Knitting the social fabric: A non-stereotypical male activity and the creation of social capital

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ABSTRACT

This study interviewed men engaging in knitting, in order to gain an understanding of how social capital may be created by this activity. Different types of social capital were examined in terms of their value to the men. Interaction between the three domains of bonding, bridging and linking social capital were explored. Findings showed that all the participants demonstrated a form of unconventional masculine identity, supporting previous research into patterns of masculinity. It found that high levels of bonding, bridging and linking social capital were created by knitting together and sharing skills and by knitting in public places. Philanthropy was a continuous thread running throughout, which does not sit easily in social capital theory due to its lack of reciprocity. The enigmatic definition of trust proved problematic in terms of valuing each dimension and assessing the manner in which they are inextricably interrelated. The well-being of these men is enhanced by the knitting of their very individual social fabric which has also left fingerprints on countless people and benefitted society as a whole.

KEY WORDS: SOCIAL CAPITAL RECIPROCITY TRUST PHILANTHROPY
Introduction

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.
Pericles (n.d.)

The concept of social capital is thought to originate from the work of Hanifan (1916) who used the expression to explain features of everyday live which people considered to be the most important. Hanifan's (1916) principle interest lay in the development of characteristics such as social discourse, friendship, empathy and benevolence between members of a rural social unit, and the manner in which these affected both individuals and the wider community.

It is in this context that this research has been conducted. Social capital has been generally defined as social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals (Baron et al. 2000).

Although the expression has only recently been used widely, it has been used occasionally. One contribution was made with regard to urban life and neighbourliness (Jacobs, 1961). Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1983) analysed three basic types of ‘symbolic’ capital. Bourdieu's (1983) Marxist stance suggests that economic, cultural and social capital are inter-dependent of each other, with economic capital forming the keystone, serving to maintain the status quo with regard to power and class relations.

One of the first academic researchers to explore social capital was Coleman (1988). His longitudinal study on US high schools in the early 1980s found noticeably higher levels of attainment among pupils attending Catholic schools than counterparts attending state schools, and higher teacher expectations in the Catholic schools. Consequently, attendance at Catholic schools was suggested to be particularly beneficial for pupils coming from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Hoffer, Greeley & Coleman, 1985).

Coleman (1994), in an educational context, went on to define this functionalist theory as a set of resources inherent in family relationships and social organisations that benefit the social or cognitive development of children. Suggesting a causal link between social capital and availability of resources supports Bourdieu (1983) to a degree, as the powerful may remain powerful due to their relationships with other powerful people (Baron et al. 2001). However, Coleman (1994) progressed this by also positing that the resources provided by social capital may be formed by a range of factors including trust and need, and are not restricted to advantaged individuals, but available to all. Furthermore, it may not always be beneficial and may be damaging in some circumstances. Coleman considered that social capital functioned precisely because it arose from activities undertaken for other reasons.

Putnam's *Bowling alone* (1995) is generally regarded as the pivotal study which led to social capital becoming an influential concept for research and political debate in recent years. It resonated with public opinion in the USA...
and is now frequently applied across a broad range of disciplines including urban regeneration (Williams and Pocock, 2010), crime (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), education and adult learning (Field, 2003; 2006). Its popularity is no doubt due to the simple and cost effective notion that increased trust and commonly shared goals, within any group of people, influences broader behaviours and attitudes and creates extensive resources for community well-being. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as connections between individuals, social networks and the norms of trust and reciprocity arising from them. Social capital is important for several reasons, not least its significance in terms of well-being. It increases our awareness of shared interests and individual differences and enables us to test the veracity of our opinions informally across a range of people.

Academics have studied the density of social networks (see Schuller et al. 2000), finding a significant decline in membership of social groups and a corresponding increase in individual leisure activities. Putnam suggested that television was the cause, but other technological advances, such as computers, have been responsible for young people spending hours in isolation playing games, e-mailing, surfing the internet and participating in social networking such as ‘Facebook’ (e.g. Lobstein et al. 2004). A more recent explanation is that the economic shift from manufacturing to service industries has changed work patterns, with only 30% of people now working what was once considered a ‘normal working week’ (Halpern, 2009), impeding membership of clubs and other structured social activities due to uncertain or irregular working hours.

