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The relationship between formal and informal volunteering: A social capital framework

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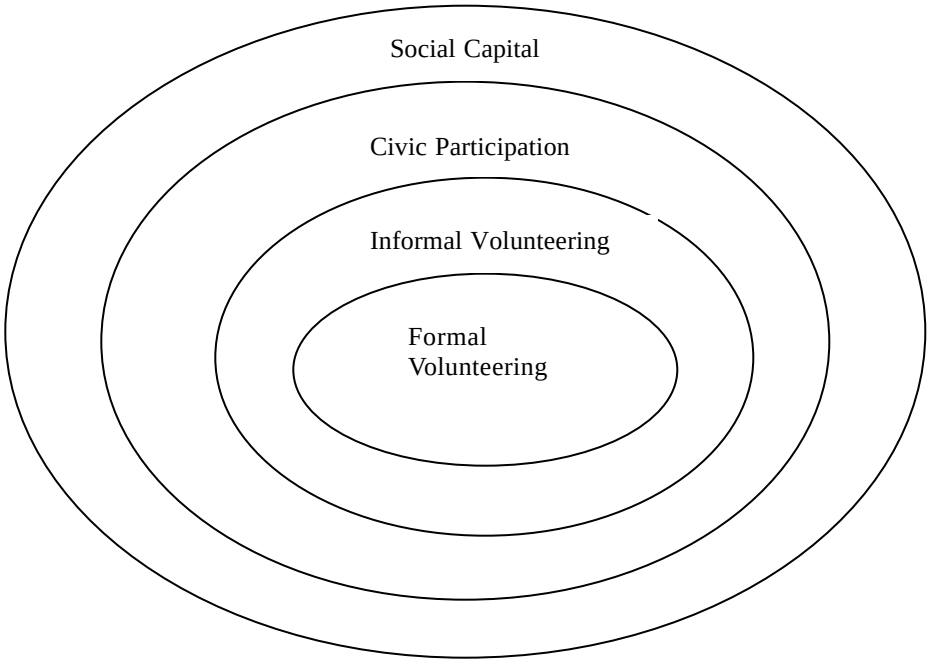
There is a growing recognition of the importance of social capital in maintaining a healthy and vibrant civil society. This is seen as an essential prerequisite for a stable political environment and for economic development. Volunteering is a core component of social capital. As social capital comes to be recognised as important, so there is a revaluing of volunteering, not only in terms of the outcomes it produces in goods and services, but also in terms of the process. What is not clear from the available literature, is the relationship between formal and informal volunteering in terms of its contribution to social capital.

We take volunteering to refer to the willing provision of unpaid labour. Most analyses restrict the concept to formal volunteering within the context of a formal organization and it is usually measured as such. The provision of the unpaid work of caring and informal neighbourly support is not usually considered volunteering, and is seldom measured, though it is also likely to contribute to social capital. We refer to this as 'informal volunteering'. In all cases, unpaid labour is a contribution to the well-being of others and the community at large. At the broader level we identify the vital role of participation within the civic life of the community. This is also unpaid but not usually counted as volunteering. It may be referred to broadly as citizenship. All these activities, and more, are included within the broader concept of social capital. This is illustrated in Figure 1 (taken from Onyx and Leonard, 2000).

Figure 1



The relationship between volunteering and social capital has not been fully explored in the literature. In some cases, volunteering is seen as an equivalent concept to social capital. For example, the NSW government policy on volunteering identifies volunteering as "an essential element to the glue that holds society together"(NSW Labour, 'Suppporting Volunteering'1999, p2). Some international comparative studies use rate of volunteering as a proxy for social capital. However, the relationship is more complex than that would suggest. We would argue that while all volunteering generates social capital of some sort, not all social capital is based on volunteering.

