

**"Networking through Loose and Strong Ties: An Australian Qualitative Study**

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### **Abstract**

Given the significant role attributed to community organisations by many social capital scholars, it is appropriate to investigate the dynamics of that process. In particular, Woolcott & Narayan (2001) have suggested that bridging and bonding are two different types of connections, whereby bridging is associated with loose ties across communities and bonding is associated with strong ties within a limited group. This qualitative study explores the loose and strong ties of 39 participants connected through community organisations *in rural and urban NSW*. The results suggest that loose and strong ties *are not synonymous with bridging and bonding*. In general loose and strong ties differ in degree rather than in kind and people prefer to bridge through their strong ties. The interesting exceptions were ties to professionals, which were highly trusted but defined as loose ties. It is suggested that a model for a high social capital society might be a chain of well-bonded groups each with strong links to some other groups.

**Key words:** Social capital, bonding, bridging, networking

Most of the early contributions to social capital theory attributed an important role to voluntary associations in producing social capital. Many draw on de Toqueville's (1961) observations that voluntary associations were the primary means for maintaining a healthy civil society in Nineteenth Century USA. Putnam (1993) attributed a central role in explaining why some parts of Italy were economically more successful than others to their possession of a rich civic culture. Voluntary associations were seen as constituting the networks, which were a central part of Putnam's widely-adopted definition of social capital; more precisely, they were the nodes of these networks.

It could well be argued that the non-profit or voluntary sector is the predominant locus for the generation of social capital. Indeed, some international comparative studies use rate of volunteering in community organisations as a proxy for social capital. There is some empirical support for the focus on community organisations. For example, Onyx & Bullen (2000) conducted a factor analytical study of social capital. A general social capital factor was identified which contained eight sub-scales. The sub-scale that contributed most strongly to the general factor was the Factor 'Community Connections', which related to people's involvement in community organisations. Also, Teorell (2000) found in his longitudinal study with a large Swedish sample, that membership in community organisations preceded the development of extensive friendship support networks, as well as political engagement, and not the other way round.

However, there have been relatively few studies that have engaged in detail with the relationship of community organisations and social capital. One example is Coleman's (1988) study of a local school community in which student outcomes were more strongly related to the school's embeddedness in the community than to the quality

of teaching or curriculum. The positive benefits of social capital were maximised when the parents of school friends are themselves in the same friendship network. The networks of friendship and participation are then dense, thus facilitating positive outcomes for the children and the community as a whole. Normative expectations and informal sanctions were more effective, thus encouraging conformity to community values and reduction in delinquency. Coleman, (1988) has argued, therefore, that the more closed the social community, the greater the development of social capital. Such a conceptualisation has implications for an open society. This is related to the traditional liberal objection to communitarianism, that it is potentially oppressive and authoritarian (Simons, 1996).

The present research engages with the meanings of networks formed by community organisations for the people within them and how these meanings affect social capital. In particular, it examines the nature of strong and loose connections and what can be achieved through them. The research interrogates the common supposition that strong and loose ties are synonymous with bonding and bridging.

### **Bridging and Bonding**

Recent discussions of social capital have begun to distinguish between “bonding” and “bridging” social capital (Woolcock and Narayan, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is usually characterised as having dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localised trust. It is consistent with Coleman’s (1988) research in which the effectiveness of community networks depended on close, intersecting, multi-functional ties. It is assumed then that bridging social capital is characterised by the weak ties described by

Grannoveter (1986), as well as a thin, impersonal trust of strangers. Woolcock and Narayan (2001) argue that while localised, bonding social capital operates as effective defensive strategies against poverty, the necessary condition for real economic development entails a shift to other, looser networks. Thus a shift from “getting by” to “getting ahead” entails a shift from bonding to bridging networks. Discussions of bonding and bridging to date suggest a model of society with cohesive well-bonded groups linked to each other by loose ties.