Three forms of social capital have been identified; bonding, bridging and linking (Woolcock, 2001). Bonding refers to ties between similar people in similar situations, for example family and close friends; bridging denotes ties between like people such as workmates and loose friendships; linking reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those completely outside the community, enabling members to access additional resources not generally available in the community. Putnam (2000) suggests that bonding social capital is good for reciprocity and solidarity, may be restrictive and acts as a type of social cement. Conversely, bridging social capital is better for sharing information and accessing a wide range of resources, can reduce homogeneousness, increase reciprocity and acts as a social lubricant. Putnam stressed that these were merely dimensions along which different types of social capital could be compared. Putnam ignored linking social capital and did not address the wider ramifications of interactions between differing combinations of the three forms of social capital. In essence, he did not consider that different combinations could produce different outcomes (Field, 2003).

There have been various criticisms of Putnam’s (1995) theory (e.g. Bookman, 2004; Bourdieu, 1998; Fukuyama, 1999; Giroux, 2004; Ladd, 1999; Nafsted et al. 2007; Skocpol, 2003), increasingly viewing this as a threat which may dehumanise society and individuals. Putnam (2000) addressed some of these whilst others are not relevant to this study as they address civic life and inequalities. Rothstein (1998) points out that the decline in social capital in the
USA and UK has been accompanied by a significant shift towards individualism and privatisation, whilst more egalitarian countries have remained relatively unchanged. One valid criticism is that whilst some traditional associations are declining, others are thriving (Sampson et al. 2005). Examples of this include wider internet access facilitating the creation of social networking sites such as Facebook and reciprocal sites such as Freecycle where members give unwanted items to each other in order to reduce landfill, promoting collective action against consumerism. It could be argued that, rather than reducing social capital, these activities build a psychological sense of social capital (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) for people unable, due to work commitments or disability, to participate in more traditional, structured forms of activity. A further criticism relates to the notion that this is simply a rebranding of an idea which has fallen from popularity and that it is the locus of attention which ebbs and flows (Schuller et al. 2000). An example of this is the similarity between social capital theory and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model. Bronfenbrenner (1979) discusses differing levels of analysis and the manner in which they interact (Figure 2), whilst social capital theorists speak of its different forms.

![Ecological levels of analysis for community psychology](image)

**Figure 1: Ecological levels of analysis for community psychology**  
(Dalton et al. 2007, p18)

Putnam (2000) has shown that where trust and social networks thrive, people, businesses, residential areas and countries profit financially. Child development is significantly shaped, SES disadvantages may be mitigated, and people enjoy better health and well-being.
As discussed above, research across a wide range of disciplines has provided a wealth of support for Putnam (2000). However, much of this is quantitative in nature comprising statistical data illustrating items such as the number of social networks and their density, state of health and well-being, feeling of safety and crime rates. There is scant empirical evidence with regard to membership of individual associations or engaging in other, more individualistic activities, and what social benefits derive from these. Returning to Coleman (1994), who considered that social capital functioned precisely because it arose from activities undertaken for other reasons, it seems rational to undertake qualitative research in order to gain a better understanding of how it functions.

Putnam (2000) found women’s social networks had declined more than those of men, but was unable to fully explain this. Burt (1998) found that marital relationships affected women’s social networks and that smaller groups provided greater benefit. Faludi (1991; 1999) highlights the different ways in which both genders have suffered from social changes since the 1950s.