At a theoretical level it is possible to identify many parallels between the literature on volunteering and that concerning social capital. Both necessarily involve some form of social connection with others outside the immediate family. The creation of social capital requires the dense interlocking networks of relationships between individuals and organisations (Portes, 1998, Putnam, 1993). These networks of relationships facilitate the capacity to form new associations and to cooperate within the terms of reference they

establish (Fukuyama, 1995). While participation in activities does not by itself constitute volunteering, this is very likely to be one of the outcomes. Other common themes in the social capital literature refer to trust and the norms of reciprocity. Reciprocity per se is not considered a feature of volunteering. As Putnam (2000) notes, social capital is about doing *with* other people rather than doing good *for* other people. Nonetheless, there are important identified returns to volunteering as well (Clary, Snyder and Stukas, 1996). Volunteering, like social capital similarly depends on high levels of trust for its successful operation. It cannot be coerced. Indeed, organisational attempts to control volunteers may lead to a loss of trust and a decline in willingness to volunteer (Pearce, 1993).

Implicit throughout most discussions of social capital is a sense of personal and collective efficacy, or personal agency within a social context. Agency refers to the capacity of people to plan and initiate action through social connection (Leonard, 1997). The development of social capital requires the active and willing engagement of citizens working together within a participative community. Similarly, volunteering requires, as an essential prerequisite, the willing provision of unpaid labour. Coerced participation negates the possibility of volunteering.

While volunteering and social capital appear to be related but distinctive conceptual categories, they are also empirically linked. Volunteering is strongly predicted by civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). A major empirical study by the first author (Onyx and Bullen, 2001) found a strong factor structure of social capital, included four "capacity building blocks", four "arenas of action" and an underlying general factor. The four capacity building blocks included 'trust', 'social agency', 'tolerance of diversity', and 'value of life'. The four arenas included 'participation in the local community', 'neighbourhood connections', family and friends' and 'workplace connections'. The first and strongest factor was the participation in the community and included items related to formal volunteering. Other factors referred primarily to informal connections. The social capital scale was subsequently administered to many different groups and communities throughout NSW. Samples of formal volunteers in NSW community centres scored the

highest social capital scores of any group, and across all measured factors (Onyx and Bullen, 2001). We can tentatively conclude from this study that those who volunteer on a formal basis generate considerable social capital. We can also conclude that formal volunteers are also actively involved in informal networks of care and support in addition to their formal volunteering work. It appears then, that formal and informal volunteering are closely related. Nonetheless there are differences. For example, the existing literature, and particularly prospective epidemiological studies suggests that while the social support occasioned from informal networks are important in maintaining personal well-being, formal volunteering has a beneficial effect on health and mortality rates independent of the social support effect (Onyx and Warburton, in press). The reasons for this differential effect are unclear. While both formal and informal volunteering are related to social capital, they are also distinct from each other, and perhaps have differential relationships to different forms of social capital. This relationship remains to be explored.

The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital

The literature suggests that there is an important distinction to be made between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Bonding social capital appears to be characterised by dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localised trust. Bridging social capital appears to be characterised by the weak ties described by Grannoveter(1986), as well as a thin, impersonal trust of strangers (Newton, 1997). It appears that both kinds of connections provide important, but very different forms of social capital. The effectiveness of community networks described by Coleman (1990) depend on close, intersecting, multi-functional ties. These are the dense and intersecting bonding networks that hold a community together. They provide the basic source of the individual's identity and sense of meaningfulness within the community of origin and/or within the lifespace of the adult. These connections provide personal support for the individual, and can be mobilised swiftly for social action at the community level in times of emergency. It is to these dense interlocking networks that newly arrived migrants become attached. However such closely networked communities may contain relatively impermeable boundaries, and remain closed to outside influences. As Portes (1998) and

others have argued, such closed communities, while initially nurturing the new migrant, may actually impede further engagement with and adaptation to the host society, thus maintaining the migrants in a marginal position.