However, the concept of “bridging” in particular remains unexamined. There are at least three ways in which the concept appears to be used in discussions of social capital, and the three uses do not necessarily go together:

- To refer to relationships that cross demographic divides of class, age, ethnicity etc (Eg, Portes 1998 analysis of the problems of ethnic enclaves.)
- To refer to bridges across structural holes, or gaps between networks which are not necessarily of dissimilar people, but where there has hitherto been little connection. Such gaps may occur for example as a result of geographic distance. (Eg, Burt, 1998)
- To refer to the capacity to access resources such as information, knowledge, finance from sources external to the organisation or community in question. (Eg, Woolcott & Narayan, 2001)

In order to research the bonding versus bridging distinction, it is necessary to unpack the concepts further. Theoretically, they can be distinguished using the five elements of social capital identified by Onyx and Bullen (2000). Onyx & Bullen’s review

of the literature identified five main themes; networks, reciprocity, trust, shared norms and social agency. First, all uses of the concept refer to more or less dense interlocking networks of relationships between individuals and groups. People engage with others through a variety of lateral associations. These lateral associations tend to be multiplex, or draw simultaneously on a variety of quite different functional bases. People relate as friends and as citizens solving a community problem, and as mutual providers of material or informational support. Social capital cannot be generated from individuals acting by themselves. It depends on a proclivity for sociability, but a spontaneous sociability, a capacity to form new associations and to cooperate within the terms of reference they establish (Fukuyama, 1995). Bridging social capital would require a much larger, less dense network with far fewer multiplex relationships than bonding social capital.

Their second common theme is reciprocity. When referring to reciprocity many authors are unclear as to whether they mean the immediate and formally accounted exchange of the legal or business contract, or a looser combination of short term altruism and long term self interest. The latter is what de Toqueville (1961) called “self interest rightly understood”. The individual provides a service to others, or acts for the benefit of others at a personal cost but in the general expectation that this kindness will be returned at some undefined time in the future in case of need. It might be expected that for bridging social capital, the terms of the reciprocity need to be more obvious more immediate and more explicit than for bonding social capital.

Another common theme refers to trust. Trust entails a willingness to take risks in a social context based on a sense of confidence that others will respond as expected and

will act in mutually supportive ways, or at least that others do not intend harm. As Fukuyama defined it:

Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community. Those norms can be about deep “value” questions like the nature of God or justice, but they also encompass secular norms like professional standards and codes of behaviour. (Fukuyama, 1995, p26)

Distinctions among various types of trust are relevant to bridging and bonding. Uslaner (1997) found a three factor structure which distinguished particularised trust (friends and family), generalised trust (of strangers) and trust of government. Others have identified ‘thick trust’ and ‘thin trust’ (Newton, 1997). Hughes et al (1999) also finds a strong distinction between particularised and generalised trust. Bridging social capital is assumed to rely on generalised or “thin” trust whereas bonding relies on more particularised or “thick” trust. However it is unclear why less trust is required for what is presumed to be the more hazardous process of reaching outside normal networks.

Onyx and Bullen’s (2000) fourth theme is social norms. Putnam (1993) and Coleman (1988) both refer explicitly to social norms. Social norms provide a form of informal social control that obviate the necessity for more formal, institutionalised legal sanctions. Social norms are generally unwritten but commonly understood formula for both determining what patterns of behaviour are expected in a given social context, and for defining what forms of behaviour are valued or socially approved. Without strong norms rules have to be negotiated, agreed to, litigated and enforced, sometimes by coercive means, leading to expensive transaction costs (Fukuyama, 1995). Whereas

shared norms can be assumed with bonding social capital. However, the wider the social distance bridged the greater is the likelihood of a clash of norms. When the assumption of shared norms is misplaced, trust is threatened and social capital cannot develop. Bridging across social distances requires the exploration of norms and can only proceed if there is some basis of shared values, if the norms are sufficiently similar for the particular purposes of the connection.

Onyx and Bullen (2000) also argues a sense of collective efficacy within a social context is implicit throughout most discussions of social capital. It is a model of a positive inter-relationship between agency and social connection (Leonard, 1997). The development of social capital requires the active and willing engagement of citizens working together within a participative community. The way that bridging and bonding have been conceptualised suggests that bridging holds agency as the main focus and social connections are formed and maintained principally to increase agency. For bonding social capital, the priorities may be reversed. Social connections are important for a range of reasons that probably include personal identity, leisure, company etc. The importance of working together for shared goals may vary depending on the perceived advantages or needs. Bridging is therefore more instrumental than bonding.