Existing qualitative research has studied a range of male group activities such as schools (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Swain, 2006), football teams (e.g. Steinfeldt et al. 2009), ballroom dancers (e.g. Leib & Bulman, 2007) and men working in beauty parlours (Ahmed, 2006). This research has primarily focused on masculine identity rather than social capital, but found that high levels of group cohesion produced either positive or negative outcomes, supporting the notion of bonding social capital. One study investigating masculinity identity discovered a group of men, who regarded themselves as unconventional and engaged in stereotypically non-masculine activities (Wetherall and Edley, 1999), prompting the comment:

As a consequence, what is being celebrated in this discourse is not so much knitting, cooking and crying per se, but the courage, strength and determination of these men as men to engage in these potentially demeaning activities. (p.350)

These men were so comfortable with their very individual masculine identities that they felt free to pursue any interest they wished.

Wetherall and Edley (1999) failed to address what benefits may accrue to these men from knitting and cooking, whether this may simply be a less nagging wife or partner, more positive forms of social capital, or simply for relaxation or enjoyment. They may purely wish to enhance their skills in a proactive, useful manner (Field, 2006) rather than by surfing the internet or watching television.

Men and Knitting

Although gender equality has improved slightly (Putman, 2000), many women still have responsibility for household tasks such as childcare (Bookman, 2004), which creates social capital through informal connections. Knitting creates and nurtures social capital through family and group learning and by
showing that you care (Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Myzelev, 2009), forming reciprocal bonds. Social activities have been found to lower mortality rates in women (Agahi & Parker, 2008).

Masculinity studies regarding men who engage in unusual activities has produced some interesting findings, for example, that men working in beauty parlours possessing high levels of bonding and bridging social capital which compensated for the stigma attached to their work (Ahmed, 2007), and male ballroom dancers who claimed to have learnt in order to meet women (Leib & Bulman, 2007).

Wetherall and Edley’s (1999) comment was surprising given that most renowned chefs are male and knitting is generally acknowledged to have been invented and practiced by men (Rutt, 1987). Historically knitting was a male occupation, particularly in Leicestershire where hosiery was the staple trade. The industrial revolution gave rise to the manufacture of cheaper, inferior quality fabric which effectively killed the trade (Hartley & Ingilby, 2001). Figure 2 below is of Loughborough’s market place and commemorates Leicestershire’s once renowned hosiery trade.

![Figure 2: The Sock Statue (Loughborough)](image)

In other areas of Britain, families knitted cooperatively in order to supplement the family income. The men, women and children of Dent, in the Yorkshire Dales, knitted as they went about their daily lives. They knitted whilst they walked, chatted or sat around the fire at home (Hartley & Ingilby, 2001).

In light of the above, the aim of this study was to explore whether a stereotypically feminine activity, knitting, can create different types of social capital and how different combinations of social capital interact and create the social fabric.
Considering the research regarding women and the creation of social capital, this study looks at men who knit in order to gain an understanding of how this activity may create social capital. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the different types of social capital created from knitting in terms of their value, and
2. Examine similarities and differences in terms of the outcomes of interaction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

Method

Design

Several researchers (e.g. de Visser et al. 2009; Wetherall & Edley, 1999) have successfully used thematic analysis for masculinity studies due to its flexibility and theoretical freedom (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and its suitability to research patterns of living and/or behaviour (Aronson, 1994). Boyatzis (1998) recommends this as an ideal starting method for novices in the area of qualitative research; providing an adaptable skill set for other methods of qualitative research. This method has some disadvantages which have been addressed during the development of the research questions and the interview schedule. Advantages include its usefulness in highlighting similarities and differences in the dataset and the ability to produce unanticipated insights.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 1) was used to guide the interviews, keep them on course and ensure a degree of consistency.

Questions were derived from previous research (e.g. de Visser et al. 2009; Swain, 2006; Wetherall & Edley, 1999) and were designed to draw the participants into speaking freely about their relationships without asking direct questions, thus facilitating a relaxed interview environment. Its design provided sufficient flexibility for each of the interviews. Questions were phrased to mitigate researcher bias and are typical of empirical qualitative studies in this field (e.g. de Visser, 2009).