Woolcock and Narayan (2000) similarly argue that while localised, bonding social capital operates as effective defensive strategies against poverty in a third world context, 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. The looser networks of bridging capital are more outward looking, more open and tolerant of difference. They are more instrumental in their orientation and less concerned with close interpersonal relations. They provide access to a range of information, skills and material resources not available within the closed, bonded community. At an individual level, Burt (1997) argues that a managers effectiveness is greatly enhanced by his or her capacity to form bridges between different, otherwise unconnected networks. It is to the individuals economic and professional career advantage, to operate across as wide a set of loosely structured networks as possible.

The relationship between bridging and bonding networks on the one hand, and volunteering on the other, is far from clear. The maintenance of bonding networks occurs through participation in local networks, and face-to-face interaction. It therefore includes much traditional volunteering within localised organisations, particularly that related to caring and the maintenance of local support networks. It may well be the case that volunteers can also play a bridging role, though this is not clear from the literature.

The Empirical Evidence

The question of interest in this paper is the relationship between formal and informal volunteering, within the context of social capital theory. To explore these issues we draw on two qualitative empirical studies carried out by the authors.

The first study concerns a recently completed qualitative study of women volunteers in metropolitan Sydney and country NSW (Onyx, Leonard and Hayward-Brown, 2001). Altogether a total of 120 volunteers took part in 10 focus groups, five rural and five

urban. This analysis permits an exploration of the pathways between formal and informal volunteering.

There are several key findings of this analysis. The first concerns how volunteers first became involved in volunteering. One potential pathway to volunteering is via informal friendship networks, and indeed this did happen:

> A friend of mine was doing it for about twenty years and she just called me in after I became a widow..(urban focus group)

However for the majority of respondents, the pathway was the reverse. That is, people began volunteering *in order to* establish friendship networks, and not the other way round. Typically, as the quote above also indicates, the move into volunteering followed the death of a spouse, or retirement, or following a move into a new town (particularly for rural respondents). Another common pathway was via the school canteen, as children entered school and women were seeking new connections within the wider community.

Another focus group question explicitly explored the extent to which committed volunteers also performed informal volunteering. This lead to a discussion of how women constructed their own volunteering work, and how they perceived the relationship between the two. What was interesting was that in most focus groups the women were puzzled by the question, and found it difficult to specify their own informal volunteering. This was not because they didn't do any, but either because they had not named it as "volunteering" or else they did not see it as relevant. Typical comments were:

> I keep an eye on my neighbours, they are all a bit elderly…..I think you do a lot more volunteering than you realise often with neighbours…you don't see it as volunteering, you just see it as being a neighbour….you just think people have been good to me, why can't I , when I have time, give a bit back (urban focus group discussion)

> I think we all do that [informal volunteering] without thinking about it, we just do it. We don't even think about it. It is just something that everybody does…..I would not call it volunteering, it is something you automatically do. That's not volunteering, that's caring. Helping family and friends, it's just part of life (rural focus group discussion)

Such comments were typical of most focus groups. They seem to indicate that the women hold a general value of reciprocal helping within the community, of which their formal

volunteering is simply one expression. But the two are not the same thing. The women were prepared to identify their work within the organization *as volunteering*, presumably because of the more formal context and the semi-professional, though unpaid work that was implied. But the wider work of caring for family, friends and neighbours was not identified as volunteering even when it entailed similar work. This wider work was simply part of being a citizen.

However, there was also some indication that their formal volunteering did also have a direct impact on their informal helping, as a result of their increased networks of contacts and specialist knowledge. For example, one group explained:

> All of a sudden you have this immense knowledge….so you have everyone coming towards you and asking all this information…You just have friends of friends that will come and ask you because they know that you work there, so you are forever volunteering that information whether you want to or not….(urban focus group discussion)

Once again this points to an intimate, but fairly complex relationship between formal and informal volunteering.

