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Val Gillies

London South Bank University, England

Rosalind Edwards

London South Bank University, England

A Qualitative Analysis of Parenting and Social Capital: Comparing the Work of Coleman and Bourdieu

Abstract

This paper will present an empirically based analysis of parenting in order to critically examine the work of two major social capital theorists. The work of James S. Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu is much cited, but while both focus on the links between individuals, families and wider social structures, their theories are based on very different interpretations of social capital and its implications. Drawing on qualitative data from a UK based qualitative study of parenting resources this paper will critically assess each theory using case studies. We argue that these two approaches allude to different social resources, with Coleman's work representing the tightly bonded solidarities more often found among working class communities, while Bourdieu focuses on the more diffuse, instrumental networking most associated with the middle classes.

Keywords

parenting; social capital; family; Coleman; Bourdieu

Introduction

In recent years the concept of social capital has emerged as a key theme shaping the direction of public policy. Viewed by some as offering the potential to address contemporary concerns around individualisation and community decline, social capital theory has underpinned a range of initiatives that seek to repair perceived gaps in the social fabric. Social capital can be broadly defined as the values that people hold and the resources that they can access, which both result in, and are the result of, collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships (Edwards, Franklin and Holland, 2003). Mainstream social capital theorists identify diminishing levels of this crucial resource and link such "decapitalisation" to changes in family life. Transformations in contemporary personal relationships and a fracturing of traditional support structures are viewed as making unprecedented demands on

families, and undermining the practice of good parenting. Increases in cohabitation, divorce and separation, mothers' employment, lone parenting and people living alone, are viewed as evidence of a destabilization of traditional values and identities and are assumed to lead to a decline in social capital. It is argued this has left parents isolated, unsure and unsupported, stoking fears about a deficit in parenting skills

This "social capital lost story" (Edwards, 2004: 5) resonates with wider concerns about social fragmentation, and provides a clear focus for policy remedies. Given that families represent a crucial foundation for social capital, the state is posed as having a responsibility to address the current deficit in parenting support and to ensure that parents are helped to fulfil their essential duties. This "support deficit" framework has inspired a new approach to family policy in the UK and is characterised by a range of interventions designed to advise and educate parents. These have included the setting up of parenting classes across the country, a national telephone helpline dedicated to parents and the establishment of the National Family and Parenting Institute with a remit to act as a "centre of expertise" in providing information and "authoritative" advice on parenting "good practice" (Edwards and Gillies, 2004).

However, while it is claimed that this form of support is relevant to all parents, policies and interventions are more often directed towards working class or "socially excluded" families. Middle class parents are seen as competent in cultivating social networks that they can draw on to the advantage of themselves and their children. Conversely a deficit of links to the local community is viewed as a problem of disadvantaged areas where there is a high dependency on the welfare state and a perceived lack of self sufficiency. As such it has been argued that the ascendancy of social capital theory is part of an attempt re-socialise the poor (Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies 2005). As Christine Everingham (2003) suggests, mainstream policy interpretations often rely on a circular argument in which poverty derives from lack of social capital and lack of social capital derives from poverty.

The work of two major theorists have been formative in shaping this debate on social capital and families: James S. Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu. While both focus on the links between individuals, families and wider social structures, their theories are based on very different interpretations of social capital and its implications. Coleman utilises a narrow and structurally determined definition of social capital as a resource within the family, while Bourdieu's approach critically engages with issues of power and inequality. Drawing on qualitative data from a study of parenting resources this paper will explore the usefulness of each theory, using case studies to illustrate our findings. We demonstrate how these two approaches describe distinctly different social resources, with Coleman's work representing the tightly bonded solidarities more often found among working class communities, while Bourdieu focuses on the more diffuse, instrumental networking most associated with the middle classes. We conclude by relating these different elements or types of social capital to wider debates to highlight the contradictions structuring prevailing policy approaches.

Outlining the theories: Coleman and Bourdieu

Coleman's approach to social capital is largely concerned with social consensus and control. Social capital resources "inhere in family relations and in community social organization" (Coleman, 1990: 300) and are comprised of obligations and expectations, information potential, and norms and sanctions. These features of social capital serve a normative function in that the trust and reciprocity they

generate ensures conformity for the collective good, while also benefiting individuals. It is a largely a hidden hand "by-product" in providing a social goods that "are not in the interest of any individual to produce alone, but ...are of benefit to many" (Coleman, 1988: 392), rather than merely instrumentally driven.

From this perspective, social capital connects families and communities and is characterised by a shared set of values and expectations. Coleman terms the close day to day relationships that can develop between parents in a local community "intergenerational closure" and claims the development of such a collective bond monitors, guides and sanctions individual behaviour. For Coleman, there is a crucial link between social capital and children's educational attainment. In emphasising its value in the creation of personal skills and capabilities or "human capital", Coleman correlates high social capital with a reduced probability of early school drop out (Coleman, 1988). Many similar studies have since been conducted using large scale US based data sets to link social capital indicators to academic performance (Dika and Singh, 2002).