Participants

Eight male knitters/crocheters were recruited through the researcher’s social networks, an effective method of enrolment (Noy, 2009) which ensured the authenticity of the sample. Table 1 provides some details of the participants, vignettes (Appendix 2) provide further information.
Table 1
Participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>Professional artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>Disabled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>Grammar school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff</td>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>Retired postal worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Unemployed graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research setting/ Procedure

Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with five male participants, three of which were conducted over the telephone. Interviews were between 15 and 30 minutes in duration. The remaining three male participants took part in a focus group discussion held in a public library, which was 75 minutes in duration. Two of the interviews, the focus group and Harry, were conducted whilst both parties were knitting. All conversations were digitally recorded and utilised the interview schedule, which was adapted as required. Each recording was promptly transcribed (Appendix 3) and reviewed by participants in order that it was corroborated prior to analysis.

Data analysis

Data was analysed thematically as an efficient method of acquiring an understanding of the content in relation to the research aims and the participants’ subjective experiences (Banister et al. 1994). During the transcription process, the researcher was aware of, and considered, the socially constructed nature of transcribed interviews (Kvale, 1996). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stage methodology was followed to identify predominant themes.

Ethics

All participants were briefed prior to being interviewed. Consent forms (Appendix 4) were either sent by e-mail or given to participants beforehand. Signed, or e-mailed, consent was received before each interview occurred. Parental consent was provided by the 16 year old participant’s mother during a telephone conversation immediately prior to the interview. Each participant was advised that they did not have to answer all questions asked and had the right to withdraw at any time before the end of February 2010. Transcripts were provided promptly to each participant in order that they may be
withdrawn, challenged or amended before being used in the research. No participant declined to answer any of the questions; neither did any participant withdraw from the study. All participants were thanked for their time and assistance following both the interview and the agreement of the transcript. No rewards were offered. All participants will be provided with an electronic copy of the final report.

Findings and interpretations

Several themes were identified which are inextricably linked to each of the different forms of social capital described by Putnam (2000). Findings have been interpreted under the three themes of bonding, bridging and linking social capital, each of which has the additional theme of philanthropy threaded through it.

Bonding social capital

Participants were asked why they knitted and what benefits they derived from the activity, frequently extolling the stress relieving, almost meditational qualities of partaking in such a repetitive activity together with the minimal equipment requirements and financial outlay. Common themes included it being in stark contrast to a high-tech job and the sense of achievement provided firstly by possessing the skills, secondly, upon completion of a unique piece of work and thirdly, the appreciation and admiration bestowed on them. Other reasons included the portability of the craft, facilitating utilisation of time spent travelling, sitting in waiting rooms, watching television and sitting in public houses or cafes, whilst simultaneously attending to other tasks such as maintaining a conversation or leaving the train at the correct station.

These examples serve to support Coleman’s (1994) theory suggesting that social capital functions because it arises from activities undertaken for other reasons. No participant suggested friendship or companionship as a reason to knit (Leib & Bulman, 2007), although most are members of knitting groups, which will be addressed in the section on bridging capital.

All participants demonstrated high levels of familial bonding social capital assisted by knitting, but often including other activities such as cooking or gardening. Five were taught by either their mother or grandmother:

My nana owned a wool store so [she] taught all the boys in the family there was 13 of us grandsons she taught us all to do French knitting and we all ... could do that (Dan: lines 11-15)

Knitting was clearly not regarded as a feminine domain in the majority of the participants’ families, as highlighted above.

...‘Blankets for the World’ appeal and everybody was knitting squares. My daughter ... and even my son were knitting squares. I knitted squares then.
In contrast, several learnt the skill as adults, as illustrated above. Eddie was taught by his wife alongside his children.

...my last girlfriend ... discovered that I could knit... she... couldn’t really knit very well, and so she wanted like things made. So I had to do the complicated bits ... and then the things she wanted made were more complicated, so I had to do all of it.  
(Frank: lines 123-131)

Most of the men who learnt as children stopped knitting for some time until an event rekindled their interest. Frank was taught by his grandmother and had not knitted for over a decade prior to this incident.

