



Strong and weak ties: the social capital of older people in an Australian coastal resort.

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Social capital

- Definitions

- "**Social networks** and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"

(Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000)

- A product of social organisation which groups can draw on to achieve shared objectives

- an essential mutuality involved in its creation

(Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, 1986)

- Both "public good" and "private good"

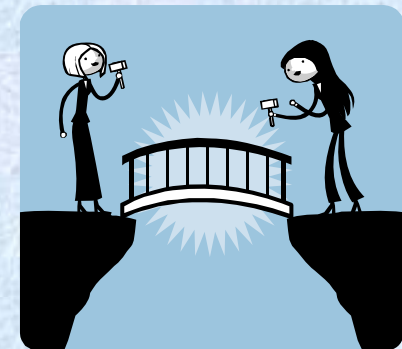
(Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000)

Types of social capital



- **“bonding” capital**
 - close relations between like persons

- **“bridging” capital**
 - connections across social groups



- **“linking” capital**
 - access to economic, social and political institutions and services

The Study

- Phase 1: Surveys received in late 2005 from



Age Cohort	Males	Females	Total
60-64	22	31	53
80-84	27	23	50
Total	49	54	103

- Phase 2: January – August 2006



47 interviews with 54 survey respondents

Research method

- **Survey gathered background data**
 - Sample size too small for full analysis
 - Used to provide context for interview sample
- **Thematic content analysis conducted of transcripts of semi-structured in-depth interviews**
 - Coded and analysed with assistance of NVivo7 software



Findings – survey

- **Most common form of household was married couple**
 - older group more likely to lose partner, live alone, move to retirement village
 - majority had no family in area
- **High rates of active participation, membership**
 - sporting, social or religious organisations
 - one in five volunteer
- **Positive feelings re community**
 - confident of help if needed



Findings – social networks

- **Family occupies central position**
 - importance, role affected by circumstances, background & attitudes
- **Friends most numerous**
 - numbers and nature of friendships varied widely
 - gender and cohort differences
- **Neighbours not often close friends**
 - but provide instrumental support



Findings – social participation

- **More planned social activity in younger group**
 - casual encounters important in older group
- **Clubs and associations offered shared interests**
 - shared activity for men
 - shared friendships for women
 - members/volunteers
 - not all were “joiners”
- **Approaches to retirement**
 - men cease work, find meaning in sport or contribution
 - women leave jobs (often reluctantly), build new connections, maintain family cohesion



Findings - community

- **Attitudes influenced by nature of community**
 - transient and temporary populations
 - retirees and sea changers
 - geography important
- **Mostly positive**
 - strong sense of attachment
 - feelings of safety high
- **Some negative**
 - low levels of trust in local government
 - ambivalence towards holiday visitors
 - basically monocultural community



Social capital in later life – individual level

- **Individual social capital in late life is the product of the whole of life**
- **Connections are affected by individual values**
 - life history and circumstances
 - health status
 - access to transport
- **Physical and mental disabilities adversely affect connections with friends and family.**



Social capital in later life – community level

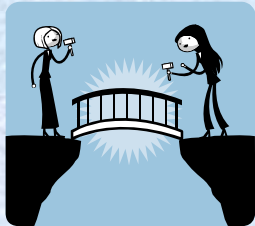
- **Older people members of many communities**
 - contribute to community social capital as
 - volunteers
 - social beings
 - friends and acquaintances
 - family members.
- **Social capital is a shared resource between life partners**
 - loss or absence of a life partner changes
 - nature of social interaction
 - place in community.



Social capital in later life – types of social capital



- Most important connections are with family and homogeneous friends (bonding capital).



- Connections across social groups (bridging capital) are useful, especially with younger people.



- Casual contacts, together with links to institutions and services (linking capital) become more important with increasing age and frailty.

Impact of ageing

- **Social life becomes more central to self-identity**
 - retirement from work
 - move to a new location
 - empty nest
- **Losses in very late life**
 - friends, family and partners
 - personal capacity and well-being
 - contact with wider social circles
- **Impacts may be affected by**
 - change of accommodation
 - formal and informal support.



Social capital in later life – Connections and disconnections

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