According to Coleman, contemporary life is undermining social capital. A growing diversity of family forms has destabilised the conditions needed to create and sustain social capital. Increases in lone mothers, absent fathers, family mobility and working mothers have all disrupted intergenerational closure and have thereby eroded trusting reciprocal relationships. The absence of fathers through family break-up, and the commitment of mothers to full time employment is seen as amounting to a structural deficiency, depriving children of necessary developmental time with their parents. Similarly siblings dilute the time that parents have available for each child and are therefore viewed as depleting social capital resources for individual children. The welfare state is another threat identified by Coleman, and is viewed as undermining the economic and social rationality of parental investment in children, thereby encouraging a "free-rider" attitude (1991: 6). Consequently, from Coleman's point of view, a non-mobile, traditional nuclear family, with a working father, stay at home mother and one or at the most two children represent the ideal structure for maximising social capital.

In contrast, Bourdieu's work on social capital is considerably more complex and nuanced. For Bourdieu social capital is inextricably linked to a number of other central resources, or "capitals", which determine an individual's standing as well as their likely trajectory. Along with social capital, Bourdieu stresses the significance of economic capital, cultural capital in the form of institutional status and personal values, and symbolic capital representing the construction the other capitals take when they are legitimated with symbolic power. With social capital deriving from family and other social relationships, its type and content is inevitably shaped by the material, cultural and symbolic status of the individual concerned (Bourdieu, 1990,1997). Like Coleman, Bourdieu also sees families as motors of social capital, but focuses instead on enduring family practices that perpetuate inequity. Family members with access to symbolic and material resources are able to draw on these capitals in order to cement their advantage, and transmit the benefits to their children. From this perspective, social capital is a resource that can be accumulated, invested in and deployed for instrumental personal advantage.

From Bourdieu's perspective, there has been no general decline in social capital. Instead he is concerned with documenting the way individuals are positioned in social space according to their access to economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. The amount and type of capitals an individual possesses, and gains or losses over time, determines both their position within the social space at any one time, and also their overall trajectory. Individuals are born into a designated social space that is defined by access to capitals, but capitals are also tied to social positions in that

being black, working class and a woman provides limited access (Skeggs, 1997). From this perspective, social capital is highly class specific and works to perpetuate social inequalities. It is also necessarily exclusory in that powerful social networks depend on mechanisms of distinction in order to preserve and reproduce their privilege (Bourdieu, 1979). This contrasts sharply with Coleman's depiction of harmonious networks comprised of shared values and social bonds that benefit individuals and society.

These two theoretical approaches to the concept of social capital also differ in terms of their wider impact. Despite his earlier introduction of the term, Bourdieu's work has been largely sidelined for an emphasis on Coleman's rigid but easily operationalized formula. Several studies have also drawn on Coleman's thesis in an attempt to quantify, measure and assess the impact of social capital in families (Amato 1998; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Runyan, Hunter, Socolar, Amaya-Jackson, English, Landsverk, Dubowitz, Browne, Bangdiwala and Mathew, 1998; Teachmann, Paasch and Carver, 1996). There have been fewer detailed qualitative studies of social capital in households. Research that has been conducted in this area either highlights the shortcomings of Coleman's theory (Seaman and Sweeting, 2004), or has relied exclusively on a Bourdieu informed framework (Allatt, 1993; Bates, 2003; Tomanović, 2004). In this paper we will use qualitative empirical data on parenting and social capital specifically to explore and evaluate the social capital theories of both Coleman and Bourdieu.

The research framework

The data informing this article derives from the "Resources in parenting: access to capitals" project.¹ This study examined the micro processes of everyday family life focusing in particular on the resources that are available to parents of children aged between 8 and 12. The framework for the project conceptualised parenting resources in terms of social, economic, cultural, emotional and environmental capital, centring on social connectedness, material and financial status, values and dispositions, and levels or types of emotional investment in children. It involved both extensive survey and intensive interview data collection, using a particular perspective on the relationship between the different sorts of data. In the first phase of the research a large scale survey was conducted among parents of children aged 8 to 12 with the aim of exploring publicly expressed attitudes to parenting support (reported in Edwards and Gillies, 2004). This was followed up in the second phase by theoretically sampled in-depth interviews to examine parents actual day to day practices. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 mothers and 11 fathers from a range of 27 households across England and Scotland (see Edwards and Gillies, 2005 for further details of the research design) and it is data from this later phase that forms the major focus of this paper.

In this second phase of our study we sought to compare Coleman's and Bourdieu's theoretical frameworks using a particular methodological and analytic strategy. We explicitly drew on features of Coleman's categorisation of levels of social capital in order to sample for this stage, focusing on his notion of high and low social capital families. From this perspective the category of high social capital is limited to a homogeneous family form characterised by two biological parents with a working father and a mother at home caring for no more than two children. The family should have lived in the same area for some time and be on a middle range income. According to Coleman this domestic arrangement maximises social capital, ensuring that children receive full time attention from a primary care taker, while reciprocal

social relationships are maintained outside of the family with parents seeking and receiving help through their social networks. In contrast, Coleman's category of low social capital encompasses a range of less traditional family circumstances including lone parents, parents who are both in full time employment, families reliant on welfare benefits and high income families whose financial status has freed them from reciprocal commitments.