Every [newly] married man has the cardigan or a jumper. So she [wife] started knitting ... after about 6 months I said to her ‘I’ll do the sleeves’. ... then I did the 2 fronts, then... [I finished it]  
(Geoff: lines 187-194)

Geoff learnt during a serious childhood illness, stopped at around the age of 12, and restarted shortly after his marriage. He has not stopped knitting since but his wife did not persist.

[mum’s] taken up knitting again and she’s shown me quite a few of the stitches and passed on some skills ... my aunt has seen some of my creations, and my mum’s creations, so she’s ... started knitting again. ... my cousins wanted us to knit some things for them and it’s just sort of snowballed ...  
(Harry: lines 117-124)

Harry learnt the skill from a housemate whilst an undergraduate because he was envious (line 8). This has revoked familial interest in the skill and sparked an interest in younger family members.

Most participants mentioned knitting items for family, friends and charity as integral to the activity. All participants spoke of close family bonds, passing and sharing skills and family members who made lasting impressions upon them demonstrating that social capital is produced via an innate set of resources with the family, assists child development and is a by-product of the activity (Coleman, 1994). The extracts above illustrate how closely bonding, bridging and linking capital are connected. These findings demonstrate that engaging in this activity knits a family together, creating trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). No participant reported negative aspects in this area. It can therefore be concluded that the bonding social capital created is extremely valuable to these men.
Bridging social capital

Definitions of bridging and linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001) are problematic as they fail to address on-line communities, included in this section because members belong to the knitting community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Bridging social capital has been described as a social lubricant, oiling relationships within group memberships, loose friendships and work colleagues (Putnam, 2000). Participants were asked about role models and different types of group memberships including work.

Participants were asked about those who had left a lasting impression on their lives. One mentioned a group of people he had never met:

... anybody who had bought wool off my nana ... and had half a ball left they'd bring it back to the shop because they knew we [grandsons] were all doing it (knitting).

(Dan: lines 18-25)

Dan also told of the rivalry between himself and his knitting cousins. This example reinforces social capital creation and retention and is charitable in nature as, without yarn, the boys could not have knitted.

Many participants spoke of significant family members but others also mentioned teachers who had left a lasting impression:

When I started knitting ... [aged] 11 at this time ... the head of music at my school ... he’s been knitting for ... 40 years ... he was very experienced and used to do ... fancy lacework ... I used to bring my knitting and ... sit with him and he would help me ... and encourage me to do more.

(Ben: lines 224-235)

This common theme ran through all accounts. All participants reported benefitting from the generosity of their benefactors with no tangible evidence of reciprocity, underlining the creation of valuable bridging capital combined with philanthropy.

Participants were asked about reactions encountered from people in other areas of their lives, as they all knit openly. The majority said that they consider that others may regard them as odd, weird or eccentric.

It’s a Facebook thing and all kids and ex-kids and people from Prince Henry’s [school] put things in there ... someone ... said ‘you know you’ve been to Prince Henry’s when you’ve had a conversation with Mr Eddie about knitting’

(Eddie: lines 897-908)
Several of the men promote knitting in social networks in an evangelical manner to break down stereotypes and find it a useful conversational tool. Most seemed to enjoy the reactions this provokes as in the example above. Dan spoke of his daughter’s pride and his reciprocal respect for her. This demonstrates high bonding capital whilst his daughter’s behaviour creates bridging capital from her open conversations with friends and teachers. Conversely, one participant described this part of his life as:

…it’s almost like a room in a house that where you keep the door shut and the lights out...
(Ben: lines 309-312)

Although knitting openly at home, schoolmates are unaware of his hobby, simply to avoid possible confrontation. Given the empirical evidence regarding school environments (e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Swain, 2007) this is hardly surprising. The majority of childhood knitters mentioned that they did not knit during their teens.

It appears that there are no damaging aspects of bridging social capital with regard to the reactions of non-knitters, and the men do not appear unduly concerned. They will continue knitting because they enjoy it.