From this analysis, bridging social capital is theorised to be associated with large, loose networks, relatively strict reciprocity, perhaps a thinner or different sort of trust, greater risk of norm violation, and more instrumentality. Bonding social capital is associated with dense, multiplex networks, long term reciprocity, thick trust, shared norms and less instrumentality.



A further conceptual issue is the extent of disjunction between bridging and bonding. When Woolcott and Narayan (2001) argue that a shift from “getting by” to “getting ahead” entails a shift from bonding to bridging networks, the shift implies that bonding ties need to be replaced by bridging ties. It is not just a matter of adding an extra layer of social capital to the bonded community. The argument is that the close, intersecting, multi-functional ties of the well-bonded community are detrimental to bridging to a wider arena. If this were the case it would be a very confronting issue for a poor community. Should a community that is just getting by with high levels of bonding social capital take the risk of decreasing its current social capital for the potential, but less certain economic gains of developing bridging social capital?

Despite the growing use of the conceptual distinction between bonding and bridging, the empirical evidence for its usefulness is somewhat scattered. Portes (1998) reviews the evidence for both positive and negative effects of social capital, in which he highlights the potential negative effect of norms that enforce conformity and may limit the capacity for individuals and groups to move across social boundaries, looking particularly at ethnic enclaves. Several large-scale surveys have established that strong communal ties can prevent different groups coming together for a common cause (Blomkvist, 2001; Swain 2000). Other indirect evidence comes from Burt’s (1997, 1998) studies of networking by managers. Although Burt does not distinguish between bonding and bridging, his view of social capital is consistent with bridging social capital rather than bonding social capital. Generally people with large networks will have more social capital than those with constrained networks. However size is not the only factor; how one is positioned can be even more important. Burt argues that most organisations have

“structural holes” or gaps in the communication channels between two parts of an organisation. A person who can network to bridge these holes accrues more social capital. Social capital is therefore “a function of the brokerage opportunities in a network.” Women managers, who appear to use more bonding than bridging social capital, do not fare as well on his (bridging) measure, nor gain the same promotional advantages.

### **The Research Aims:**

The literature suggests some important distinctions between bonding and bridging social capital. This research aimed to explore the concepts qualitatively. To do so, the differences between loose and strong ties within the networks formed by community organisations were explored

From the above discussion, it would be expected that strong ties would be characterised by multiplex relationships, long-term general reciprocity, thick trust and shared values. Strong ties would be important for mutual support and collective action. Loose ties were expected to be associated with stricter reciprocity, thin trust, and few shared values. They were expected to be important for locating and accessing resources located outside the community. The research asked how people understand their strong and loose ties, including the issues of reciprocity, trust, and shared values. It also asked what they, and others, gain personally and collectively from those ties. As a separate issue participants were specifically asked which of their ties provided useful links to other networks. Bridging was operationalised in terms of: links to other networks within the

wider community; access to external resources; links across social divides (age, ethnicity, class).

## **Method**

In keeping with the research aims of understanding how people understand and benefit from their strong and loose ties, the research reported here uses a qualitative methodology. Thirty-nine individuals were selected for interview. The sample is purposive to ensure a variety of people of different ages, gender, ethnicity and population density. Thirteen people were selected as the initial target with designated demographic characteristics through contacts known to the researchers. Each interviewee was then asked to identify one further person for interview, and that person was in turn asked for a further contact, thus providing a modified snowball sample. The requirement for inclusion in the sample was that the person had some association (not necessarily formal) with a community or non-profit organisation. The second person nominated within the snowball process was a person who was associated with the same organisation as the first person, but who was known to also be associated with a different organisation. The same process was repeated with the third person interviewed in each sequence. Thus each of the three persons within each set responded to questions about a different organisation, although the three also had links in common.

Of the thirty-nine people, ten were resident in West Wyalong, a small town in the rural area of the western slopes of NSW. This was a town identified in the Onyx and Bullen (2000) study as high in social capital. In addition, nine residents of Wyong were selected. Wyong is a small rural town, within commuting distance of Sydney. It has a

rapidly increasing population, with many people arriving from the city. The remaining twenty were drawn from across metropolitan Sydney (One set of three in Sydney was not complete because participant could not name a contact).

