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# **Building bridges into the community: Social capital in a volunteering project for care leavers**

## **Care leavers' volunteering and social capital**

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# **Building bridges into the community: Social capital in a volunteering project for care leavers**

## **Abstract**

Volunteering to address poor life outcomes often experienced by care leavers is emphasised in UK policy. Although volunteering is credited with the ability to generate social capital, there is limited research on the impact of volunteering on the social capital of care leavers. This article re-examines data from an evaluation of a volunteering project for care leavers. It explores in what ways young people's participation in the project constitutes social capital. The findings support the

importance of regular face-to-face contact and co-production for young people to become creators of their own social capital.

### **Key words**

Social capital, volunteering, care leavers

### **Introduction**

It is evidenced that care leavers often have poorer life outcomes than their home-care peers and that young care leavers are at increased risk of a range of disadvantages including homelessness, teenage pregnancy, offending, substance misuse and self-harm (Fauth, Hart and Payne, 2012; Simon and Owen, 2006, Hannon, Wood and Bazalgette, 2010). However, it has been recognised that volunteering can help care leavers develop skills which may play an important role to their future life outcomes. Melkman et al. (2015) report that volunteering can lead to care leavers' transition from being helped to helping others, a principle that could build resilience by transforming past adversities from a burden into an advantage. The authors emphasise the key significance of role models, reflecting evidence that socialisation processes are important in encouraging young people's participation in volunteering (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Caputo, 2009; Duke et al., 2009). In line with growing international popularity of the concept of social capital with policymakers (Healy, 2002), UK government policy towards care leavers has emphasised the importance of building young people's social capital to help overcome disadvantage. The updated Care Leavers Strategy (HM Government, 2014) emphasised the importance of care leaver volunteering stating that such opportunities can help to develop skills in "communication, team work, organisation, confidence and leadership" (Care Leavers Strategy, 2014 p. 16). However, little research has been conducted into the impact of volunteering upon the social capital of young care leavers.

### **Research Aim**

This study aims to explore how social capital, in its various forms, is implicated in the successful engagement of young care leavers in a volunteering project. It uses data originally collected for a mixed-methods evaluative study aimed to assess the impact of volunteering opportunities on young care leavers, particularly their access to social networks and on their wellbeing. This re-examination of the qualitative data from the evaluation aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of the processes at work in the generation and kinds of social capital that result from care leavers' engagement with the project and how participants may benefit from this social capital.

### **Social capital and care leavers**

Little is known about the social capital of looked after children or those leaving care (Van Audenhove and Vander Laenen, 2017; Barn 2010). However, it has been suggested that care leavers may lack social capital in comparison to their home-care peers (Broad, 2005; Stein, 2008). Young people in care may lack the same support networks as their home-care peers and it is argued that the nature of the care

system exacerbates this lack of social capital by failing to provide stability of placement, school and neighbourhood setting (Barn, 2010). Within this volatile context, trust has been highlighted as a key concern (Oosterman et al., 2006). Melkman et al. (2015) point to the importance of stable relationships in facilitating role models to develop pro-social helping behaviours, and as a stepping stone towards normalising care leavers' life experience and developing a sense of belonging.

Care leavers are more likely than their home-care peers to have limited family support, peer networks and community stability, and this is likely to have a negative impact upon their ability to find work (Noble-Carr, McArthur and Woodman, 2014), access development opportunities (Hiles, Moss, Wright and Dallos, 2013) and could cause an increase in risky behaviours such as drug taking (Cheng and Lo, 2011; Comptroller and Auditor General, 2015; Arnau-Sabates and Gilligan, 2015). Additionally, research has found that care leavers are more likely to have a successful transition into independent living if they have formed positive relationships with their peers, family members or support workers (Stein and Morris, 2009).

For young people in general, social networks appear to be highly influential in determining their spatial horizon: for example, the geographic location of the work places of family and friends influence whether young people 'transcend space' or are 'trapped' by it (Green and White, 2007, p. 78). Young people are predominantly viewed as benefitting from social capital but have limited resources to be involved in the processes leading to its creation (Morrow 2005 cited in Barn, 2010).

