

Conceptualizing Social Capital in Relation to Children and Young People:  
Is it Different for Girls?<sup>1</sup>

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Paper for presentation to Gender and Social Capital Conference, University of  
Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, May 2003

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DRAFT FOR CIRCULATION

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has had a chequered history. In 2000 I was invited by some 'social capitalists' to give a brief feminist critique of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* to a Social Capital workshop held at St John's College, Cambridge. I was greatly assisted in the production of that paper by Professor Anne Phillips, Director of the LSE Gender Institute; and encouraged by Prof Sheila Riddell and Dr Eva Gamarnikow (both participants at the workshop), to develop the critique by utilising data from my own research to explore the salience of gender for social capital in relation to children and young people. In an ideal world we would have co-authored a paper, but time constraints have meant that it hasn't happened. So I am immensely grateful to Anne, Eva and Sheila, and to the organisers of the Winnipeg Conference, for encouraging me. Above all though I must thank the children who participated in my research and their teachers for enabling the research to take place.

For the purposes of this paper I am following the definition in the UN Convention on the Rights and referring to children and young people under the age of 18 as 'children'.

## **Introduction & Background**

Since 1998, in the UK, there has been an explosion of interest in social capital at both the policy and research levels. In the late 1990s the Health Development Agency (then the HEA, the health promotion arm of the Dept of Health (England & Wales) commissioned a series of qualitative and quantitative research projects designed to test, measure, or generally explore the relationship between social capital and health (broadly defined). The definition of 'social capital' in this work was based on Putnam's (1993) version of social capital, consisting of social and community networks; norms of co-operation, reciprocity and trust; community identity and sense of belonging to one's community; and civic engagement or participation.

In an earlier review paper drawing on other critiques, I suggested that Putnam's conceptualisation was problematic for many reasons (Morrow 1999) but particularly so in relation to children because it ignored the effects of gender, except to portray the consequences of women's employment as negative, both for community cohesion and for their individual children; that women's work in creating or sustaining social networks/social capital was rendered invisible; and that US research (particularly derived from Coleman (1988) focused on 'family structure effects' on children, - took a top-down view of the effects of parents on children, with a focus on parents' ability to invest in their children's well-being and/or future (see also Edwards et al 2003, Blaxter & Hughes 2000). As Molyneux (2002) points out, Putnam

often endorses 'the family' as a prime locus of social capital, to be worked with and strengthened. On the face of it few would disagree, but much depends on how this is interpreted and what is meant by 'the family'. In much of this literature the family is treated normatively as a unit in which little or no account is taken of the gendered divisions of labour and the power within it (p183).

'Parents' in the social capital literature are often undifferentiated, and this masks the way in which most 'parenting' tends to be done by mothers (Breugel & Warren 2003; this has of course long been recognised in feminist research, see Reay 2002).

I argued that a more active conceptualisation of children could be used to explore how children themselves actively draw on, generation or negotiate their own social capital, or indeed make links for their parents, or even provide active support for parents. In other words, children's agency, constrained though it may be, was downplayed in the

US research, and children appear as passive burden on adults' time. The focus on some of the US studies was also on the 'quantity' of social capital, not the 'quality'. For example, Coleman (and others) used the number of siblings as an indication of a lack of social capital, the argument being that the more children in a family, the more dilute the amount of adult attention to the individual child, which produces weaker educational outcomes. This ignores how siblings may interact to support each other. Many of the studies that 'measure' social capital seem to assume that individual children are only influenced by family structure and school. They do not give an account of the broader social context, such as friends, social networks, out-of-school activities such as paid work, and children's activities in their communities. Nor do they pay much attention to structural constraints and how these impact on social capital, and these constraints may be differentiated according to gender, ethnicity and location.

I also suggested that Bourdieu's more complex and contextualised account of different forms of capital as interrelated could be usefully applied in research that tried to link the social context of children's everyday lives whether home, school or neighbourhood to health/well being (Bourdieu 1986). While Bourdieu recognised that women are responsible for maintaining affective/familial relationships (see Reay 2002) he doesn't use the concept of 'emotional capital' in relation to gender - see eg Nowotny (1981) who suggests that there may be different rules for the conversion of capital for men and women, which relate to women's (historical) concentration in the private sphere; she develops the concept of 'emotional capital' - 'knowledge, contacts, and relations as well as emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterized at least partly by affective ties' (p148; see also Allatt 1993). Emotional capital can be understood as 'the stock of emotional resources built up over time within families and which children could draw upon' (Reay 2002 p6).