It should be emphasized that the sample was small and purposive, not random. The purpose of the study was not to generalize but to explore the dynamics of how social capital is generated and used. Such exploratory research requires qualitative analysis of in depth discussion for a limited number of people. It is likely that the social mechanisms so identified may well have broad applicability, though this will have to be established in further research.

Each person was interviewed, using an open, exploratory, in depth interview approach. The interview schedule included questions relating to the respondents' networks. Each person was asked to draw a map of their key networks, identifying each in terms of whether they were friends, neighbours, workmates, or members of a community organisation. Close family was excluded. The respondents were then asked to identify one community organisation (as identified on the original map) for closer examination. Further questions were then asked concerning the purpose of that organisation, the strong and loose ties within the organisation, or related to it, and the nature of those ties. The respondents were asked to identify what they gained from each connection, and which ones formed useful links to other networks. The final question asked respondents to define the difference between strong and loose ties for them. The interview was taped with the permission of the interviewee. Each interview was approximately one hour in duration.

Interviews were transcribed and searched for emergent patterns. The software package Nudist Vivo was used to document the process. All identifying names and personal information were removed.

## **Results**

Community organisations appear to be a valuable source of both strong and loose ties. Almost all participants could identify both strong and loose connections in their networks within the community organisation they chose to discuss. Some, however, were quick to point out that their really strong ties were with family or life-long friends who were not members of the organisation. Most community organisations also provided opportunities for members to extend their networks beyond the immediate group either through the organisation's federated structure, or through formal or informal links with other organisations.

### **The Importance of strong ties**

As expected, it is the strong and not the loose ties that provide a sense of emotional support, of belonging, and personal identity. The discussion focussed on trust, values, being known and accepted, and dependability. Other elements were an absence of disagreements and the multiplex nature of strong ties.

These strong ties demonstrate thick trust. Examples of the way that trust finds expression included, self-disclosure, compliance with requests, visiting each others homes, keeping confidences, empathy, open-mindedness, good judgement, talking

through a problem, lending money, caring for each other's children. Trust was seen by some as the pivotal issue for distinguishing strong and weak ties.

We feel trusting in one another and confident with one another; you feel you can say whatever and not be judged by it or for it...(Judy, urban)

I see a bit more as a continuum. ... you might have trust ... in terms of particular arena such as work ... but the trust is limited to an area but whereas the stronger ties *would* be people that you would trust in more areas of your life. (Margaret, urban)

Strong ties were often built up over a long history of interaction. In both rural and urban areas, trust is built up over time and many interactions. The main difference was that in the country, trust depended on many years of connection. A really strong connection required at least 20 years. In West Wyalong, this length of association becomes a problem for newcomers. In urban areas, length of time is still important, and many of the strongest ties were those that extended back at least 10 years. However, in Sydney, frequency and intensity of contact can be at least as important, particularly in new circles.

Strong ties are multiplex. They are drawn on in a variety of contexts. Typically these are the connections that are identified by the interviewee as friends and community connections, and perhaps work colleagues as well. They are the people with whom they chose to work and play. For example Johan's strong ties were volunteers with him in the church. But they also had video nights and barbeques, looked after each other's children,

and went bushwalking together. Lisa's closest friends were those that she had worked with in one capacity or another over many years.

Almost all the respondents reported that reciprocity was an important aspect of strong ties. Examples of reciprocity were given in the contexts of child-care, support during illness, physical labour, information concerning job opportunities, voluntary work, information exchange, debriefing, and emotional support. For the majority of the respondents, it was to the strong ties that they turned in times of trouble. The strong ties gave material support when required, but also, and most importantly they listened and gave emotional support. It was with these people that our interviewees could talk through difficult personal problems. Such relationships were invariably reciprocal. Every one could give examples of help given as well as received over a long time period.

Strong ties were usually very similar to the respondent across most dimensions. They tended to be roughly the same age and family life stage, usually the same gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. They also shared the same values. For most people this sharing of common ground was an essential ingredient.