Coleman (1988), Bourdieu (1983) and Putnam (1995, 2001) have all articulated the concept of social capital; arguably the most influential of these with regard to policy terms has been Putnam's definition of social capital as trust and norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 1995, 2001; Portes, 1998). This perspective envisages social capital as an outcome when residents of a geographical place get together on a regular basis to engage in joint activities.

Putnam (2001) distinguishes two main forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to social networks that are constituted by those who see each other as similar and are hence somewhat exclusive and more inward-looking, for example friendship and family relations. Bonding social capital is seen to inspire trust, norms, solidarity and belonging. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to social networks that are more inclusive and outward-looking, because they are formed between individuals who are different from each other. Bridging social capital thus helps with acquiring new information and resources and is credited with enhancing community cohesion by making links between tightly bonded groups (Putnam, 2001). It might be argued that care leavers are a demographic group that may have a shortage of bonding social capital, especially that which is constituted by family ties, while potentially having access to bridging social capital in the form of statutory worker involvement.

Debates about social capital often focus on two questions. Firstly, which form of social capital is most beneficial and secondly, how is social capital created? With regard to the benefits of social capital, it appears that bridging social capital is valued

more highly than bonding social capital. Especially in the context of individual disadvantage and personal development bridging social capital is often seen as most beneficial (De Souza Briggs, 1998). For Putnam (2001) bridging social capital is the most important type of social capital because it defies the “illiberal effects” that bonding social capital might generate (Putnam 2001, p.358). Szreter and Woolcock (2004) have suggested a special form of bridging social capital, which they call linking social capital and define as relationships between those who are “unequal in their power and their access to resources” (Szreter, 2002, p. 579) and which is important in community and economic development. Granovetter (1973) argued that bridging social capital or “the strength of weak ties” helps individuals in finding a job. However, the literature also indicates that the usefulness of social capital depends on the context in which it is generated and utilised. Social capital is not necessarily beneficial in its own right, nor is there any one type of social capital that can be seen as particularly beneficial, but different types of social capital complement each other and are interdependent (Harris, 1987; Agger and Jensen 2015). Therefore, when looking at how care leavers might benefit from social capital different types of social capital and how they interact need to be considered in order to understand how they may benefit care leavers.

When it comes to the question of how social capital is created, one major criticism of Putnam’s (2001) approach has been the fact that he conceptualises social capital in terms of large-scale statistical measures, rather than seeing it as a process that unfolds in a certain context (see for example Crossley, 2008; Phillipson, 2004). For civic engagement in voluntary organisations or volunteering – a key indicator for social capital suggested by Putnam (2001) – importance of context means that whether engagement builds social capital or not depends on the nature of the activity and the organisation. Milligan and Fyfe (2005) argue that this depends on the extent to which voluntary organisations are actually run by volunteers, rather than paid staff; similarly, Lichterman (2006) argues that it depends on the “customs of group life” (2006, p.563). In other words, the way in which volunteers interact with each other and the types of activities they are involved in influences whether social capital is created or not. Therefore, rather than assuming that young people’s involvement in volunteering projects is by itself an indicator of social capital, it is necessary to look at how this involvement actually works in practice.

Putnam’s (2001) focus on geographic communities might be seen as outdated, given the ease of transcending geographical distances with communications technology (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). Further, the applicability of Putnam’s (2001) concept to young people has been questioned by Morrow (2004), who finds that the social capital concept as proposed by Putnam (2001) is altogether irrelevant in young people’s lives. She nevertheless concedes that using social capital as a sensitising concept can achieve a much-needed focus on processes and practices in young people’s lives. Consequently, in our study we looked at social capital in the context of everyday relationships that were formed between the actors in the course of participation in a volunteering project. Taking Putnam (2001) and the critiques of his social capital concept as a starting point, we incorporated linking social capital and drew on Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988), whose conceptions of social capital