The complexity of the relationship between formal and informal volunteering emerged further in the discussion of community. For example:

> In a community where there are lots of volunteers, people are aware that other people care about them. In lots of….suburban areas…I think people feel isolated…it is getting a lot of services that it would not have otherwise…often voluntary work goes into identifying that, 'yes, this section of the community needs more than we are able to provide, let's get this bucket of money to help provide the service' (rural focus group discussion)

> People are joining in, rather than sitting back in isolation, because there is nothing worse than being alone…(urban group)

> There would be more communication [with lots of volunteers], there would be more people aware of other people's needs and then trying to band together to see what they can do as working in a team…it would bring a community together, because people are actually out there, they are not just locked into their own little environment….they are actually doing something, building up that community and increasing services….(urban focus group discussion)

What these and similar quotes are saying is that formal volunteering is embedded in a wider web of community relationships in which people care for each other and work

together as active citizens to create a better community for all. Formal volunteering takes much of its value from this wider context.

The second empirical study, also a qualitative study, explored the networks bridging different third sector organisations within a given local area. This study was not specifically concerned with volunteering but with the role of loose and strong ties within the networks formed by community organizations. It was specifically looking at the mechanisms of both bonding and bridging social capital.

Thirty-nine men and women were selected for interview. Thirteen people were selected as the initial target, with a chain of three connected people for each, thus providing a modified snowball sample. Of the thirty-nine people, ten were resident in a small country town, nine were selected from a small town, within commuting distance of Sydney, and the remaining twenty were drawn from across metropolitan Sydney. While all respondents were associated with one or more community organisation, not all would be identified as formal volunteers. Many were, but others identified themselves rather as members or participants in these voluntary organisations. The interview questions 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, including the possibility of links to other networks.

As expected, we found that 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 their own federated structure, or through formal or informal links with other organisations.

Also as expected, it is the strong and not the loose ties that provide a sense of emotional support, of belonging, and personal identity associated with bonding social capital. The discussion focussed on trust, values, being known and accepted, and dependability. Strong ties demonstrate a 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. Some saw trust 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)

> …but the trust [for loose ties] is limited to an area, whereas the stronger ties *would* be people that you would trust in more areas of your life. (Marjorie, urban)

Strong ties are also 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. 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.

Loose ties on the other hand 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. They were not multiplex. Sometimes the loose ties were members of the same organisation who were different, and not in the same social set, perhaps younger or older people or differing in 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.

Many professional or semi-professional people were named as loose ties. These professionals were central to the organisation and personally important to the interviewee, but 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; Judy named a Pasteur in her church group as particularly important in providing counselling support; Wendy identified a local doctor associated with the early intervention children's network. In 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, although they were not necessarily identified as volunteers.

The networking 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, and they were seen as important parts of the community. Bridging links between groups were harder to identify. It was expected that there would be many loose connections that were used as bridges to other networks; in fact however, very few were found. In contrast, the research identified many examples of bridging, or between group links that depended on existing strong ties. 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.

Community action was made possible by strong links across different groups but within the same community. It was these strong links that made co-operative action possible by accessing external resources. One example of this was the formation of an action group in the rural town to maintain medical services. This campaign was driven entirely by the voluntary action of a group of close ties involving several organisations. 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. This bridging became evident in the modified snowball sampling process. The resulting 'sets' of respondents in fact represented bridges across divides of geographical distance, gender, age, ethnicity and class. While any two persons held much in common, the move from the first to the third person in the set demonstrated enormous shifts, usually over several categories. For example person one was a young woman of South American 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. 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. 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 close

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 two empirical studies reported here suggest several interesting conclusions, none of them definitive at this stage.

First is the observation that strong ties are crucial to the formation of bonding social capital. Close ties are essentially multiplex in character, that is they cross over several functional categories such as friend, fellow worker, support person, information resource. These people are trusted associates from long and/or repeated interaction. The relationship is invariably reciprocal and based on some shared values. Many, though not all of these close ties are formed within community organisations. 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 who were active within community associations of various kinds, and those who became formal volunteers, 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 was sometimes the pre-requisite for joining a new group. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that 'structure' is as important as 'people.' It is the people who count, but usually within the context of a community organisation.