In the process of constructing our sampling frame, however, we identified various family forms and circumstances where Coleman's social capital categorisations are less clear. For example, a family's social capital status might be considered ambiguous if the mother only works part time during school hours. Coleman implies that there are situations where low social capital indicators are "offset" by more positive circumstances (1988: 89). As a result, we decided to include an additional category of middle social capital to encompass families who appeared to fall between definitions of high and low. Using this schema, our sample consisted of 6 high social capital, 6 middle social capital and 15 low social capital family households.

Our theoretical sampling for the qualitative phase of our research drew on the work of Coleman, but the content and analysis of the in-depth interviews with parents was influenced by Bourdieu's conception of the interdependence of social and other capitals. Our intention was to contrast Coleman's predefined and formulaic assignment of social capital on the basis of household structural characteristics with Bourdieu's more dynamic and contextual approach. Consequently our interviews with parents focused on a broad range of issues including time, money, locality, children's health and development, practical aid, schooling, and kin and other social networks. Our subsequent analysis of this data sought to address the interaction between social and other capitals in the resources that parents can draw on and give. This methodological approach allowed us to relate contemporary, empirical data on families to the social capital theories of Coleman and Bourdieu.

Social capital: matching data to theory

Focusing first on the work of Coleman, we found little in his rigid formulation to reflect the lives and experiences of our interviewees. Our sampling frame enabled us specifically to investigate whether social capital is linked to family characteristics, as Coleman professes. However, in a comparison of households we could find no evidence to support this structurally based definition of high, middle or low social capital. On the contrary, family forms such as lone parent families, and parents claiming benefits in our sample were particularly well networked and clearly demonstrated the features associated with Coleman's understanding of social capital, including obligations and expectations, information gathering potential and effective norms and sanctions. Neither could we find any indication of Coleman's predicted "decapitalisation" in our sample. All of the households we interviewed were socially integrated in reciprocal support networks, and none described feeling isolated or unsure of whom to turn to for advice.

Coleman's theories are underpinned by concerns about increasing family diversity and social fragmentation, yet the findings from our study question both the premise that social capital is necessarily in decline and the assumption that changing family structures are to blame. Most parents in our sample received regular help from family members in some form or another, and all described strong friendship networks (Gillies, 2005). Lone mothers were particularly likely to describe an extensive and tight support network comprised of friends and family, while parents

with limited or no physical contact with family members compensated through integrated supportive networks of friends, neighbours and work colleagues. Our study also highlights how workplaces can represent a source of crucial social support for many mothers, augmenting rather than detracting from their social capital. Qualitative research conducted by Peter Seaman and Helen Sweeting (2004) similarly undermines the categorisation of non-traditional families as social capital deficient, showing how such families were able to access social resources not envisaged by Coleman.

Although we found no shortage of social capital amongst our sample, it was clear that parents' ability to invest in this resource to advance their own and their children's opportunities was strongly determined by their access to other resources. This appears to support Bourdieu's understanding of social capital as integrally linked to economic and cultural capital. We can best illustrate this through the use of case studies from our data. As such we are following in the tradition of Coleman and Bourdieu who have both articulated their theories through case study examples (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1999). Here we focus on two lone mothers, Julie Denis and Katherine Hall.

Julie Denis

Julie is an African-Caribbean lone mother of two children by different fathers. Her youngest daughter, Carly, is 10 and her older son, Lloyd, is 15. She rents a three-bedroom housing association property on a purpose built estate in a densely populated urban area and is currently drawing state benefits. Julie did not grow up locally but came from a large family of four sisters and two brothers based in another city. Her two sisters now live relatively close to Julie, but the rest of her siblings and her mother remain in the family home town. Julie's neighbours are largely young, multi-ethnic and on low incomes, with the market research profiler ACORNⁱⁱ describing the area as populated by high numbers of long term unemployed, students and lone mothers.

Julie describes her relationship with family members as very close. She has a particularly strong interdependent relationship with one of her sisters. They have children of similar ages and Julie provides childcare for her sister to allow her to work. In turn Julie receives strong emotional and practical support from her sister and financial help, for example, in the form of grocery shopping. Julie also emphasises the close contact she maintains with the rest of her family, by regularly speaking on the phone and visiting. She views these family relationships as a support safety net and has received (and provided) practical help in the past. Julie also receives intermittent financial help from her children's fathers in the form of one-off payments for clothes or holidays. Julie has a large network of friends that she regularly socialises with, although she distinguishes them from her "genuine" friends who she feels have become part of her family. She has two particularly good ("genuine") friends living nearby with children of their own who she relies on for emotional and practical support, and she is a Godmother to another friend's daughter and provides regular childcare for her. Julie is also a Godmother to her neighbours' 3 year old daughter.

Katherine Hall

Katherine is a White lone mother who is separated from her husband. She has two daughters, Zoe, age 9, and Adele, age 5, and lives in large detached house in a small village in the home counties.ⁱⁱⁱ She works three days a week as a lawyer. Her annual household income (including contributions from her husband) exceeds

£100,000.^{iv} Her neighbours are mainly other highly educated professionals and business owners, with ACORN describing her street as inhabited by the most affluent people in the UK. Katherine has lived the area for the past seven years and has no family members living nearby. She does not have a close relationship with her parents and has rarely asked them for help or support. Katherine's husband (a full time lawyer) takes the children at weekends.

