

A New Approach to the
Social Capital and the Social Networks
of Australian Families

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Table of Contents

<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Index of Tables</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Index of Figures</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Index of Plates</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Summary</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Declaration</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Perspectives on Families.....	2
1.2 Thesis Structure.....	18
Part I Theoretical and Analytic Instruments to Examine Family Social Networks and a Literature Review of Network Characteristics.....	22
Chapter 2: Social Capital – The Value of Connections.....	23
2.1 Defining Social Capital.....	24
The Evolution of the Social Capital Debate.....	24
The Emergence of the Term.....	25
Social Capital as a Concept.....	27
Social Capital as an Agenda.....	33
The Agenda Spreads.....	40
The Social Capital Explosion.....	44
Chapter 3: Social Capital as Resources.....	48
3.1 Shortfalls of Social Capital Theories.....	49
Problems in Conceptualising and Measuring Social Capital.....	49
Problems with Ownership.....	51
Comparability of Observations.....	53
The Dark Side of Social Capital.....	54
3.2 Lin’s Theory of Social Capital.....	55
Conceptualizing Social Capital.....	59
Chapter 4: Networks and Social Capital.....	64
4.1 Network Typologies.....	65
Formal vs. Informal Groupings of Interactions.....	65
Types of Ties.....	72
Distinctions within Networks.....	77
Criteria for Placing Networks into Typologies.....	79
4.2 Social Network Analysis.....	80
Development of Social Network Analysis.....	81
Criticisms of Social Network Analysis.....	92
4.3 Conclusions from Chapter Four.....	94
Chapter 5: Characteristics of Networks.....	95
5.1 Types of Network Participation.....	95
Social Participation in Networks.....	97
Community Participation in Networks.....	99
Civic Participation in Networks.....	103
Economic Participation in Networks.....	104
5.2 Embedded Network Location.....	109

	5.3	Independence as a Norm.....	113
		Norm of Reciprocity and the Link to Independence.....	117
		Conflicts in Networks.....	121
	5.4	Conclusions from Chapter Five.....	122
Part II		Research Procedures.....	124
Chapter 6:		Research Procedures.....	125
	6.1	Research Strategy.....	126
		Methodological Considerations.....	126
		The Strategy.....	128
	6.2	Data Collection and Analysis.....	132
		Considerations in Data Collection.....	133
		Interview Instrument.....	137
		Pilot Study.....	145
		The Sample.....	145
		Data Display.....	149
		Data Reduction.....	154
		Drawing Conclusions.....	157
	6.3	Network Characteristics.....	158
		Network Participation.....	159
		Embedded Locations of Networks.....	160
		The Norm of Independence.....	161
	6.4	Community Profiles.....	163
		Local Newspapers, Brochures and Websites.....	166
		Checklist of Neighbourhood Facilities.....	169
	6.5	Ethical Considerations.....	170
	6.6	Limitations of the Study.....	171
Part III		Typologies and Social Capital in this Study.....	173
Chapter 7:		Network Typologies in This Study.....	174
	7.1	Development of Network Typologies.....	175
	7.2	The Typologies in this Study.....	182
		The Heterogeneous Typology - Dancing to Many Tunes.....	184
		The Homogeneous Typology - Peas in a Pod.....	191
		The Balanced Typology - Six of One, Half a Dozen of the Other.....	197
		The Insular Typology - A Little Bit of Love.....	201
		The Truncated Typology - A Fractured Affair.....	205
	7.3	Summary of Typologies in this Study.....	207
Chapter 8:		Levels of Social Capital.....	210
	8.1	Social Capital in this Study.....	211
		Mobilized Social Capital.....	211
		Accessible Social Capital.....	218
	8.2	Levels of Social Capital in the Typologies.....	222
	8.3	Summary of Analysis.....	237
	8.4	Levels of Social Capital: Findings.....	239
Part IV		Factors that Constrain or Enhance Access to Social Capital.....	241
Chapter 9:		Participation and Social Capital.....	243
	9.1	Network Participation in this Study.....	244
		Participation in the Heterogeneous Typology.....	244
		Participation in the Homogeneous Typology.....	250

