using third sector organisations to provide 'professional' and cost-effective welfare services whilst also expecting such organisations to contribute to the reinvigoration of civil society by fostering the development of social capital and citizenship (Fyfe 2005). Aside from such criticisms that suggest the Big Society and similar concepts are a guise for getting individuals to provide

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public services for free in an age of austerity (McCabe 2010) for discussion see (Coote 2010), little has been made of the concepts underpinning this approach. Through an analysis of popular community concepts and the linkages between them (see diagram), this paper seeks to address this issue.

This small scoping study explored a number of theoretical concepts related to community, noting the historical context of the development of concepts and changes in their popularity. In reading the relevant literature for each concept, notes were made of any links or differences from other concepts. Exploring the synergies between concepts illustrates how some have become increasingly popular since the financial crisis and recent political changes, with greater emphasis on community self-reliance and responsibility. However, the notion of social capital has proved popular across the political spectrum. Social capital was mentioned in relation to the majority of other concepts, as indicated in the diagram below, e.g. being created through resilient and adaptive communities, or being at the heart of social action. (Lynch, Due *et al.* 2000) suggest that those on the political right see social capital as an opportunity to argue for a withdrawal of the state from welfare and social provisions, whilst those more towards the left maintain that state support is crucial to the accumulation of social capital (Baum 1999). This division is evident in recent political rhetoric. For example in his 'responsibility speech' Ed Miliband argued that 'those ties which bind us together have become frayed' due to some people's lack of responsibility to one another as community members, which has arisen through the 'new inequality' between the very rich and the squeezed middle. This 'Blue Labour' movement emphasises the importance of communities taking responsibility for their own lives, although critiques coalition government funding withdrawals for undermining volunteerism (Miliband 2011). The coalition government Big Society ethos suggests community involvement creates self-reliance, which helps to build a stronger, more resilient society rather than one overly reliant on state support. In reference to social action, the Conservative Party website states:

> *'We believe that there is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state. And the best way to demonstrate this is through Social Action rather than just words. Individuals across the country make fantastic contributions to their communities through small-scale, local voluntary action. Our aim is to emulate their example by*

setting up, learning from and supporting Social Action projects to help transform struggling communities.'

It is in light of this current political context that related concepts will be explored in this paper.

Diagram – Community concepts and links:
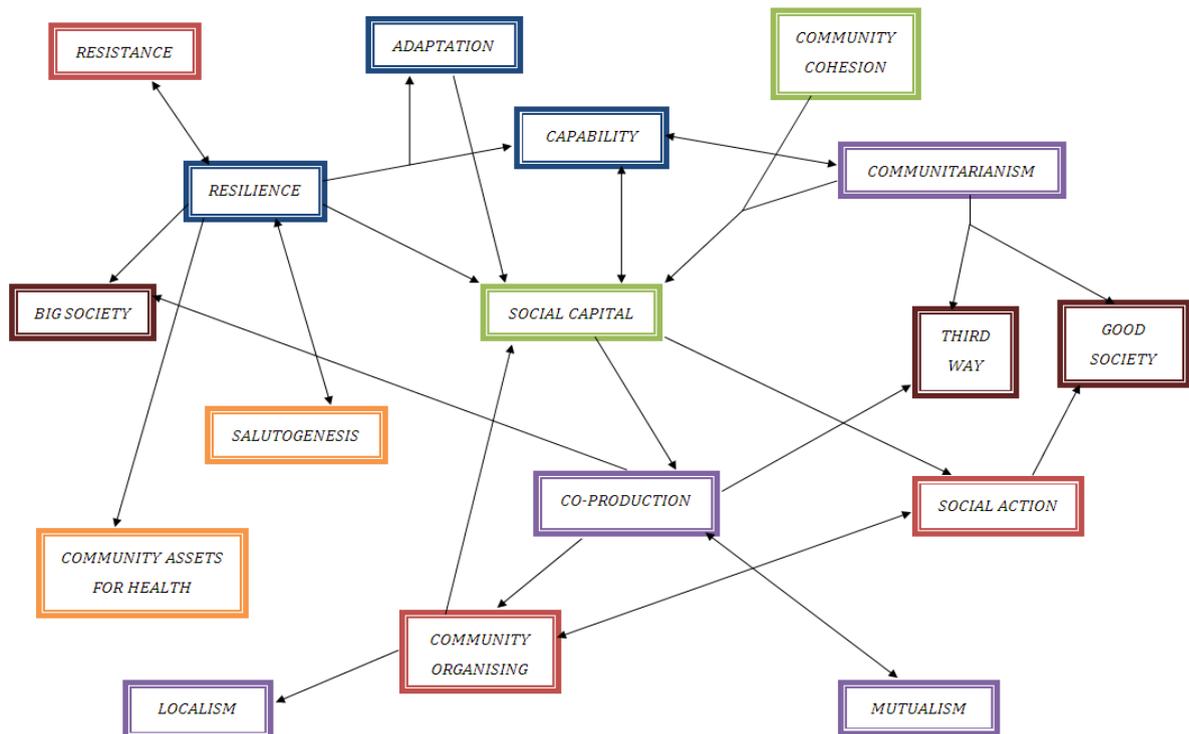
This diagram demonstrates the links between concepts which emerged from the literature. Whilst some have proposed causal relationships, the diagram does not represent a logic model but a map of how authors have linked concepts in a more narrative way. As the diagram illustrates, central to many community concepts is the notion of social capital. Communities with high levels of social capital are seen as more capable, adaptive and resilient, whilst emphasis on civic participation and social trust indicate links with social cohesion and communitarian approaches.