Close ties are also important in bridging to other groups, and accessing external resources. They are more important than loose ties in this respect, because they are more trusted. Despite what Granovetter (1986) argues, people in local communities are unlikely to use weak ties in an instrumental way; most people would rather do without. However, normally, close multiplex relationships extend over a number of potential arenas for action, including across more than one community organisation, and bridging opportunities are plentiful. Formal volunteers are part of this bridging.

Professionals or semi-professionals operating on a semi-voluntary basis have a special status, being loose ties that are nonetheless trusted and used for bridging. The findings that professionals can provide bridging links despite being loose ties is consistent with Burt's (1997) 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. Gidden's 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. Where people have lost their trust in experts (or in institutions), then people must return to the slower more cautious method of developing strong ties through personal experience.

People who are formal volunteers are also more likely to be informal volunteers in a variety of contexts and to be active citizens. They care about each other. This generalized caring may be partly a result of their own predisposition, but it is also partly because formal organisations maximize the opportunity of developing close, multiplex

relationships, and for extending their networks beyond their immediate family. Nonetheless, formal and informal volunteering are not the same, and are not seen to be the same by the volunteers themselves. It appears that formal volunteering has more of the flavour of contracted work within the organisational structure, whereas the informal volunteering carries a more diffuse sense of mutual obligation as friends, neighbours and citizens.

It seems likely that formal organisational volunteering carries some of the authority of 'the professional'. In this sense, formal volunteers are not 'professionals', but neither are they simply friends or neighbours. They are somewhere in between. They are assumed to carry some of the knowledge and the authority of the organisation, and therefore may be trusted in a way that loose ties normally are not. In this sense, volunteers may play a mediating role between the organisation and the broader community in which the organisation is embedded.

Moreover formal volunteers also form bridging networks, mediating between different organisations. The 'external relations function' of management committees, in linking with other branches or other organisations, and public relations activities, all involves bridging. We found many examples of volunteers who represented their organisation in wider federated structures, inter-agencies, and regional or state-wide bodies. Some voluntary organisations are primarily oriented toward bridging links. These include some international organisations, advocacy and peak bodies, as well as federated (eg sporting) structures.

The evidence presented here would suggest that formal community organisations are crucial in the formation of social capital, and that they do so at least partly through the actions of volunteers. That however would be a gross oversimplification. Social capital can be produced almost anywhere in which the conditions for its production are satisfied, that is wherever there are dense, lateral networks involving voluntary engagement, trust, and mutual benefit. Not all third sector organisations fill these conditions, or fill them equally well. It is likely, for instance that an essential requirement of a "good" nonprofit organisation is one in which a public collective good is produced and one in which

volunteer labour is used in substantial amounts, as Perrow (2001) suggests. It is also likely that social capital generation requires more active participation by members and by volunteers than large, bureaucratic structures permit. That is, where organisational structures require hierarchical accountability mechanisms and command and control authority patterns, there is relatively little opportunity for reciprocity and mutual action, and trust is dependent on the good will of the powerful. It is likely, therefore, that small local community based organisations involving many volunteers and opportunities for informal networks, provide the highest probability of obtaining optimum conditions for the generation of social capital. This is particularly important in rural communities.

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" as Woolcock and Narayan (2000) suggest. Rather, they need both. They need to find additional ways of developing sound links to other communities. Trusted professionals, and formal volunteers may be valuable ambassadors in this process.

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. There is no necessary conflict between loyalty to one's immediate group and loyalty to the wider society. Formal volunteers within local community organisations certainly play a crucial role in the process of both bonding and bridging. While our data reported in these studies is primarily drawn from Australia, the theoretical implications are likely to have very broad implications globally, as we begin to understand in more detail the dynamic effects of the mobilization of social capital in all its forms.

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