Katherine's main support network is provided by friends, neighbours and work colleagues. She has a very good relationship with her neighbours and feels that she lives in a "great community". Most of Katherine's neighbours have children of their own and they socialise regularly. Although Katherine employs a child minder three days a week her children spend a lot of time next door playing with the neighbours' children. Katherine has a close relationship with the female neighbours either side of her and feels they were particularly supportive when she was splitting up with her husband. Katherine also feels her work colleagues are an important source of support, and mentions a particularly good friend in her workplace. She regularly holidays with this friend and her neighbours. Katherine is also involved with the school's Parent Teachers Association and as a result has built relationships her daughters' teachers and other local parents.

According to Coleman, both Julie and Katherine exhibit the characteristics of low social capital, with their lone parenthood reflecting "the most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families" (1988: 111). He argues that lone parented children are inevitably under supported and are as such more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. In contrast, families with high social capital are seen by Coleman as re-enforcing pro-social values through the development of an intergenerational bond that socialises children into relationships characterised by mutual trust and obligation. Such deficits are not identifiable in our case study examples, with both mothers and their children socially embedded as active members of their communities, sharing strong values around mutual responsibility and obligation.

Julie and Katherine are clearly both well networked, but the social capital they rely on and access on a daily basis is rooted in their very different social and economic circumstances. Julie struggles to make ends meet on welfare benefits, but far from encouraging a relinquishment of personal responsibility (as Coleman alleges) her life as a lone mother is sustained through highly reciprocal supportive relationships. In contrast, Katherine's financial independence enables her to combine social relationships with paid for services to secure any help she needs. As well as employing a childminder three days and one evening a week, Katherine also pays for the children to attend regular after school activities such as French, chess and swimming. Although she has less need of informal support she benefits on a personal and emotional level from maintaining reciprocal relationships with neighbours, friends and other mothers. Significantly, through creating and maintaining these links, Katherine is able to access influential networks that Julie would most likely be excluded from.

Differences are also apparent in terms of the value and meaning of the social resources each mother provides and acquires. Julie has time and experience of raising children and is able to provide invaluable childcare help to her sister and other friends. In return, Julie's shopping is often collected and bought for her, while the goodwill she generates stands as potential future resource if practical or financial help is needed. As a result Julie's social capital is in the main converted to the practical help and psychological support that enable day to day survival. For Julie, this is experienced in terms of strong emotional bonds with particular individuals, and is expressed as a form of familial interdependency. Like many other working class

parents in our sample, she makes a clear distinction between acquaintances and family, and includes close friends in the later category: "Like the circle of like people I move with, or me family I should say - not so much people because like I said I'm not one for like having lots and lots of friends, I've acquaintances - because like we help each other, you know, we support each other". In contrast, Katherine's high social status and privilege have enabled her to build relationships with other wealthy and relatively powerful individuals, which (alongside the pleasure of friendship) can be drawn on in preserving and accumulating her relative social advantage. A more instrumental focus on the personal benefits of social networking was implicit in many of the interviews with middle class parents in our sample. In line with Gaynor Bagnell, Brian Longhurst and Mike Savage's (2003) findings, middle class parents in our sample were consciously instrumental in their involvement with Parent Teachers Associations, as is evident in Katherine's account:

I've joined the Parent Teacher Associations at the schools. I've got to sort of network locally and meet a lot of local people. Went to the first Committee meeting and volunteered to do it. Because I knew that it was a good way, when we were new to the village, of getting to know local people, and I've been on the Committee now, what, for three years, well both schools ... I think it benefits me, and it benefits the children.

Bourdieu's (1997) understanding of social capital as part of an interlinked system orientated towards the reproduction of privilege can be drawn on to interpret the case study example of Katherine, but appears less relevant when it comes to Julie. Low economic capital combined with working class cultural capital ensures there is little opportunity to pursue personal gain. Instead Julie maintains a dense network of friends and family, characterised by obligation, commitment and dependency. This distinction is reflected in our wider sample analysis, which revealed qualitative differences both in the form of social capital accessed by parents and the functions it fulfils. In general, working class parents were more likely to describe a core network of highly reciprocal, supportive relationships supplemented by connections to more peripheral social contacts. Narratives of betrayal, disloyalty and estrangement were also more common amongst this group reflecting the high expectations and emotional intensity associated with such relationships. Middle class parents, in comparison, discussed their attachment to a more dispersed and less bonded social group, with few obligations or responsibilities beyond socialising.

Bagnell, Longhurst and Savage (2003) identified a similar class based distinction in their study of networks and social capital, with parents from working class areas demonstrating tighter social ties, while parents from middle class areas described more diffuse networks. For mainstream social capital theorists such as Robert Putnam (2000), strong homogeneous ties denote the "bonding social capital" associated with day to day "getting by", while weaker heterogeneous links facilitate the "get ahead" characteristics of "bridging social capital". However, as Bagnell et al. (2003) show, working class residents tend to be more tightly embedded in local communities compared with their more mobile and less restricted counterparts. Our research points to a similar interpretation of social capital as grounded in particular material circumstances, thereby conflicting with Coleman's definition of a generalisable resource defined by its function and measured through household characteristics.