we considered as complementary to rather than in juxtaposition with Putnam (2001). This is useful in order to explore how young people see their involvement; do they see their participation and the relationships they form as a result as a conscious investment for future benefit in the sense of Bourdieu (1983) or is any value that is created in terms of relationships a by-product of engagement in volunteering, rather than the aim, as Coleman (1988) would suggest? As Bourdieu (1983) suggests, relationships are not created equal, rather, it depends on whether they provide access to resources of some kind and what type of resources these are. Looking at everyday relationships formed by virtue of participation in volunteering enabled us to examine how young people benefited from developing relationships to others and whether any of the structural network effects studied by Coleman (1988) were at play in creating these benefits.

## **The Study**

An emphasis on the benefits of volunteering has resulted in funding being given to organisations that provide volunteering opportunities to care leavers, such as the youth volunteering project (hereafter referred to as 'The Project') under study here. Based in Greater Manchester in the UK, The Project provides volunteering opportunities to people in care and care leavers aged 13-21. Project activities include taster days and group volunteering opportunities, for example visiting the elderly, conservation work, helping at a refugee drop-in and making cards for sick children. Young people are also offered informal learning sessions on life skills and issues such as anger management. Young people are usually referred to the project by their social worker. A key element to The Project is that staff use an intensive engagement process which involves one-to-one relationship-building, during which they assess young persons' interests and gradually ease them into group activities. Another key aspect relevant to this study is that The Project encourages self-determination and co-production as the young people take an active role in designing the volunteering opportunities and promoting the project to peers.

In a recently published paper (Webb et al., 2017) we analysed qualitative data derived from a mixed-method commissioned evaluation of The Project using these data to test the psychological concepts of identity capital and resilience. The study presented here utilises the same qualitative dataset, but differs from the earlier study by conducting an analysis framed by the sociological (and political) concepts of bridging and bonding social capital. Further, this more recent analysis adds to our earlier paper by more explicitly expounding upon the implications for policy and practice.

## **Methods**

A bespoke qualitative data collection tool derived from United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (ONS) descriptors for social capital (Foxton and Jones, 2011) was used to guide data collection; this methodology is detailed further in Webb et al. (2017). The ONS definition of social capital outlined by Foxton and Jones (2011) has the following dimensions: civic participation, social networks and support, social participation, reciprocity and trust, views about the local area.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who typified the gender, age and geographical location(s) of those who engaged with The Project. Community stakeholders (for instance, youth workers, foster carers and project staff) were recruited in order to gain a situated understanding. In total, eight young people and 11 stakeholders participated in qualitative data collection. Six young people and four stakeholders are represented in this paper for analytical precision; these in-depth data extracts have been purposefully selected for inclusion here as they typify the diverse range of responses and respondent characteristics found within the larger dataset.

Semi-structured interviews were guided by a themed interview schedule designed to allow young people to reflect about their participation in the project, as well as contextualize their experience on the project in their everyday life. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants providing explicit consent. Selective verbatim transcription was undertaken of recorded interviews, and these data were transferred to a qualitative data analysis software package, QSR Nvivo. Qualitative data were thematically analysed using *a priori* themes derived from Office of National Statistics (Foxton and Jones, 2011), as well as based on additional themes that emerged during the analysis.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from a university Research Ethics Committee. We worked with stakeholders in the partner agency to consider ethical matters (anonymity, confidentiality and data protection) and safeguarding duties on an ongoing basis. All fieldworkers obtained Disclosure and Barring Service clearance. Face-to-face interviews took place in private locations within public settings. This meant that other researchers, stakeholders and young people were always nearby. Information giving/consent processes were adapted for young people with reading difficulties in order to ensure that their consent was meaningful and fully informed. The true names of participants described herein have been protected with pseudonyms.