All the people that are very close to me all have commitment, and not just to children, it's to other people in general and respect towards other people and children and just wanting to make the world a better place (Wilma, 40's, rural).

### **The Importance of Loose Ties**

Loose ties were usually similar in many respects to the close ties. They too tended to be among those of similar background and values. For many people they were simply people in the same networks as the strong ties, but where a friendship had not yet

developed. There were several reasons for this. They had not yet shared enough history and common activities, or it was not possible to give the same intensity of emotional investment to everybody. Often loose ties were characterised by a more limited range of common interest.

Those people in softball I probably have nothing in common with ... but those ties are important too because you can't go through your whole life just having strong emotional deep type of people because it will just wear you out totally. (Jill, 50's, urban)

Loose ties were not multiplex. Sometimes they were members of the same organisation who were different, and not in the same social set, perhaps differing in social status, age, religious commitment or parental status. Nonetheless these people gave a positive sense of a broader experience. For example, an older male member of a community theatre group valued the younger members because they gave him different perspectives on a variety of issues. The fact that, often, the community organisation was the only contact people had with each other emphasises their role in facilitating connections that would not otherwise occur. Therefore bridging, in the sense of links across social categories was a feature of the loose ties within organisations.

However both strong and loose ties are to be found in the same networks, particularly those associated with community organisations. Their function overlaps: both create a sense of belonging and community, but also to achieve tangible outcomes for that community.



It's like holding hands for the children and consequently the community, that love of community. (Maria, 30's, urban)

The instrumental benefits of loose ties to the individual were less clear. Respondents were asked specifically whether any of the people identified in their network (whether strong or loose connections) formed useful links to other networks. The question was explicitly seeking evidence of bridging links. In response, the interviewees identified a range of instances in which bridging links had provided important contacts to external resources. Almost invariably these bridging links were mediated either by existing strong ties or by professionals within the networks. Loose ties were not considered appropriate or sufficiently trusted. Only in Wyong was there one explicit, instrumental use of loose ties:

Loose ties have helped me achieve things in life that I want...I can't do it through my tight ties only through my loose ties. (Philippa, 30's, Wyong)

### **Ties involving professionals**

Many of the loose ties that were mentioned by rural and urban respondents alike, were professional, or semi- professional people. Some of these took on a professional or formal role within the organisation. Such professional loose ties could be used for bridging purposes. For example, Johan was able to use his loose ties to gain a new job. The person who helped him shared a position with Johan within the church. But because this person was a senior professional within Johan's work life, Johan kept him at a

distance within his community life. Nonetheless the connection was important, as Johan explains:

My present position is, I think, due to him. Because I put him down as a referee and networking is incredibly important in education nowadays. Knowing people on an executive level, for instance, like a principal, like it's very important, it's almost like a, well, it gives you a sense of credibility. (Johan, 30's, urban)

Other links were professionals who were not formally part of the organisation but were supportive, for example, one local doctor was very helpful to the local cancer support group and his wife ran an extremely successful fund-raising event.

In the majority of networks, one or more professionals were named who were central to the organisation and personally important to the interviewee, but who nonetheless were identified as loose and not strong ties. There were many such examples: Jan was the highly respected paid dressage instructor within a horse club in Wyong; Judy named a Pasteur in her church group in Western Sydney as particularly important in providing counselling support; Wendy identified a local doctor associated with the early intervention children's network in West Wyalong. In all these and other cases, the relationship with the professional was closer than with the normal professional contractual relationship. The professional was embedded in the network and was valued, trusted, respected. There was a sense of mutual support and working together as equals and yet there was also a distance, a deference expressed; the professional was not identified as a friend. The professionals quite often played a key role in the organisation,

whether paid or unpaid, as Keepers of the mission. They played an enabling role beyond the narrow paid or professional role.

Two respondents only, dealt with strong ties in the differing contexts of professional and personal relationships. Both were unusual in associating strong ties with people who were professionally of higher status. Neesha, who moved from India to Australia three years ago identified her relationship with a respected more senior Australian mentor as a strong tie. Martin, an older male identified an older religious leader who had a profound influence on his beliefs, as a strong tie. Despite their differences Neesha and Martin both held strong ideological commitments (Neesha to the women's movement and Martin to the church) which were reflected in their choice of paid work and community organisations. Given the centrality of these values to their lives, it is not surprising that they felt a strong tie to people who inspired their commitment. It is interesting, however, that both participants started by discussing the professional and personal separately and, by the end of the interview moved to a position which emphasised the desirability of integration.