Social capital refers to the values that people hold and the resources that they can access, which both result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and

relationships (Edwards, Franklin *et al.* 2003). The central premise of social capital is that social networks are a valuable asset (Field 2003). Recent writings have extended the concept of social capital from an individual asset to a feature of communities, even nations. In contrast to the focus on individuals in the work of Bordieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000) is more concerned with social capital as a feature of communities. His approach, which has also been described as communitarianist, calls attention to the notion of civic virtue, which is most powerful when embedded in a network of reciprocal social relations. Putnam is pessimistic about contemporary society, arguing that there has been a decline in civic life, associated with individualisation. It is not hard to see why his 'bowling alone' thesis and emphasis on local communities as the way to reviving civic engagement has gained popularity with the current government, which seeks to remedy 'broken Britain' partly through increased localism and devolution (A Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill, (2011). However, the Big Society agenda remains England-focussed, not encompassing the devolved nations of Wales or Scotland. Whilst some have described England as more pro-active in relation to community development (Aiken and Cairns 2008), a paper by the Hansard Society (2011) based on Ipsos MORI research delineates some of the localist differences between England and other parts of the UK:

> '*Those in Wales are slightly more interested in how things work in their local area (75% compared to 69% in Great Britain as a whole) but express a lower level of knowledge than those in Great Britain as a whole (37% to 46%). Three fifths (60%) of those in Wales feel that things in their local area could be improved, compared to 46% in Great Britain as a whole. The likelihood of volunteering in every activity mentioned in the Audit is consistently lower in Scotland than in Great Britain as a whole, but broadly similar in Wales and Great Britain.*'

(Hansard-Society 2011)

Whilst some Welsh conservatives have called for Wales to embrace the Big Society vision (Isherwood 2011), other MPs have criticised the vision as cover for a smaller state (Livingstone 2010; Smith 2011).

There are other reasons why social capital may currently be popular in community policy discourse; it draws attention to the benefits of a form of capital which is not financial and can be achieved with little government intervention during a time of recession, whilst it also evokes nostalgic notions of community connectedness by emphasising the importance of relations between people (Arneil 2007; Franklin 2007).

One way in which social capital is arguably generated is via community organising, a concept and practice currently popular with both the coalition government and Labour party. The premise of community organising is delineated on the Citizens UK website – a prominent UK organisation advocating community organising – as communities coming together '*to compel public authorities and businesses to respond to the needs of ordinary people. It identifies and trains leaders in diverse communities, bringing them together to voice their needs and it organises campaigns to ensure that these needs are met. Barack Obama worked as a Community Organiser in Chicago in his twenties and never forgot the lessons he learned there.*' As this extract indicates, community organising has gained in prominence over the last few years in light of Barack Obama's experience of working as a community organiser in Chicago, where he received training in the Alinsky approach. Some UK universities now offer courses in community organising in response to this increase in popularity (Davis 2010), one of which is delivered by Maurice Glassman, a prominent thinker behind the 'Blue Labour' movement. Both government and opposition have made commitments to train community organisers to carry out the Big/Good society agenda (King, Roberts *et al.* 2010; Stratton 2010).