## **Findings**

### *Relationship to project workers*

Access to the project was significantly influenced by gatekeepers. The Project workers had to build trust with staff members in the relevant statutory services as well as with the young people. This appeared effective as in some cases The Project workers could embed themselves in statutory agencies. However, statutory staff members remained reluctant to advertise the project widely. As Bridget states;

“Communication ... giving young people the information so they can make their own choice whether to go on the programme or not, that’s what’s lacking” (Bridget, youth worker).

Rather than advertising the project to all young people in their charge and then letting project staff assess young people’s suitability for participation in The Project, statutory colleagues handpicked young people whom they thought were most likely

to benefit from The Project. In the words of Sylvia, project worker at a sheltered housing facility: “people have to be ready to do something. They have to want it for it to work.” Statutory staff are hence relying on their own individual judgment of young people in order to decide whether to refer them to The Project or not.

However, referral alone was no guarantee that a young person would enrol in The Project as project staff found a need for an intense engagement process to build trust. This often started with individual meetings with each young person, during which staff members developed an understanding of the young person, the challenges they face and their level of confidence. The Project found they needed to move at the pace the young person was comfortable with and develop volunteering opportunities responsive to their needs and interests. Overall, this engagement process was characterised by persistence and patience. Project staff found that young people frequently missed meetings. Staff built this into their process by phoning young people prior to meetings to remind them. When a young person lacked confidence to join a Project group, staff worked individually with them until they were ready to engage.

Establishing a face-to-face relationship appeared to become crucial, as the following statement from Kate shows;

“If she’d just sent me a flyer ..., I would have looked at it and [thought that it is] not really interesting. But I think because she rang me and was, like, ‘do you want to meet up?’ ... we did it on one-to-one it was more like ‘oh yeah’, because you can tell by their facial expressions on a one-to-one rather than on a piece of paper, you just think oh [yes]” (Kate, care leaver).

Interviews with social and youth workers suggest that the engagement approach used by this project stands in contrast to other provision targeted at young people, which often presupposes service users who are ready to make a commitment and punishes failure to follow through. As Teresa explained;

“Sometimes the young people will engage, sometimes they won’t, but I feel that the project workers ... have got a very good understanding of that, which really helps us because ... a lot of agencies are saying, ‘they’re not engaging, end of – that’s it!’ For us that can be detrimental, because that might be a period of two weeks where the young person is having a bit of a wobble and we might be able to get them back on board. If that’s closed to us we’re back to square one. But The Project know our young people; they know what we’re dealing with” (Teresa, social worker).

This knowledge appears to flow from staff members’ approach of building a genuine relationship with young people, an understanding of their needs and being tolerant of challenging behaviours. As such, the relationship between project workers and young people entering the programme has overtones of bonding social capital, with an emphasis on trust. The project worker also appears to form a key bridge between the young person entering The Project and other participants. For many young people the transition from one-to-one meetings to group activities is challenging—something that illustrates how strong bonding social capital can work well for those

who are included, but might work to exclude others. In the case of The Project, the good relationship to the worker seemed to be essential for easing this transition.

Although the importance of that relationship is gradually complemented by stronger bonds with fellow group members, it remains important throughout participation in the project. Kate and Gary refer to the influential position of the project worker;

“I was always learning and picking up other skills. I had different influences with [The Project worker] ... When I was with [The Project worker] I was mature”  
(Kate, care leaver).

Gary uses the vernacular English phrase “egg on” to describe the persuasive encouragement he received from the project worker;

“I hated school but I want to sort out my reading and writing. ... You need someone there to egg you on and [the Project worker] is like that, egging me on to sort out my reading and writing” (Gary, care leaver).

This resembles the type of relationship Coleman (1988) refers to as social capital when he describes family members spending time with a child to support their educational progress.

Social capital is thus demonstrated to be an emergent property of, but also a precondition for, young people’s initial engagement with The Project. Once young people have been referred, the project worker concentrates on establishing a bonding social capital relationship with them, in order to inspire the trust that is necessary to connect them to The Project. In this sense, the project worker-young person relationship has a dual role: bonding on the one hand and bridging on the other.

