

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

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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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