Furthermore, although Coleman's definition of social capital corresponds with the dense reciprocal support networks found among our working class parents, he gives no consideration to the drawbacks of such social ties. Social capital in this context is characterised by intense demands and obligations that can place a heavy

burden on those dependent upon it for survival. This essential mutual support conveys none of the wider economic benefits discussed by Bourdieu. Consequently while Coleman disregards the potentially onerous nature of social capital, Bourdieu's linking of social capital to personal gain appears to overlook the crucial role of social solidarity as a day to day resource.

Social capital and the gender gap

Despite a broader tendency in the mainstream theoretical literature to discuss social capital as a gender neutral concept, our study highlights how, at the level of family, it is predominantly managed and maintained by women. In line with previous research (Moore, 1990) we found men's networks to be more formal and less kin based, while women's networks were less formal and contained more family members. It was mothers rather than fathers who sustained family links, negotiated childcare arrangements and organised social activities. Generally speaking, the women in our sample had more intimate friendship networks compared with their partners, and appeared to place greater value on friends. Also it was mothers rather than fathers who made links with and sustained regular contact with other parents (mostly other mothers) in their locality.

From Coleman's essentially normative perspective, social capital depends upon a traditional gender division with men acting as breadwinners while women remain at home to care for the children. Consequently the central role that mothers play in negotiating social capital is viewed as natural and normal, but under threat from greater equality and opportunity for women. As Maxine Molyneux (2002) notes, mainstream social capital theories often present women as instinctively predisposed to community and family relationships, while rarely questioning their absence in more powerful male dominated networks. As a result, women are viewed either as potential social capital saviours and targeted to undertake unpaid voluntary or community work, or they are held responsible for its perceived demise. Coleman's concerns about the increase of women in the workforce can appear reactionary and dated, yet his theories resonate with widely held anxieties about the stability of the family and society. Fears that a detraditionalisation and individualisation of social life will lead to the breakdown of society have driven the attempt to harness social capital theory as a policy remedy (e.g. Halpern, 2004). Yet as we have stated, our analysis provides no indication that families are disconnected or isolated. Instead, the dominance of women in managing and mediating social capital illustrates how mothers continue to shoulder primary responsibilities for family life whether or not they work outside of the home.

In this context, Bourdieu's theory offers a more useful way of understanding this social capital gender imbalance. Gender for Bourdieu is a primary symbolic classification in a wider social framework based upon power and distinction. While his work most effectively draws out the classed nature of social and other capitals, numerous feminists have found this model can be appropriated to explore gender differences (Lawler, 2000; Lovell, 2000; Reay, 1996, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). More specifically, Bourdieu suggests that the various forms of capitals accessed by individuals shape their particular "habitus", or way of being and doing. According to Bourdieu (1979,1990), habitus is acquired not through conscious learning or as the result of ideological coercion, but through lived practice, and is deeply ingrained in material dispositions such as walking and talking, as well as thinking and feeling. This practical habituation is described by Bourdieu as a "second sense" or a "feel for the game". It is through a combination of experience, practice and reflection that

individuals develop a practical disposition to act in certain ways. According to Bourdieu a dynamic dialectic characterises the integration of habitus (embodied dispositions) and "field" (external environment). While embodied dispositions are grounded in concrete circumstance, these circumstances are shaped and transformed by the individual concerned (Bourdieu, 1979,1990). Thus, the concept of habitus represents a combination of personal, social and structural dimensions, and is situated in time, space and place. As Bourdieu (1977: 87) explains "The habitus makes coherence and necessity out of accident and".

It is through the embodied dispositions of the habitus that power relations come to be mis-recognised and inequalities become naturalised (McNay, 1999). Consequently an individual's habitus reflects not only class but also gendered social relationships that produce and are produced by differential access to capitals. From this perspective, the norms espoused by theorists like Coleman are part of a broader mechanism in which power relationships are maintained through the illusion of essentialised difference. Discrimination in the workplace and the particular meanings and responsibilities attached to motherhood and fatherhood ensure that women continue to take primary responsibility for raising children. As such social capital combines with cultural and economic capitals to form a gendered, classed (and ethicised) habitus, ensuring that women are more likely to draw on social capital in managing family lives, while men cultivate social capital to help them succeed in the workplace. To a certain extent, this mirrors the class specific "getting along" and "getting ahead" distinctions. However, our analysis clearly demonstrates how social class organises gender differences on the basis of social and structural hierarchies. This is highlighted by the way that middle class mothers like Katherine are able to cultivate and utilise social capital to ensure advantages are passed on through the family.

Social capital or social class?

In line with Bourdieu's claim that social, economic and cultural resources are necessarily interdependent, qualitative analysis of our data reveals the crucial significance of wider structural frameworks in interpreting social capital. Two further case studies of families who fall into Coleman's high social capital category in terms of their family structure at least, illustrate the way social class both determines and is in part determined by access to social capital. These examples also demonstrate how the social capital appropriated by parents in our sample cannot be properly understood in isolation, or attached to particular family forms.