### **Bonding or Bridging?**

The interview study found plenty of evidence of "bonding" social capital, and this was evidenced in both strong and loose ties. In this respect, loose ties were those within the same community network that had remained relatively undeveloped. They assumed the same value set, though they tended to show more differences than the close ties, with more variation in age and gender in particular. Nonetheless they were seen as important parts of the community.

Bridging in the sense of networks across structural categories such as ethnicity, class, or age was evident in the networks within organisations. Of the of the 39 organisations, 19 involved mixed classes, 9 involved mixed age groups, and 9 involved a mix of ethnicity. Such bridges also became evident in the modified snowball sampling process. Each of the interviewees was asked to identify another person for the study from within their network who also was active in another organisation. Generally the person named was a close tie. The resulting 'sets' of respondents in fact represented bridges across divides of geographical distance, gender, age, ethnicity and class. Of the 12 complete sets, four sets involved a change in ethnicity, six a change in class and six involved a change in age. Sometimes the shifts were over several social categories. For example, in one such snowball set, person one was a young woman of South American, migrant origin from a working class suburb; person two was a woman of the same ethnic background but older, with children who had moved to a higher socio-economic area some distance away. Person three in that set was an anglo woman in the same higher socio-economic area. Over the set of three, gender remained the same, but age, ethnicity, class and geographic area were bridged. It is more than a coincidence that the only set of three interviews that could not be completed was in the most disadvantaged public housing estate with high levels of fear and low social capital as measured on Onyx and Bullen's (2000) social capital scale (White, Reedy & Leonard, 2001).

Bridging links between groups was harder to identify. It was expected that there would be many loose connections that were used as bridges to other networks, however, very few were found. In contrast, the research identified many examples of bridging, or between group links that depended on existing strong ties. These between group links

were used to access information and other resources, and were used to achieve outcomes that could not be achieved from the resources of a single organisation. Contrary to expectations, those bridging links that could be used “to get ahead” rather than “to get by” were almost always drawn from the strong and not the loose links. This applies to the personal use of bridging links as well as organisational links.

In January I wrote a submission to develop an Aboriginal women's healing space in the [women's health] Centre's backyard, to do a community arts project with Aboriginal women using Jan's mental health money... Now that required links with Aboriginal organisations so Kay was very helpful there and what she did was she talked to her friend Donna who's the community arts officer. So by the time I've rang Donna she already knew about it coz Kay told her about it and showed her the submission. Kay wrote a letter of support...(Mary, 39, urban)

In this, as in other examples, action was made possible by strong links across different groups but within the same community. The links formed bridges between organisations, but could be described as bonding the wider community. Even in the urban setting, these strong links bridged quite different networks but within the larger geographical community or community of interest. What was crucial always was the degree of trust. People were more willing to take risks in bridging to other networks in search of information and resources when they could work through trusted intermediaries. In general loose links were marked by lower degrees of trust, a more cautious approach. The reduced trust often was marked by differences in values. Where

values were different, and trust was “thinner”, there was less likelihood of using those loose ties for instrumental purposes.

The exception to this occurred when the loose ties were professionals associated with the organisation. Many networks included professionals (often working in a semi-voluntary role) who were trusted even though they remained loose ties. It may be that the professional code of conduct provided an alternative source of trust, in the absence of strong ties. In this case the professional, who may be the pastor, teacher, doctor, or convenor, was respected, and regarded as a very important link within the community network. They also became important bridging links to the wider world. But they remained as loose and not strong ties, and the relationship with them was generally constrained by their professional role. Such people were more likely to be different in some respects, to be older, or have higher status.