Much like social action, community organising is about people in communities coming together into an organisation that acts in their self-interest. There have been some criticisms of this approach given founder Saul Alinsky's radical ethos, which references community organisations as 'conflict groups' dedicated to an 'eternal war' and asserting that power must be 'taken' (Alinsky 1946). However, whilst Cameron references the Alinsky model, his vision is not for community organisers to oppose the power of the state but to manage the redistribution of these powers, therefore the focus is on greater capacity building with emphasis on the transition of power from state to community (King, Roberts *et al.* 2010).

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Generating social capital through community organising has been suggested as one way of making communities more resilient. Whilst the term resilience has been used for some time in relation to both engineering and technology studies and child psychology, it has recently gained popularity in relation to community research. (Norris, Stevens *et al.* 2008) define community resilience as '*a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of function and adaptation after a disturbance'* which (Wickes, Zahnow *et al.* 2010) suggest most saliently captures understandings of community resilience across the literature. Their own definition of community resilience is '*a complex, multilayered process through which communities demonstrate a capacity to withstand and respond positively to stress or change.'* The emphasis here is on a dynamic conceptualisation of resilience which acknowledges that communities adapt to change over time (Norris, Stevens *et al.* 2008). It has also been argued that the capacity of local communities to minimise adverse health effects through adaptation, in relation to climate change for example, is in part a function of social capital (Ebi and Semenza 2008)

Research suggests that community resilience does not come from government but the wider ability of social systems to self-organise, adapt and learn (Jones and Mean 2010). Indeed lay sources of support appear to be much more prominent in accounts of resilience than professional sources or formal agencies (Stewart, Reid *et al.* 1999). As such, community resilience may be more about institutions and organisations creating the necessary framework for action and allowing community resilience to emerge and develop over time rather than developing specific plans (Edwards 2009). This relates to current political emphasis on self-reliance and community responsibility. The characteristics of resilient communities identified in the literature incorporate core dimensions of social capital: such as the centrality of networks and social relationships (connections for groups to work collaboratively) and norms of trust and reciprocity (essential for networks and collaboration to exist). Social capital therefore represents an important theoretical model for understanding community resilience (Wickes, Zahnow *et al.* 2010).

Most of these concepts are portrayed relatively narrowly, uncritically accepting notions of community as positive and overlooking potentially negative aspects of community life. One

area in which this continues to be the case, particularly in relation to social capital, is public health (Muntaner *et al.* 2008). It has been suggested that engaging citizens in co-producing health and wellbeing can help services tackle health inequalities by improving connections with less advantaged groups and by shaping provision to better meet community needs (South, Branney et al. 2010). However, as Baum (1999:195) notes: '*Some of the literature on social capital and health presents a romantic view of community and assumes that close-knit communities are necessarily healthy. However it is possible that they can be exclusionary and distrustful of outsiders, and may not be healthy for those who are not part of them or those within them who disagree with the majority*'. The concept of social capital focuses attention on the positive consequences of sociability while putting aside its less attractive features e.g. exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms (demands for conformity), and downward levelling norms e.g. situations where group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society (Portes 1998; Bowen 2009). Navarro (2002) suggests that Putnam's communitarian approach to social capital has omitted power and politics; instead the emphasis is on ability to compete for resources, enhanced by the networks of which the individual is part. Navarro also critiques Putnam's lack of awareness that the absence of togetherness may be rooted in the existence of capitalism and competitiveness and their adverse effects in alienating and atomizing citizens, ignoring the issues of inequality and the exercise of power (Edwards *et al.*, 2003; Bowen, 2009). Portes concludes that the concept of social capital can be useful in relation to communities, although it needs more care and theoretical refinement than displayed so far. He argues that a systematic treatment of the concept must distinguish between the possessors of social capital, the sources of social capital and the resources themselves (Portes 1998).