Most participants are members of several knitting or craft related groups, meeting monthly. With one exception these groups are predominantly female but the men feel accepted and welcome due to the shared mutual interest, concurring with the interviewer’s gender being considered irrelevant (Schilt & Williams, 2008); the key facilitator was knitting. Considerable benefits are reaped from social interaction and skill sharing during meetings. Most participants teach or make items for others, either as gifts or as a cooperative ventures, such as teaching to knit for charity or becoming involved in local community focused initiatives. One example provided was of grandmothers exchanging knitting skills in exchange for internet tuition (Geoff: lines 1078-1089). Another example was the Dutch knitting group who gave everything they made to the homeless (Harry: lines 64-70). This philanthropy is evidence of the links between bridging and linking social capital. However, it does not fit in with the ‘mutually beneficial’ notion of social ‘capital’ (Putnam, 2000) but suggests a more egalitarian stance. This will be discussed further in linking social capital.

Only three participants reported membership of on-line communities, but this is worthy of mention as they considered it to be equal in value to physical groups. Particularly Ben, the youngest participant, finds it an invaluable source of access to like-minded people, in line with the idea of a psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The age of the participants may have affected these findings as this community has a global membership of approximately three quarters of a million people (Ravelry, 2010).

Males and females frequently knit alone, particularly with complicated designs, enabling its meditational qualities to be enjoyed. All participants reported several other solitary hobbies including gardening and fishing, which have
been found beneficial to men’s well-being in comparison to group activities being considered better for women (e.g. Agahi & Parker, 2008).

This section has shown that all participants knit openly most of the time and are comfortable with their individual identities, supporting previous research (Swain, 2007; Wetherall & Edley, 1999). Creation of valued reciprocal bonds has also been exemplified by the sharing and enhancing of skills (Field, 2003). Philanthropy has again been pointed out, both within groups and towards unknown people, particularly Dan’s memories of his grandmother’s customers which have left a mark on him.

**Linking social capital**

This is defined as networks of dissimilar people from outside the community (Woolcock, 2001) which is problematic as discussed in bridging social capital. This section discusses physical encounters with strangers covering a diverse range from fellow knitters at craft related shows to total strangers on an aeroplane.

Yet again, all participants enjoy showing off their skills and breaking down stereotypes, often knitting in public, including parks, pubs, trains, planes and demonstrating at craft shows and public exhibitions. Various reactions have been experienced, none of which proved to be particularly negative, and some which are regarded as amusing.

... on the train and I was knitting ... the train was fairly empty and there were 2 women, ... probably in their 60s or something like that sitting diagonally behind me and I could hear them from time to time saying ‘I think he’s knitting, I think he’s doing the sleeve’, but not once in that entire journey did they say ... or do anything until, as they were getting off ... the older one came and had a look and said ‘oh yes, I thought it was the sleeve’, and that was it (Adam; lines 126-139)

Other participants echoed this type of experience, describing reactions as indifferent, avoidant or being considered insane or weird. One participant had experienced indignation from an elderly woman, which was the exception rather than the norm. Some of the older participants spoke of how tolerance had increased since the 1950s. Some participants reported quite different reactions:

I think it’s quite a good useful tool for communication. Because if people see you doing it, they’ll actually want to come up and, you know, maybe want to start talking. If people are sat beside you on a train and they see you knit, it adds more of an atmosphere you know and it gives an avenue to talk that you wouldn’t have if you were reading a book or playing on a games console where that’s a private thing
(Harry: lines 226-235)

All participants mentioned that they knitted wherever and whenever they pleased:

I will knit on Eurostar. I will knit on the train I will knit on the tube I’ve got no problem with knitting anywhere
(Colin: lines 43-45)

Whilst showing self-confidence this also provides another example of creating social capital and creating a wider acceptance of diversity (Putnam, 2000). It also depicts acceptance within the knitting community and increased tolerance from the general public, explaining how increasing numbers of men seem to becoming interested in knitting. There appears to be a social shift in the younger generation, suggesting that they may be becoming disenfranchised with the solitary confinement in which they have placed themselves with their almost constant immersion in games consoles and headphones.