## **Discussion**

The dynamics of bridging and bonding social capital appear to be more complex than previously thought. In particular, and contrary to predictions, close multi-functional ties are preferred for both bonding (within group) and bridging (between group) connections. In general, the only loose ties that are used for bridging are those with formal professional status. This is so in urban as well as rural areas. The partial exceptions were found in Wyong, an area of rapid development by new arrivals. The only difference between rural and urban areas is that the chain of networks formed by strong ties reaches across a much more dispersed geographical and demographic area in the case of urban ties. Thus, while the concept of bridging and bonding remains important, it

should not be assumed that loose ties are more useful or important than strong ties. Few people are prepared to operate outside the bounds of strong links, even when reaching out to other networks.

Clearly a community, isolated because of its geography or social standing, that can only draw on its own resources will have fewer opportunities for economic or social development than one that can link to other communities. The results suggest that such communities do not need to “shift” from bonding to bridging in order to “get ahead.” Rather, they need to find additional ways of developing sound links to other communities and trusted professionals may be valuable ambassadors in this process.

The findings that professionals can provide bridging links despite being loose ties is consistent with Burt’s (1998) findings on the importance of perceived legitimacy for the recognition of bridging links. Certain people in a society or organisation will be identified as being trustworthy because of their position or role. Giddens further elucidates the distinction:

Trustworthiness is of two sorts. There is that established between individuals who are well known to one another and who, on the basis of long-term acquaintance, have substantiated the credentials which render each reliable in the eyes of the other. Trustworthiness in respect of the disembedding mechanisms is different, although reliability is still central and credentials are certainly involved. In some circumstances, trust in abstract systems does not presuppose any encounters at all with the individuals or groups who are in some way ‘responsible’ for them. But in the large majority of instances such individuals or groups are involved.... The nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up

with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems, especially trust in expert systems. (Giddens, 1990, 83)

Giddens goes on to note that codes of professional ethics form one means whereby such trustworthiness is internally managed. People, who are recognized in terms of their professional identity, can be used as bridging links without the relatively slow process of repeated interaction involved in developing trust that occurs with strong ties. Clearly people with this professional status can play a strategic role in facilitating connections across groups. However professional standing is not enough. In order to be a useful link, the professional needs to have demonstrated a commitment to the values of the community. Voluntarily contributing to local community organisations is a significant sign of such a commitment. A breach of trust by a professional therefore has far reaching effects in terms of the fabric of the whole society. In places where corruption is rife, people must return to the slower more cautious method of developing strong ties through personal experience.

We have argued that people and organisations form bridges whenever they activate and make use of connections that cut across organisational and social boundaries. But such bridging is always relative. The multiple, cross cutting ties between people, organisations and social categories, all serve to “bond” the wider community. Further, while people generally prefer to maintain close ties with those most similar to themselves, most people are located at the intersection of multiple social categories. Thus close ties may be formed between people of the same church but different socio-economic backgrounds, or between people of the same age and geographic location, but



of different ethnicities. Such multiple, overlapping social identities also serve to bond the wider community in which they occur. It is only when there is a lack of such overlapping connections, that isolated and factionalised sub-communities occur.

A model of society with relatively small cohesive well-bonded groups joined to each other by loose ties may not be the most appropriate. Perhaps a more useful model is that of a chain in which each link is well-bonded but there are also strong ties to some other links. Just as a the chain is as strong as its weakest link, so the society which has groups that are not strongly connected to any other groups has sites of potential disharmony. One advantage of this metaphor is that it does not suggest that well-bonded groups per se are problematic. Nor is there any necessary conflict between loyalty to one's immediate group and loyalty to the wider society. Nor is there any need to posit a 'generalised trust' to hold a society together.

The community-based organisation is crucial in all of this. Although this study was not designed to test causality, the results are consistent with the observations of Teorell (2000) that membership in community organisations preceded the development of extensive friendship support networks, as well as political engagement, and not the other way round. That is, those in the present study who were active within community associations of various kinds, got to know other people, some of whom subsequently became strong, multiplex ties. Of course it is never that simple; prior acquaintance of one key person may well be a pre-requisite for joining a new group. Multiplex relationships clearly extend over a number of potential arenas for action, including across more than one community organisation, and shared values are crucial. Nonetheless, the findings

suggest that 'structure' is as important as 'people.' It is the people who count, but usually within the context of a particular organisational structure.

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