	Participation in the Balanced Typology.....	255
	Participation in the Insular Typology.....	259
	Participation in the Truncated Typology.....	263
Chapter 10:	9.2 Findings about Network Participation.....	266
	Location and Opportunity.....	268
	10.1 Locales in this Study.....	272
	Turrumurra/St. Ives Area of Sydney.....	273
	The Peninsula Area of Sydney.....	287
	The Hills Area of Sydney.....	301
	Hornsby Shire Area of Sydney.....	313
	10.2 Influence of Place on Social Networks and Social Capital.....	320
	10.3 Place-Based Connections and Social Capital by Typologies.....	324
Chapter 11:	Independence and Social Capital.....	330
	11.1 Independence as a Norm for Particular Families.....	333
	11.2 The Norms of Independence in Relations to the Norm of Reciprocity, and Conflicts in Networks.....	335
	Independence, Reciprocity, Conflicts and Social Capital in the Heterogeneous Typology.....	336
	Independence, Reciprocity, Conflicts and Social Capital in the Homogeneous and Balanced Typologies.....	341
	Independence, Reciprocity, Conflicts and Social Capital in the Insular and Truncated Typologies.....	348
	11.3 Summary of Independence and Social Capital.....	353
	11.4 Concluding Remarks on Independence.....	355
Chapter 12:	Conclusion: Family as an Active and Engaged Social Entity.....	357
Bibliography	365
Appendices:	Appendix 1 Advertisement for Participants for Research Study.....	392
	Appendix 2 Placements of Advertisements by Suburbs in Sydney.....	394
	Appendix 3 Summary of Codes Used in this Research.....	395
	Appendix 4 Legend for Sociograms.....	398
	Appendix 5 Scales for Coding.....	399
	Appendix 6 Publications Consulted to Develop Community Profiles.....	411
	Appendix 7 Websites Consulted in Development of Community Profiles.....	413
	Appendix 8 Final Codes Used in Newspaper and Website Study.....	414
	Appendix 9 Sample Letter of Consent.....	415
	Appendix 10 Network Occupations and Prestige Ratings Used in this Study.....	418
Glossary of Abbreviations, Technical Terms and Policies Used in this Thesis...		420

Index of Tables

Table 1.1	Percentages of Cohabiting Couples in Australia.....	3
Table 1.2	Marital Status of Australian Population 15 Years+ by Percentage, 1954-2001.....	5
Table 1.3	One-Parent Families (with dependent children) in Australia as Percentage of Family Types, 1976-2001.....	6
Table 4.1	Summary of Typologies used in Other Research.....	78
Table 6.1	Interview Instrument Section 1 - Demographics Details and Attitudes.....	138
Table 6.2	Interview Instrument Section 2 - Name Generator.....	140
Table 6.3	Interview Instrument Section 3 - Resource Generator.....	142
Table 6.4	Interview Instrument Section 4 - Position Generator.....	144
Table 6.5	Family Members Represented in this Study, their Occupations and Ages.....	148
Table 6.6	Checklist of Neighbourhood Facilities.....	169
Table 7.1	Criteria for Heterogeneous, Homogeneous and Balanced Typologies.....	177
Table 7.2	Summary of Three Criteria for Placing Each Network into a Typology.....	183
Table 7.3	Comparison of Heterogeneity in the Heterogeneous Typology	189
Table 7.4	Comparison of Heterogeneity in the Homogeneous Typology.	196
Table 7.5	Comparison of Heterogeneity in the Balanced Typology.....	199
Table 7.6	Comparison of Diversity in the Insular Typology.....	204
Table 8.1	Mobilized Resources Based on Claims by Participants of Ties through which Support was Received.....	216
Table 8.2	Number of Ties from which Support was Expected by Participants.....	220
Table 8.3	Occupational Access in this Study.....	221
Table 8.4	Total Mobilized Social Capital in the Duncan Network.....	231
Table 8.5	Total Social Capital in the Duncan Network (from Tables 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3).....	232
Table 8.6	Average Social Capital in each Typology.....	233
Table 10.1	Facilities and Services within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Turrumurra/St. Ives Area (Preset List of 29).....	275
Table 10.2	Advertised Community Associations and Events within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Turrumurra/St. Ives Area.....	276
Table 10.3	Comparison of BOSCAR 2004 Statistics which Cover the Turrumurra/St. Ives Area to Statistics for Sydney.....	277
Table 10.4	Facilities and Services within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Peninsula Area (Preset List of 29).....	289
Table 10.5	Advertised Community Associations and Events within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Peninsula Area.	291
Table 10.6	Comparison of BOSCAR 2004 Statistics for the Peninsula Area to Statistics for Sydney.....	292