Most participants enjoy sharing their skills and rekindling interest in people who may not have knitted for many years, highlighting the fact that once learnt, knitting is never forgotten. Some participants regularly volunteer to demonstrate the craft and pass their skills onto others:

What’s nice about Harrogate is that you get a lot of textile college pupils. They come and of course they’re only taught machine knitting which is nice in its own right but number of them that come on the school trip either Thursday or Friday but then come back on Saturday to do a little bit more. I’ve even had somebody come back to show me the jumper she’d knitted the following year
(Geoff: lines 227-235)

In this way social capital is being given without mutual tangible benefit, but most participants spoke of the sheer pleasure of feeling appreciated:

I think it’s quite fun as well, when you’re teaching someone new, and they get frustrated and they don’t ... understand what you’re doing. ... you’re doing something magical with your hands and they can’t comprehend, but I think ... when the penny drops and they actually get it, I think it’s quite a big relief to them and to the teachers as well
(Harry: lines 383-391)

Again, the words ‘capital’ and ‘mutually beneficial’ do not sit well here as there is no tangible benefit to the participants’ whilst there is to the recipients. However, intangible benefits abound. As Geoff exemplifies, simple acts of kindness can have an enormous unintentional impact on people. Speaking of one particular show he recalled how one woman returned the following year to show him a photograph of her creation, whilst a man from Glasgow chats to him every year (lines 449-451) and waxes lyrically when discussing his
interaction with children (lines 381-382). Most of these examples are from Geoff simply because he is retired and has time to regularly volunteer, passing his skills to others in the linking social capital context. All participants reported skill sharing predominantly in the areas of bonding or bridging social capital.

The majority of participants also spoke of philanthropy either in terms of skills or objects they had created. Much of this relates to bonding and bridging social capital with items being made cooperatively or individually. Dan spoke of his mother knitting items for charity raffles at the local pub (lines 37-38) whilst Harry told of his experience in Holland, mentioned in the bridging social capital section. He joined a group who met regularly for a chat and coffee, making items such as hats and scarves to give to disadvantaged people. The group promoted themselves to gain more members and beneficiaries, thereby creating both bridging and linking social capital.

Discussion

This study found that valuable social capital is created by male knitters across each of the three domains which have a common theme of philanthropy running throughout. The types of social capital are so inextricably related within this research context (Figure 3), that they merge into a convolution that cannot be directly applied to the research question. Therefore the discussion will be centred on the key findings in terms of the value of each type of social capital and the similarities and differences in the outcomes of different combinations.

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**Figure 3: Types of social capital dimensions and their connectivity**
One striking finding is that none of the participants seemed aware of the crisis in masculinity (Faludi, 1991) which may be due to all of them demonstrating a non-hegemonic masculine identity in line with previous research (e.g. Swain, 2006; Wetherall & Edley, 1999) enabling them to engage freely in any activity of their choosing. This is clearly a valuable asset which requires further research in order to discover whether this is a cause or effect of participating in a non-stereotypical activity.

Findings also suggest that bonding social capital is pivotal to the creation of bridging and linking social capital. Within a familial context, benefits seem to accrue not only in educational terms (Field, 2003) but also in well-being (Agahi & Parker, 2008), self-confidence and benevolence, having a knock-on effect in terms of bridging and linking social capital and enabling male knitters to be comfortable with their unconventionality and accept the diversity of others, increasing tolerance in society as a by-product (Putnam, 2000). Whilst participants enjoy close bonds with their families these do not appear to be constrictive or damaging in any way. Knitting can be seen to create extremely valuable social capital, with few negative effects (Coleman, 1994). Rutt (1987) noted that middle and upper class families continued to teach boys how to knit until after World War II. Future research into the relationship between leisure activities and SES may provide knowledge in respect of any effects that damaging bonding capital may have on the creation of valuable bridging and linking social capital.