The most frequently cited article in relation to social capital and public health is by (Kawachi, Kennedy *et al.* 1997), which found that high levels of social capital lessen the impact of income inequality on the health of populations (Moore, Sheill *et al.* 2005). The paper draws heavily on Putnam's approach, reflecting a trend in relation to public health; that it is the communitarian view of social capital espoused by Putnam which has been emphasised – focused on civic engagement, norms of reciprocity and trust – whilst the network definitions of Coleman and Bordieu are marginalised (Moore, Sheill *et al.* 2005).

Communitarianism has been critiqued in recent years for its failure to provide a satisfactory answer to 'the disintegration of social bonds in advanced societies' and suggesting *a one-dimensional world in which communities are blessed with a cohesion that is neither chosen, intended, nor lived by the people who produce them*' (Bowring 1997:97) yet this approach has had a meteoric rise in public health rhetoric (Lynch, Due *et al.* 2000). Much of the literature related to concepts such as social capital has shown that the ideas they espoused were not new, although may have been termed differently over time depending on social context. One of the challenges with several concepts is that they are used as multipurpose descriptors, failing to distinguish between different types and levels of connections among individuals (Muntaner *et al.* 2008). (Lynch, Due *et al.* 2000) argue that by limiting our understanding of social capital to population level analogue of social support for a person, we may miss an opportunity to use the concept of social capital as an heuristic and practical tool to advance a public health oriented policy agenda to reduce health inequalities.

These debates and developments are taking place within a context of increased emphasis on localism. A central aim of localism is to establish a more direct form of democracy, giving individuals and communities greater decision-making power in order to bridge the gap between people and politicians (Parvin 2009). Writing in the Guardian in the light of the MP's expenses scandal, David Cameron argued that people's anger, suspicion and cynicism were the result of having little control over the world around them. He advocated reversing 'social atomisation' by empowering people to work with their peers to solve common problems, and reversing 'infantilisation' by encouraging people to look to themselves and communities for answers instead of the state (Cameron 2009) thereby advocating localism. The 2010 Decentralisation and localism bill tackles a central idea of the Big Society; that the best decisions are made locally and that local communities are best placed to decide on what services they want and how to deliver them (Colenutt 2011).

One of the prominent criticisms of this version of localism is that it will create 'top down' community control, which will not be as effective as grassroots democracy (Hetherington 2010; Colenutt 2011). This has also been criticism levelled at Putnam's version of social capital and his emphasis on the local; that civic voluntarism was never predominantly local and never flourished apart from national government and politics. An emphasis on localism

also potentially raises challenges for minority groups; the centralisation of decision-making power protects minority groups from the tyranny of the majority, as what is right or wrong politically or morally may not always be consistent with what the local community thinks is right or wrong (Parvin 2009). In addition, a society in which citizens had a strong sense of place attachment and loyalty to their respective cities could be in conflict with any sense of common national purpose, or macro-cohesion (Forrest and Kearns 2001).

Many of the concerns about 'broken Britain' have focussed on perceptions of a decline in civic life, as suggested by Putnam. However, others have questioned this, proposing that civic life may just be 'churning' (Smith 2009), or that the 'pulling apart' of communities may be positive if it represents the continuing struggle for equality, recognition and the inclusion of women and minorities (Arneil 2007). It may also be the case that perceptions of decline are based on formal volunteering, overlooking the wealth of informal community activities which take place 'below the radar' and the practical barriers which prevent people from engaging in volunteering e.g. long hours and low wages (McCabe 2010). McCabe argues that such voluntary activities do not take place because of government or policy agendas but to meet basic human needs. Figures demonstrating decline also look robust when compared to data on public participation in the democratic process (Parvin 2009; McCabe 2010). However the motivations for volunteering are important to consider. Whilst some may primarily be motivated by self-interest (Hansard-Society 2011), for others being able to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society is one of the elementary freedoms which people have reason to value (Dreze and Sen 1995).

McCabe (2010:14) questions the ability of the Big Society agenda to restore community trust in politics if it becomes inexorably linked in people's minds with deficit reduction, the delivery of services on the cheap and the rolling back of the welfare state to a residual role where consumers with resources have more access to quality choices whilst services for the poor become poor services.

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