Table 10.7	Facilities and Services within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Hills Area (Preset List of 29).....	302
Table 10.8	Advertised Community Associations and Events within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Hills Area.....	304
Table 10.9	Comparison of BOSCAR 2004 Statistics for the Hills Area to Statistics for Sydney.....	306
Table 10.10	Facilities and Services within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Hornsby Area (Preset List of 29)....	315
Table 10.11	Advertised Community Associations and Events within Five Kilometres of Each Participant's House in the Hornsby Area..	316
Table 10.12	Comparison Of BOSCAR 2004 Statistics which Cover the Hills Area to Statistics for Sydney.....	317
Table 10.13	Summary of Place-Based Connections and their Social Capital.....	324
Table 11.1	Total Support Reported as Provided to Network Members.....	346

Index of Figures

Figure 1.1	Proportion of Marriages Preceded by Cohabitation by Year of Marriage, Australia, pre 1960-2001.....	4
Figure 1.2	Population Growth by Age in Australia 2002-2007.....	8
Figure 3.1	Theoretical Propositions of Lin's Social Capital Theory.....	57
Figure 6.1	Model of this Study.....	131
Figure 6.2	Components of the Miles and Huberman Approach to Analysis.....	132
Figure 6.3	Diagram of Resources from this Study using Foa and Foa's (1974) Scale.....	151
Figure 6.4	Sociogram of the Hunter Network from this Study.....	152
Figure 6.5	Correlation Formula Used by Excel Correl.....	156
Figure 7.1	Summaries of Network Typologies in this Study.....	182
Figure 7.2	The Heterogeneous Typology in this Study.....	182
Figure 7.3	Sociogram of the Heterogeneous Archer Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	185
Figure 7.4	Sociogram of the Heterogeneous Grace Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	188
Figure 7.5	The Homogeneous Typology in this Study.....	190
Figure 7.6	Sociogram of the Homogeneous Oates Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	192
Figure 7.7	Sociogram of the Homogeneous Queen Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	194
Figure 7.8	The Balanced Typology in this Study.....	196
Figure 7.9	Sociogram of the Balanced Hunter Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	198
Figure 7.10	The Insular Typology in this Study.....	201
Figure 7.11	Sociogram of the Insular Farmer Network Showing Formal and Informal Groupings.....	203
Figure 7.12	The Truncated Typology in this Study.....	206
Figure 8.1a	Financial Support from the Duncan Network.....	224
Figure 8.1b	Inspiration from the Duncan Network.....	225
Figure 8.1c	Encouragement from the Duncan Network.....	226
Figure 8.1d	Emotional Support from the Duncan Network.....	227
Figure 8.1e	Practical Support from the Duncan Network.....	228
Figure 8.1f	Companionship from the Duncan Network.....	229
Figure 9.1	Sociogram of the Heterogeneous Archer Network Showing Types of Participation after Final Analysis.....	245
Figure 9.2	Sociogram of the Homogeneous Oates Network Showing Types of Participation after Final Analysis.....	251
Figure 9.3	Sociogram of the Balanced Logan Network Showing Types of Participation after Final Analysis.....	256
Figure 9.4	Sociogram of the Insular Erikson Network Showing Types of Participation after Final Analysis.....	260
Figure 9.5	Sociogram of the Truncated Ireland Network Showing Types of Participation after Final Analysis.....	264
Figure 10.1	Networks within Each Locale in this Study.....	272