The philanthropic atmosphere surrounding the participants suggests that they do not embrace neo-liberalism and are unconcerned with the status quo of power as described by Bourdieu (1983). Each participant demonstrated caring for others in all domains of social capital, negating the theory that social capital and neo-liberalism provide mutual benefits (Putnam, 2000). Morals and values found in this study suggest philanthropy has never left society, it has simply fallen from favour and been replaced by individualism (Baron et al. 2000) and is in opposition to Fukuyama’s (1999) reciprocal theory. Trust and values have been rebranded in neo-liberalistic terms as market commodities by Putnam (2000), who failed to adequately address linking capital and evaluate intangible benefits such as simple acts of kindness, perhaps due to the lack of welfare support in the USA. Benevolence appears to be a precious commodity simply because it cannot be reciprocated. Empirical research (e.g. Burt, 1998; Coleman, 1994; Putnam, 2000) alludes to trust as an important lubricant, but has never adequately addressed a conceptual definition (Schuller et al. 2000). No social capital theory will be complete until this difficult task is addressed.

Knitting in public provided opportunities to break down stereotypes and forge linking social capital with total strangers, thus leaving fingerprints upon people that may never be evaluated, although some people returned to see Geoff the following year. When used in tandem with bonding social capital it serves to demonstrate values of caring and sharing towards more disadvantaged members of society in an undemonstrative manner.
Thus, this study supports Field’s (2003) criticism that Putnam (2000) inadequately addressed linking social capital and that different combinations of bonding, bridging and linking social capital could produce different outcomes.

In conclusion, this study has found creation of valuable social capital which functions effectively precisely because it occurs as a result of knitting. Burt’s (1998) idea that each network carries its own value has been supported, but Putnam’s (2000) claim that greater numbers of networks provide greater amounts of social capital has not been answered due to the enigma of trust. However, knitting networks are to be highly prized due to their high levels of trust and reciprocity.

The fabric of the participants lives revolve around knitting resulting in the creation of valuable bonding, bridging and social capital and demonstrating that

> What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.
> Pericles (n.d.)

**Reflexivity**

During all qualitative research it is imperative that each researcher recognises the influence which they exert during the entire process, and the importance of identifying any preconceptions brought into the research. I acknowledge that, from inception to conclusion, this study has been influenced by personal reading and cultural experiences. I am a life-long knitter, from an extremely creative and frugal maternal family. My memberships of the Knitting and Crocheting Guild and the North Cheshire Guild of Spinners, Weavers and Dyers, have brought regular contact with male proponents of these crafts. Until a psychology lecturer explained attribution theory using the exemplar ‘you would think it odd to see a man knitting as it is unusual behaviour’, I had considered that men were a minority group within the craft in the same manner that younger women are. The stereotypical female knitter is represented by the current ‘Shreddies’ television advertisements and, although knitting falls in and out of fashion, it remains relatively unpopular in percentage terms of the total female population, with the majority of proponents having been taught by members of their family.

Further reflection was given regarding Davison’s (2007) notion that interviews are a performance which establishes the way in which facts are negotiated between two parties. During the process both sides make presumptions about each other and interviewers may be unable to present themselves honestly in their efforts not to bias the outcome. Additional contemplation was given in respect of different sex interviews due to the idea that implicit shared knowledge is inherent in same sex interviews (e.g. Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996) and the possibility that a female researcher may gain slightly different insights to those of a male researcher, also bearing in mind that men studying women have felt marginalised and excluded (Schilt & Williams, 2008).
The mother of the teenage interviewee offered to participate in the study, which would have provided another perspective on the subjective experience of male knitters. After considering the ethical issues and difficulty reporting comments which may appear to conflict, I decided not to conduct an interview, but recognise that remarks made during that conversation may have influenced my interpretation of the data.

A qualitative approach was used as quantitative methods would be unable to answer the research question.

References