At any rate, it seemed that the formulations of social capital based on Putnam's work have been somewhat silent about gender in relation to adults; or (worse) pathologising to lone parents (90% of whom are mothers) and their children. What would the picture look like from the perspectives of children? Do the different elements of 'social capital' operate differently according to gender in childhood?

### **Conceptual frameworks**

Two theoretical frameworks informed the research described in this paper. The first was the emergent sociology of childhood, based upon the work of two British social anthropologists Allison James and Alan Prout (1990; see also Mayall, 2002). They argue that we need to move beyond psychologically-based models that construct childhood as a period of development and socialisation. Instead, we need to see children as active social agents who, at least at the micro-level, shape the structures and processes around them, and whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right. The second paradigm was a key strand of 'welfare research' (Williams et al, 1999) that attempts to incorporate social context into health research (Macintyre, et al, 1993) and to explore the importance of 'place' and 'lay knowledge' in theories and research on health inequalities (Popay et al, 1998). These two paradigms form the basis for the study reported here, exploring children's subjective experiences of their neighbourhoods, their quality of life (and ultimately their well-being/health), the nature of their social networks, their participation in their communities.

### **Empirical example:**

(for full details of methodological and ethical considerations, see Morrow 2000, 2001a&b, 2002). The research was conducted in two schools in relatively deprived wards in a town in SE England (disguised as 'Springtown'; children chose their own pseudonyms; the site was chosen to match another HEA study on adults and social capital). One ward consisted of 'suburban sprawl' on the outskirts of the town, with post-war housing and factories; the second consisted of a mixture of industrial development, and Victorian, inter-war and post-war housing development. The sample comprised 101 boys and girls in two age bands: 12-13 year olds and 14-15 year olds, with a significant proportion from minority ethnic groups.

A combination of qualitative research methods were utilised to explore children's subjective experiences of their neighbourhoods, their everyday, lived experiences, their quality of life, and the nature of their social networks. These included structured methods, in the form of freely written accounts, to elicit personal information about friendship and social networks. Children also wrote about 'What I do when I am not at school?', which provided data on opportunities for independence and taking

responsibility, membership of clubs and out of school activities, involvement in work (family, paid, as well as domestic), as well as leisure pursuits. They also briefly described their aspirations for the future, and whether they already knew someone doing that kind of work. One 14 year old boy in School 2 was interviewed. Visual methods were also used. Individuals and/or groups of Year 10 students were asked to photograph places that are important to them, using disposable cameras, and then to describe why (this has generated about 100 photos of their environments). Year 8 children drew maps. Finally, group discussions were used to explore their use of and perceptions about their neighbourhoods and town, and their perceptions of news media imagery of their local environments and their age group. They also discussed how their environments might be improved, and whether they felt they ‘have a say’ in decisions that are taken both in their schools and their neighbourhoods (participation).

Gender differences were apparent in a some, but not all, elements of the research, and I am going to structure this paper around the research questions, and explore gender differences (or not) at each point: social networks; trust and reciprocity; views of local area; civic engagement/participation. My conclusions are fairly cautious and I don't want to overstate the case, because it was clear that gender intersected/interacted with ethnicity and age as salient in children's accounts of their experiences – each source of ‘identity’ came to the fore in different ways and was context specific. I'll conclude that gender is relevant as structuring principle at certain points, but not at others, and that it is important to see that children (like adults) have multiple identities that are context-specific.

## **1. Social networks: two parts:**

### **1.1 Familial networks & the quality of relationships.**

Parents, but especially mothers, were very important to both age groups, and the emotional work that mothers do was very clearly acknowledged and recognised by children, but particularly girls. Virtually all the written comments children made about their families (especially their mums) were positive, and this appeared to be regardless of family structure. They weren't asked a direct question about family structure but sometimes it was described in a matter-of-fact way:

the most important people to me are my mother and my best mate. My mother because she always manages to cope with me and can manage to look after me

and my brother on her own, my dad got divorced from my mum 5/6 years ago. I still occasionally see him, but not all the time (Jody, age 14)

Brenda, age 14, described how

The most important person in my life is my mum, she has brought me up the way I am. My dad hasn't brought me up because my mum and dad are divorced, my dad left when I was two years of age, I don't see him much.