Figure 10.2	Sociogram of the Heterogeneous Grace Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	279
Figure 10.3	Sociogram of the Truncated Player Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	281
Figure 10.4	Sociogram of the Homogeneous Oates Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	294
Figure 10.5	Sociogram of the Balanced Norris Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	296
Figure 10.6	Sociogram of the Heterogeneous Duncan Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	308
Figure 10.7	Sociogram of the Insular Erikson Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	310
Figure 10.8	Sociogram of the Truncated Ireland Network Displaying Local and Non-local Connections.....	318
Figure 11.1	Proposed Relationship between Norms of Independence, Reciprocity and Social Capital.....	331
Figure 11.2	Suggested Continuum to Show a Link between Attitudes towards Independence and Levels of Social Capital.....	334
Figure 11.3	Comparison of Norms of Independence to Levels of Social Capital, Based on Attitudes to Using Social Connections, Norms of Reciprocity and Conflicts,	353

Index of Plates

Plate 10.1	Mansion Style Home.....	273
Plate 10.2	St. Ives Shopping Village.....	273
Plate 10.3	St. Ives Mountain Bike Club.....	273
Plate 10.4	North Turrumurra Shops.....	273
Plate 10.5	St. Ives Jewish Community.....	273
Plate 10.6	North Turrumurra.....	273
Plate 10.7	Single Story Brick Home.....	273
Plate 10.8	Older Style Home.....	287
Plate 10.9	Manly Beach.....	287
Plate 10.10	Sailing off Narrabeen.....	287
Plate 10.11	Manly Corso.....	287
Plate 10.12	New Units and Apartments.....	287
Plate 10.13	New Double Story Residence.....	287
Plate 10.14	Netball at Curl Curl.....	287
Plate 10.15	Paul the Strawberry Man.....	300
Plate 10.16	Tree Planting at Fagan Park.....	300
Plate 10.17	Newer Double Story Home on Large Block.....	300
Plate 10.18	Galston Valley Railway.....	300
Plate 10.19	Galston Country Music Festival Awards.....	300
Plate 10.20	Newer Single Story Home on Large Block.....	300
Plate 10.21	Fibro Home on Large Block.....	300
Plate 10.22	Hornsby Train Station.....	313
Plate 10.23	Hornsby Girls High School.....	313
Plate 10.24	Hornsby Country Fair.....	313
Plate 10.25	Single Level Brick Home.....	313
Plate 10.26	Older Fibro Home.....	313
Plate 10.27	Park in Hornsby.....	313
Plate 10.28	Pacific Highway, Hornsby.....	313

Summary

The existence of families has long been seen as fundamental to the structure and health of a society. Nevertheless, current sociological thought sees family in terms of a 'haven', as a private, isolated unit, a place in which individual members can retreat from society. The reality of 'family' in today's Australian society does not fit this model, if it ever did. This thesis aims to provide a new approach to the family, one that sees family as active and engaged. It also argues that, as a result of its connected nature, this family is able to provide a type of value to its members. This value is conceived of as social capital. The ability of this family to generate social capital through its networks makes the family an interactive social entity, underpinning its position as part of the structure of society.

However, some social networks are more able to supply benefits than others. By exploring types of participation in terms of social, community, civic and economic participation, as well as formal and informal engagement, the thesis argues that while active participation is essential in generating benefits there are factors which can impinge on such participation. The effects of 'place' or the embedded locations of networks is undoubtedly important in bonding people within communities and acting as a bridge to others, however, the thesis finds that communities of interest generate more social capital. The thesis also argues that attitudes toward family independence or autonomy may compromise network exchange. Variations in the meaning of the norm of independence either emphasize the interdependency of society or highlight a definitive responsibility of the individual and family. In the former, the interdependency of society is emphasized. In the latter, network exchange is

compromised. Independence thus becomes an essential element in the measurement of social capital and a cultural dimension of why some social networks are better able to supply benefits.

Declaration

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled *A New Approach to the Social Capital and the Social Networks of Australian Families* has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of this thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: HE24OCT2003-D02637.

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