The Grahams

Ted and Denise Graham are married with a 10 year old son, Liam. They rent a small two-bedroom property from a housing association in a Northern industrial town. Ted works long shifts Monday to Saturday as a cleaner in a local shopping centre earning around £15,000 annually^v, while Denise cares full time for Liam. Denise grew up locally and, though her mother recently died of cancer, her father and three brothers live close by. Ted grew up in another town. His father died when he was a child and he rarely sees his mother or his sister. Like Ted and Denise, their neighbours are largely working class people with the ACORN profile describing their

street as comprised of people with very little education and low incomes who enjoy horseracing and bingo.^{vi}

Both Denise and Ted have a close relationship with Denise's father (a retired porter) who lives three doors away, but the help and support provided is highly reciprocal. Denise took a primary role in ensuring her father coped with the loss of her mother, helping him with cooking, cleaning and washing. Her father does not perceive it to be his role as a man to provide childcare support (except in an emergency), but has access to a car and often give lifts or picks things up for them. Denise and Ted cannot afford to run a car and rely on Denise's father to help them with the weekly shopping or to take Liam to doctors' appointments. Denise's three brothers are painters and decorators and have often helped out in the house with DIY and mending things. Denise sees less of her brothers now because her father's new girlfriend has caused a family rift, but she remains close to their wives. Denise has a strong, reciprocal support network of friends and neighbours. Most have children attending the same school as Liam, and Denise has relied upon their help when she has been unwell. Denise also helps out, providing unpaid childcare for a friend's 18 month old little girl four mornings a week. Denise also looks after her elderly neighbour and another elderly lady further up the street (Ted is sent round if they need light bulbs or fuses changed). Denise has one particularly close friend who she relies on for emotional support and counts as part of her family. They help each other out with childcare, lend and borrow small sums of money, and tell each other things they wouldn't tell their husbands.

The Ryders

Fiona and Colin Ryder are married with an 8 year old daughter, Amber. They own a large semi-detached house in a prosperous semi rural area. Colin is a manager at IT firm in the City earning between £50,000 and £60,000 annually^{vii}, while Fiona cares full time for Amber. Both Colin and Fiona grew up within a five mile radius of where they now live. Their parents live relatively close to them, as do Fiona's brother and sister and Colin's two sisters. Their neighbours are largely middle class professionals, with ACORN describing the street in which they live as a prosperous suburb where people tend to have high incomes, be highly educated and read broadsheet newspapers.^{viii}

Fiona has a good relationship with her mother (a retired teacher) and her father (a retired managing director). She visits them regularly, relies on them for childcare support and has borrowed large sums of money from them in the past. Fiona also has a close relationship with her sister (a piano teacher), who regularly babysits for Amber and provides her with discounted piano lessons. Fiona has a more distant relationship with her brother (a headmaster), but sees him regularly at family gatherings. Colin's relationships with his family members are distinctly less close and are for the most part managed by Fiona. They make a family visit to Colin's mother (a housewife) and father (a retired engineer) once a week and, while they often babysit for Amber, arrangements are made through Fiona. In the past Fiona had maintained a relationship with one of Colin's two sisters (a teacher), but contact dwindled as her children grew older. They see Colin's other sister only at family gatherings organised by Colin's parents. Colin and Fiona are friends with two couples (with children of their own) who live close by and they often socialise together as a group. Fiona and the other two mothers meet regularly and provide emotional support, and occasional babysitting. In the past, one of these mothers had paid Fiona to act as a childminder in order to return to work. Colin only sees these friends when group social events are organised. Fiona does voluntary work at the local school twice a week helping

children to read, while Colin and Fiona regularly attend events organised by the school.

According to Coleman, both sets of parents display the characteristics of high social capital in that they are long term resident families comprised of working fathers, full time at home mothers and one child each. However, more detailed qualitative analysis suggests the families have little in common beyond these broad categorisations. While both couples derive substantial support from family, friends and neighbours, these relationships are confined to class based networks, which are in turn determined by material circumstances, social status and residential location. Consequently the resources each couple can access are far from equal. The social capital returns for Fiona and Colin are considerably more profitable, providing money, practical help, influence, and legitimated cultural knowledge, while incurring few reciprocal obligations. For Denise and Ted, social relationships demand much greater commitment (particularly from Denise) for much less personal advantage. For example, Denise relies upon lifts and errands from her father because, unlike Fiona, she cannot afford to run a car. This basic but crucial form of support is provided in the context of Denise's role as a carer for her father (along with other elderly neighbours in her street). Denise's relationship with her best friend, Josie, illustrates the intensity of the social bonds she has established:

Josie, she'll do anything I ask her to. If she can help me she will. She has a car. If I want to go somewhere she'll take me. But only last week Liam had a sick day off of school and I needed to go shopping and she came from school and sat with him. I only rang her at quarter past 8 and she were here at twenty to 9 and I'd do the same thing for her. Um we do help each other out, and she won't take for things ... You know like if she's out and about, like you said before, she'll ring me from wherever she is and say 'I've seen such a thing, it's so much, do you want me to get ya?' And I do the same with her ... I mean the day me mum died she rang me at 11, me mum died at ten past 11 and Josie rung me at about 12 minutes past 11, didn't she, and she said 'Denise' she said 'I'm in the middle of me washing' she said 'but I've got a funny feeling something's happened'. And I told her what had happened, and within ten minutes - I mean Josh then, her lad, he were only baby and she were down here and she just never went home. And she knew, that's how close we are, she knew something had happened.

Unlike the Ryders, the Grahams have never felt able to or justified in borrowing large amounts of money from their family, but they do lend and borrow small "tide over" amounts when there is a need. There also appears to be a culture of buying small items of shopping for others and giving it as a gift. As Denise explains in the quote above, Josie often picks things up for the family and then "won't take for it".