### *Relationship to other participants*

Underpinned by the strong rapport with the project worker, the social capital that is formed within the group of young people is then comprised of peer-to-peer relationships and the norms of reciprocity that arise from them. The Project meets the conditions Putnam (2001) proposes for social capital formation: young people come together on a regular basis to engage in joint activities. Further, within The Project the “group style” (Lichtermann, 2006, p. 539) was one that allowed young people to become actively engaged in shaping the activities, as the following quote suggests;

“Before the activity we always meet and plan for the activities ... It’s good because we are doing something that we have chosen by ourselves, it’s not someone who planned for it we planned for it by ourselves and then do it by ourselves” (Jacques, care leaver).

This contrasts with a more passive group style that is characterised by simply showing up and plugging into activities that are exclusively being organised and managed by someone else, also referred to as “plug-in volunteering” (Lichtermann 2006, p. 540). The benefits of self-determined joint activity become clear in David’s

reflections on a gardening activity, in which he speaks of himself as part of the wider group;

“I thought we wouldn’t get it done, but we pushed hard on the first day getting all the dried rubbish grass away and then turning all the soil ... it knackered me quite a lot, but we still got it done” (David, care leaver).

The data suggest that the experience of doing things as a group helped young people to discover their strengths and overcome difficulties. Joint activity has also led to the formation and enforcement of norms of behaviour, for example around trying not to swear. The following quote shows that at the beginning project workers reminded young people not to swear, but over time older participants began to take on this role towards younger participants;

“It has been nice to see some of the older ones ... to start taking more of an older peer role towards the younger ones. At the beginning it was always us challenging, ‘please don’t say that’. But now the older ones are taking on that role” (Bridget, youth worker).

The social, youth and Project workers and one foster parent interviewed for this study, predominantly emphasise the bonding nature of The Project. Because it is exclusive to people in or leaving care it brings together people with similar experiences, so The Project appears to constitute bonding social capital. For example, Wilma observes;

“If they didn’t have groups like [this], they wouldn’t have the chance to ... get an insight into why they’re looked after and realise that they’re not on their own” (Wilma, social worker).

Becoming part of The Project and thus a bonded group of similar individuals means that participants can take things for granted in ways that are not possible when being with other friends. As Wilma explains;

“One person would say ‘Oh, I’ve got contact [with a parent]. Do you have contact?’ Some of their mates [outside of The Project] wouldn’t even understand what contact is, whereas in The Project they can do that. ... It gives them an opportunity to be themselves” (Wilma, social worker).

Being in a group that constitutes bonding social capital in this way, young people on The Project are able to exchange information relevant to the problems that being in the care system entails, for example on their entitlements while in foster care.

Self-confidence and skills related to social capital are also referred to as one of the outcomes of being part of a group of similar people. The young people develop essential skills for making links outside of the group and connecting to others at a less superficial level. This is often framed in contrast to prior experiences, where they have felt excluded or bullied by other bonded friendship or interest-based groups. Responses that are similar to the following quote can be found in nearly all of the young people interviews;

“I can actually listen to people because [before The Project] I used to be, oh right, I’m not listening to you and walk off, but I’ve started listening to people more and I’ve learnt how to have a conversation more with people as well, because before The Project when I met someone I knew I would just say ‘hi, how are you’ and that would be the end of the conversation” (Gary, care leaver).

Developing close ties to peers in programmes like The Project may thus also allow young people to improve their bonding social capital outside of these programmes. For example, a foster carer (Monica) reported that her foster daughter (Claire) gained confidence since attending The Project and was able to be more assertive in her relationship with Monica. Monica reported that this growth in confidence enabled her to get to know Claire better and helped them to bond. This may be illustrative of how bonding social capital may lead to further bonding capital, through a virtuous circle of impact.

By providing an arena for bonding social capital to develop, The Project provided an important source of stability, as the example given by Wilma implies;

“One of the young people has had eight placement moves. But through a lot of that [she and a friend of hers who is also in The Project] have been able to liaise and when she’s been sad she’s facebooked her or texted her and she’s been there to help her. And that’s because of the continuation of the groups that they’ve gone to” (Wilma, social worker).

The young people themselves also comment on the fact that they have made friendships as a result of the project. However, they appear to value these friendships not for their exclusivity, but for their ability to open up opportunities to socialise more widely. David talks about this;

“Since I’ve joined The Project ... I can just go out and meet new mates ... But without this project I don’t think that hardly any of the young kids have got that opportunity, they would probably all just stay in their rooms or something. But since this has been going everyone’s got to meet new mates, they all hang about with each other or keep in contact, go and meet them, go and say hello to them, swimming, anything” (David, care leaver).

This appears to suggest bonding capital on one level, because David talks about friends. However, one of the characteristics of bonding capital, the inward-looking nature or exclusivity of a friendship group does not seem to be present in his quote. In fact, none of the young people talk about close friendships on The Project. Indeed, some young people are eager to assert that the friendships they make on The Project are different from those that they have elsewhere, with Project friends being equivalent to weak, not strong ties, because of lesser frequency of contact;

“I have [people from The Project] on Facebook..., but I don’t get really involved in them ... I just like to stick to my own friends because you know them, I just think I know you from The Project but I don’t really know them, it’s not one of my next-door neighbours who I see every day” (Kate, care leaver).

This evidence suggests that participation in The Project group activities generates bonding social capital in the form of trust, norms, reciprocity and access to relevant information. However, bonding social capital on The Project carries within it the notion of bridging social capital and weak ties, rather than exclusively being focused on strong ties. The group-based trust also inspires some young people to become more comfortable in developing social relations outside of the group.

### *External relationships*

Participation in the project facilitates new external relationships and reinforces pre-existing external relationships.

There is evidence that by looking beyond the group, young people may begin to redirect attention from their own problems to those faced by others. In this way, volunteering provides a window into the lives of other people – which, according to Putnam (2001), inspires a sense of generalised reciprocity, as well as building skills for further civic activity. In the following quote Steve describes his feelings whilst volunteering in an old people's home;

“I can't really describe how it felt, but it was very upsetting. You don't know what they're going to say, you might tell them one thing and they might forget that and might ask you again, you can't really say 'I've just told you that', so you have to explain something to them in a different way, but try not to make them upset or something” (Steve, care leaver).

Jacques specifically referred to his ability to make a contribution and to perform a bridging role;

“I'm doing this here in this area and when I come to The Project I bring the skills I've learnt here to The Project and the things I've learnt from the Project I take it to another community” (Jacques, care leaver).

Giving young people opportunities to forge relationships with stakeholders and organisations external to the programme links them to information and resources that are not contained within their bonded group. In the observation of Monica;

“She wouldn't have met half these people if it hadn't been for The Project. ... Chances are she wouldn't have done half the things she's done. Like getting involved in voluntary work. And when one door opens another one opens” (Monica, foster carer).

Kate, who became involved in peer mentoring through The Project, described her plans to utilise this relationship for her job search;

“I will do this as volunteer work and ... get to know [my supervisor] a bit better and go back to her and say 'I want to make a job out of this. How do I go about it?'” (Kate, care leaver).

This points to social capital in Bourdieu's (1983) sense, where a conscious and self-interested investment is made in social relations for future benefit.

Involvement in The Project may also lead to strengthening existing relationships by working closely with other workers involved with the young people. Here, network structure similar to that credited by Coleman (1988) in the formation of human capital (Coleman, 1988) seems to be at work: because there is a link between two adults who are both connected to a given young person, it is possible for these two adults to exchange information, affecting their relationship to the young person. For example, Teresa reports that the project worker's information-sharing about a young person's progress helped the social worker find a basis for building a better relationship with a young person in her charge;

"That young person saw [us as social workers] quite negatively, it was a little bit difficult to get her engaged, but... [knowing what she was doing on The Project] gave me a way in, because I could be like 'oh, what were you doing, that's brilliant' and kind of building the relationship with that support" (Teresa, social worker).