While the Grahams appear to be tightly bonded to certain social networks, the expectations they meet and hold are often broad and unspecified. As such they resemble Marshall Sahlin's (1972) concept of "generalised reciprocity" as a form of solidarity rather than a barter-like exchange. The help and support the Grahams receive appears to be rooted in intimate commitments that make day to day life possible. In comparison, the Ryders appear to have few social obligations beyond regular visits to family members. The financial help they have received from Fiona's parents was not attached to any conditions beyond eventually paying it back, and they readily assume that grandparents would naturally want to take a regular childcare role. Practical resources obtained through, or provided to, other social contacts generated a greater sense of reciprocity, but the Ryders commonly neutralised obligatory relationships by transforming them into a monetary exchange. For example, Fiona's pays her sister to provide Amber with piano lessons, albeit at a

discounted rate. Furthermore, when financial difficulty forced a close friend to return to work after having a baby, Fiona helped out with childminding for an agreed low fee. This is in marked contrast to other working class mothers in our sample (like Denise and Julie) who provided or relied upon free, regular childcare and other kinds of support. In a study of informal exchange in households, Colin Williams and Jan Windebank (2002) found working class families were considerably more likely to rely on unpaid mutual aid. As they note, such favours generate an undefined obligation to be met in the unspecified future, whereas a cash exchange can effectively remove this hanging social debt. For the Ryders, placing financial value on particular forms of support removed the discomfort of this uncertainty and the sense of obligation associated with reciprocal relationships.

The example of the Ryder family also demonstrates the extent to which economic capital is crucial in managing and mediating social capital. Aside from enabling them to buy a house in a prosperous area and live among well-educated professionals, Colin's income removes them from the kind of social interdependency experienced by many of the poorer families in our sample. However, while economic capital underpins the appropriation of social capital, cultural capital represents an equally significant factor, particularly with regard to parenting practices. Parents in our sample with access to middle class resources (such as money, high status social contacts and legitimated cultural knowledge) drew on these capitals to consolidate their power and advantage, and invested heavily in their children's education as a method of transferring this privilege. Previous research has produced similar findings, with Patricia Allatt (1993) illustrating how the minutiae of middle class parenting practice is founded on an active manipulation of social and financial resources to ensure advantage is passed down through the generations. Inge Bates (2002) has also explored the dynamics of social and cultural capital transmission within families, highlighting the complex struggles of parents to ensure middle class benefits are reflected in their middle class cultural capital, the Ryders hold strong values around education. Colin has been educated to university degree level, while Fiona attended a grammar school^x and has A levels^x and secretarial qualifications. Both are keen to see their daughter do well at school and are heavily involved with Amber's homework projects. An 11 plus exam^{xi} still operates in the Ryder's school catchment area and although Amber is viewed as being on course to pass, Colin is monitoring her work and says he will employ a tutor if necessary to ensure she makes it to the local grammar school. The relatively loose social capital networks accessed by the Ryders are particularly well suited to securing Amber's educational advantage in that they contain a number of education professionals, including Amber's own teachers. Unusually there is no Parent Teachers Association at Amber's school, but Fiona's weekly visits to the school to hear other children read have enabled her to develop useful contacts and access relevant information. Social capital in this context is particularly well appreciated given the anxiety the Ryders express about Amber's forthcoming transfer to secondary school^{xii}, as is evident in the following extract from the interview with Colin:

We know other parents that are going through it and the whole system seems to be fraught in that er, there's pressure about choice, it's er, not really choice at all. You can try and choose but if you don't get into the first school that you want the likelihood is that the second school down won't have you because they're not at the top of your list, so it's a nightmare situation ... Obviously I'd be pretty concerned about the results. If she doesn't pass [the 11+] ... I'm not too sure what the alternatives are but they're not - there are some good secondary schools but then again where do you put them on your list to make sure you get in? ... You can try and go

for one and if you miss that the likelihood is you wouldn't get into your second or third choice, you end up getting shoved into what's left over. Which is a complete nightmare.

I: What about practical advice? Who do you think you'd go and ask advice from?

I'd probably give a call about things yeah ... Brian, Fiona's brother Brian's an ex-headmaster so he's sort of fairly knowledgeable about the education system.

In contrast, the working class cultural capital possessed by the Grahams generates little of the recognition or legitimacy conferred upon the Ryders. Denise and Ted both grew up in working class families and left school without qualifications. As such they lack grounded knowledge of the cultural and academic framework structuring their son's school, and are aware, through previous interaction with teachers, that the cultural capital they have positions them as problematic and inferior. For Denise and Ted, education was associated with disappointment and failure, both in terms of their own personal histories and their experiences of being parents. While both wanted their son to do well at school, they were not surprised to find that Liam struggled with academic work. Unlike the Ryders, they have few resources to aid their son's education. They cannot draw on their own knowledge, have no highly educated, influential contacts to access, and are unable to afford the cost of a private tutor. They also have little to do with the school, given that their previous encounters have been characterised by conflict. As numerous studies have established, class plays a formative role in shaping the nature and experience of parental involvement in education (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1996; Crozier, 1996; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Reay, 1998; Vincent, 1996).

Individual social capital and inter-relationships

The class distinct maintenance and utilisation of social resources evident in our sample raises a number of questions about the meaning of social capital. Coleman's ideal of "intergenerational closure" as enforcing norms, values and obligations was most closely realised in the tight networks of our working class sample of parents. Yet while these often intense bonds provide solidarity, emotional support and a social safety net, they generate little of the benefits envisaged by Coleman. For example, the educational success he attributes to social capital is more likely to be associated with the loosely networked middle classes. Coleman's emphasis on the importance of social control, and concern over the demise of cohesive social sanctions is further undermined by Rambaut's findings (cited in Portes, 1998) that particularly strong familialistic ties found among recently arrived immigrants are associated with poorer educational outcomes for students.

Bourdieu's very different understanding of social capital as a resource oriented towards shoring up and passing on privilege through the generations, best describes the more instrumentally focused actions of our middle class interviewees. The social relationships accessed by many of our working class families more closely resembled the "bonded solidarity" discussed by Alejandro Portes (1998) in which actors form communal identifications and support each others' initiatives. In this context, it could be argued that the Bourdieuan metaphor of capital is inappropriate given the collective as opposed to individual benefits gained from social relationships. Rather

than accruing, trading and converting social capital, working class families form inter-relationships that stand in contrast to individualistic middle class values.

From this perspective, the individualism underpinning mainstream theories of social capital reflects the middle class experiences, or "habitus", of the theorists who espouse them. As Beverley Skeggs (1997, 2004) argues, the individualism that structures much of social theory originates from and benefits the privileged middle classes. Notions of individualism justify those with power and authority and brand other groups as inferior for their lack of differentiation from the mass. This is particularly evident in current approaches to family policy in which responsibility is projected onto working class parents for failing to equip their children with the right skills for social improvement. Efforts to regenerate social capital reflect a wider concern that the working classes are failing to raise appropriately individualised children (Gillies, 2005a). Yet as Bourdieu demonstrates, this form of social capital works on the principle of exclusion to preserve privilege, and therefore cannot be generalised beyond particular networks. At this broader conceptual or societal level social capital is revealed as crucial mechanism of social injustice.

Conclusion

Our study of parenting resources emphasises the significance of everyday social relationships to families, while also highlighting shortcomings in social capital theorising. Coleman's work relies on a structural account of social capital that is not born out by our research. However, Coleman's cohesive social networks founded on norms, values and reciprocal obligations were identifiable among the working class families in our sample, who depend upon such bonded social relationships for their day to day survival. This contradicts the assumption commonly held in policy circles that such communities are characterised by a deficit of social capital. Yet, while Coleman's type of social capital allows poor and socially excluded families to "get by", it offers few of the human capital benefits envisaged by policy makers and by Coleman himself. In contrast, Bourdieu's description of social capital is as a resource based entirely around personal and group gain. His focus on the instrumental nature of social networking was recognisable among the middle class parents in our sample, but was notably absent in poorer communities. Bourdieu's type of social capital generated significant rewards for parents and children, but was rooted in privileged economic and cultural conditions.

Despite their qualitative differences, these two approaches to social capital are commonly conflated in policy literature on parenting. Inspired by Coleman's version of social capital, policy makers strive to encourage social solidarity and shared norms while also promoting individualistic values around personal advancement. There is little recognition that cohesive social networks may be sustained precisely because of a lack of self interest and instrumentalism. From this perspective, a prevailing emphasis on functional social capital risks undermining the community ties it seeks to bolster. At any rate the concept of social capital appears to lack the explanatory and prescriptive power that many have attributed to it. Thus, while important insights can be gained from the work of Coleman and Bourdieu, neither conception of social capital on its own offers a comprehensive account of the significance of social resources to families.

Endnotes

- i The project was conducted under the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group programme of work based at London South Bank University (see www.lsbu.ac.uk/families), ESRC award no. M570255001.
- ii ACORN stands for "A Classification Of Residential Neighbourhoods". The marketing-data firm CACI has produced this classification to include every street in the country, fitting them into 17 distinct Groups, which, in turn, contain 56 "typical" ACORN neighbourhood categories. Streets of broadly similar people are grouped together. The descriptions of the types are based on averages across all streets in the type.
- iii Home counties is a semi-archaic name for the English counties bordering London, which are conventionally seen as "nice" semi-rural and affluent areas.
- iv In 2004, the UK national average wage was £26,151 per annum.
- v See footnote 3.
- vi Bingo is a prize gambling game played in bingo halls, and is conventionally considered a female working class leisure pursuit. Players buy cards with numbers on them in a grid. Randomly-selected numbers are drawn by the bingo caller. The first person to have a card where the drawn numbers form a specified pattern is the winner and calls out "Bingo".
- vii See footnote 3.
- viii British newspapers conventionally are divided between the upmarket, serious broadsheets and the mass-market tabloids also known as red tops.
- ix British children attend secondary schools from age 11. A grammar school is a selective state secondary school with a mainly academic curriculum. Selection for grammar schools is dependent on passing the 11 plus exam. The test examines students' academic ability. In most parts of the UK, the exam has been abolished in favour of the non-selective comprehensive system.
- x An A-level, short for Advanced Level, is a non-compulsory qualification taken by students, usually age 17/18, in secondary schools or further education colleges.
- xi See endnote X.
- xii See endnote X.

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