Whilst this study did not aim to explore social workers' professional development the findings begin to show how these workers' engagement and involvement beyond statutory social services could be developmental for them as a result of their acquisition of bridging social capital. Interestingly, however, this bridging social capital could only materialise because The Project workers had built trust and hence bonding social capital, among their statutory colleagues. This did not work in all places, but where it worked, partnership working with The Project and thus with staff who was external to their agency enabled statutory workers to gain a deeper understanding of the young people they support. Bridget talks about her learning as a result of joining The Project staff in the delivery of some project activities;

"With other projects I worked on, because they were so sporadic, you don't really get a good taste of [the young people]. You know, they won't open up to you as much. But with this project, we're seeing the same young people on a regular basis. We are building up that trusting relationship with them. They do open up; they do talk; they tell you what's going on in their lives. And that's been an eye opener. I've always known that children in care have a rough time ... What I found with working with this group is the severity of what these young people are dealing with" (Bridget, youth worker).

Teresa comments on how her original assessment of young people's suitability for the project turned out to be flawed;

"All my young people who I've referred, who I've thought aren't capable or ready for group work have all managed it, so there's something that's working there that we think is just brilliant, because something they're doing is getting our young people on board" (Teresa, social worker).

On a more mundane level, engagement with The Project simply provides access to new information; "The project worker being around, attending our team meetings and telling us when things are going on. That's helped us know what resources are available" (Nathalie, social worker).

Through volunteering on the project young people appear enabled to move from forging friendship-like ties towards working on their bridging ties and developing a wider sense of reciprocity and connection with others in society. Statutory workers who are engaged with or involved in the project expand their bridging social capital, with implications for their professional development.

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that Putnam's (2001) social capital concept is relevant for understanding the benefit that has accrued to the young people and illuminating some of the processes that are at work. Elements from Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1983) can assist further with this.

This study suggests that social capital in Putnam's (2001) sense, characterised by relationships, trust and norms of reciprocity, emerges from young people's regular face-to-face encounters to engage in activities with each other. Programmes like The Project may generate many types of social capital and while it is possible to distinguish the different types of social capital these do not often align clearly with certain relationships. A project worker who is trying to engage a young person into the project may thus build a relationship of trust, which is in line with bonding social capital, but this is for the purpose of linking the young person into the project. Hence, the project worker's relationship with the young person embodies both bonding and bridging social capital. Similarly, from the perspective of a young person entering the project, the move into the project could be seen as bridging social capital. Subsequent integration into the group of peers who share similar experiences could be conceptualised as bonding social capital. Bonding social capital in The Project, however, appears not to be exclusively constituted by strong ties, but by weak ties that are seen by young people as distinctly different from friendships they have elsewhere and that are characterised by strength due to frequency of contact. Therefore, social capital is a process that can be viewed differently, depending on the position someone has in the network of relationships that constitute social capital. As a result, conceptualising social capital as a static thing, in line with Putnam (2001), is not reflected in lived reality.

Bonding social capital has been credited with enabling people to "get by", to inspire trust and belonging, while bridging social capital has been associated with "getting on" (de Souza Briggs, 1998). This study suggests, along with Agger and Jensen (2015), that bonding social capital may be the bedrock from which not only more bonding social capital can be built, but also other forms of social capital. It is bonding social capital that young people in care are likely to lack most; hence the importance of alternative opportunities to build bonding social capital. The findings from this analysis do seem to suggest that a young person's journey through the project – starting from one-on-one meetings with the project worker, through to group-based activity and finally volunteering in the wider community – is paralleled by an expansion of the focus of social relations. Initially, bonding social capital is very important, but this facilitates forays into bridging social capital.

The findings highlight some of the potential practical benefits of social capital for young people and show that some young people do use The Project as a targeted

investment into relationships from which they expect future benefit, in line with Bourdieu's (1983) social capital concept. However, there is reason to believe that, for most of the young people, social capital is a side-effect of participation in the project rather than something consciously sought, which is more in line with Coleman's (1988) view of opportune benefit gained through everyday interactions.

The findings also support Lichterman's (2006) group style argument (Lichterman 2006) being highly relevant to appreciating the circumstances under which volunteering contributes to social capital. This suggests that, contrary to Morrow's study (Morrow, 2004), Putnam's concept of social capital based on civic action can be relevant for young people, but this has to be done via programmes that emphasise co-production rather than passive consumption or "plug-in style" (Lichterman 2006, p.540) volunteering. In projects governed by such principles, young people thus become instrumental in processes that create social capital, rather than just being passive beneficiaries.

Interestingly, the findings also suggest that young people value face-to-face relationships despite their familiarity with and heavy use of technology and social media. Initial engagement into the project usually required the direct, face-to-face engagement of the project worker with the young person, rather than more impersonal means of communication. However, there is also evidence that, once a relationship has been established, technology may help with sustaining this relationship. This is in line of Putnam's (2001) argument for technology coming into play only once a relationship has been established.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

To achieve desirable outcomes such as engaging disengaged young people into a volunteering project, different types of social capital need to be acknowledged. For young people it may not be sufficient to be in the possession of bridging or linking capital in the form of a social worker in order to be recruited for the project. Social workers acted as brokers or gatekeepers to The Project, limiting the number of young people who benefited from the project by cherry-picking. Those young people who made it past the gatekeeper benefited from further engagement by The Project workers, who constituted bonding and bridging social capital alike. Hence, for a vulnerable young person to become part of a project, a significant investment into relationships is necessary, rather than exclusively relying on referral agencies. Although bonding capital is often dismissed as less relevant for advancing individual development it is important to build in opportunities for bonding as part of recruitment and project delivery if potential service users are likely to have a dearth of bonding social capital. This has implications for designing initiatives, as well as for how they are funded.

Partnership working across agencies can be effective for providing the type of social capital that is likely to benefit young people. When workers from different organisations involved with the same young person communicate across organisational boundaries, they may deepen their respective relationships to the young person in question, thereby unlocking the ability to support this young person more effectively. By building relationships with and learning from the young people,

statutory workers, in particular, can gain new insight into this group of young people. For them, engagement with The Project constitutes bridging social capital that results in access to new information and resources, thus enhancing their professional development.

The face-to-face relations that Putnam (2001) emphasises appear very relevant to engaging young people – something that would qualify the dominant view that young people are particularly receptive to social media-based methods of communication (Gray, 2018; Favotto et al., 2017; Herring, 2008). Projects focussed on engaging disengaged young people should therefore try to prioritise face-to-face contact, reserving the use of social media for the time after relationships have bedded in.

For volunteering itself, rather than promoting volunteering activities per se, it may be more effective in enhancing social capital to prioritise volunteering opportunities that enable young people to become active participants in the process.

## **Conclusion**

Social capital, in Putnam's (2001) sense, supplemented by other social capital concepts, is a useful lens for showing not only *in what ways* care leavers benefit from programmes like The Project but also *why* they benefit. Our findings suggest that it is not a single type of social capital, but the combination of its different elements that may make such programmes enriching for young people. For young people in or leaving care, bonding social capital should not be dismissed as unimportant and could, indeed, be the bedrock for other forms of social capital to form. Our study suggests that when participating in programmes guided by principles of co-production and self-determination, young people have the opportunity to develop from being consumers of social capital to creators of social capital. It may be important to recognise the importance of human relating in this social capital development, as the young people in our study appeared to continue to have a deep appreciation of the value of face-to-face relationships.

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## Tables

<b>Table 1: Interview Participants</b>
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Pseudonym	Role in the project
Bridget	Youth Worker
Claire	Care leaver
David	Care leaver
Gary	Care leaver
Jacques	Care leaver
Kate	Care leaver
Monica	Foster carer
Nathalie	Social worker
Steve	Care leaver
Sylvia	Sheltered housing project worker
Teresa	Social worker
Wilma	Social worker