Cameron, 13, wrote: 'the most important person in my life is my mum. She understands me the most'. Asa May, 13, wrote: 'My mum is very important to me at the moment because she is due to have a baby at the start of July. /.../ My dad is important because I don't live with him and I like to see him as much as I can'. On her map, she had drawn a section and annotated it with the words 'Aunty's, Nan's and Dad's area', marked separately from 'My area' and 'Nana's area'. Safina, age 13 described how 'After school, I go to Mosque and then after Mosque I come home and look after my 3 smaller brothers and I help my mum to clean up and tidy the house. The most important thing is Mum.' Mayall has noted how Muslim girls in her study 'had a clear, gendered, understanding of how their life now and in the future should be lived, based on Islamic teaching.' (Mayall 2002 p52).

Other girls mentioned how their mums were important for a range of reasons, for example, because 'she is the only one I have to talk to, and she is loving, caring, very kind'; 'she does everything for me'; 'she .. is always there for me when I'm ill and in need'; 'she understands me the most'. Shenna, 12, 'My mum is important because she cares for everything I do like if I go out the front with my friends'. One girl summed it up thus: 'well, my mum is the most importantist [sic] thing in my life because you only get one mum. My mum is important to me because I know I can go and speak to her about anything and that she understands what I go through in life in general'.

Boys were much less forthcoming about the different roles of mothers and fathers, and tended not to separate them out, though a few boys did specify that their mums were important because 'of the things she does for me and family' 'she helps me a lot'; another boy described how he does his homework 'with mum'. None of them described close emotional support provided by mothers in the same way as girls. These examples suggest that the demands for, and the provision of, social and emotional support (one element of social capital) within families across generations

may be differentiated according to gender, and of course reflects societal norms about who undertakes childcare, who is more likely to live with children post-divorce, and who is more likely to be available to 'look out' for their children. The accounts from children also are somewhat out of line with prevailing images in social capital research of lone-parent families as 'problematic' or even deficient in many ways.

### **1:2 Aspirations and social networks**

Previous research has shown economic chances of (adult) individuals are affected by their membership of a kin group (Grieco 1987) but very little research has examined how young people's first or subsequent jobs are acquired through informal networks. I asked children to make a note if they knew what they wanted to do when they leave school and whether they already knew someone doing this kind of thing (to try to explore children's social networks and potential sources of information about jobs; n=78 answered the question, n=46 knew someone in the kind of work they aspired to). In both schools, these responses were (mostly) differentiated according to gender and where children did have 'role models'/sources of information these were almost invariably same-gender. Familial networks appeared to be the main source of information and guidance about jobs and future plans for education, (though again I want to be slightly cautious here because asking children aged 12-13 what they want to do when they leave school may be premature).

#### **Some examples from girls:**

'My sister is a nanny and I want to be that as well' (13 year old girl) When I leave school I want to be a hairdresser. My auntie owns a hair salon. I also want to be a beautician.' 13 year old girl. 'When I leave school I want to go to college for a year to study Nursery Nursing. Then get a job in a nursery or playgroup. I know a lady around the corner from where I live who is a qualified Nursery Nurse' (Sandy, 15). Sabrina, age 13, described in group discussion how she babysat for a family over the road: 'I just babysit, you know the girl opposite me, her auntie went to Pakistan, you see, and all the family did, apart from her grandad, so I used to babysit her every single day after school. That was when she was about three'. She also wrote: 'I want to be a nurse or a lawyer. The girl who I babysit, her mum's sister is a nurse. Or a lawyer because my sister's best friend's sister is a lawyer and is always getting certificates from her university. She is so clever.' There were some high aspiring girls, particularly in School 2: 'forensic psychologist', 'vet', 'journalist'.

### **Examples from boys:**

'I want to be a builder, my dad is a builder' (12 year old boy); 'When I leave school, I hope to work in the field of law, possibly a barrister. My cousin is not a barrister but is a probation officer' (Dave, 14). James, 14, West Ward: 'I would like to do computer programming or do something to do with computers. I know someone who does work with computers and he lives across the road from us and he is a good friend of ours.' Tom, 15, described how 'I hope to be a painter and decorator when I leave school. My brother-in-law used to do this so I used to help him, that is why I'm interested in this work'. Ajit, 15, described how he hoped to 'go to College get an A Level, go to Uni and get a degree in Micro-electronics and manage a company. My uncle in America has a printer chip company'. Jagu 'When I leave school I hope to go onto College and study, A levels, which ones I don't know. I know quite a lot of people who go to College like my big brother and his friends and my friends brothers'. Other boys mentioned wanting to be pilots, one boy wanted to be a mechanic (My third oldest brother is, that's why). There were no examples of boys wanting undertake 'feminine' occupations.

I briefly discussed with the older groups (S2) whether they felt school prepared them for life after school, and one girl commented

Some people don't know what they wanna be, they don't know what's out there, ...they should teach us like about all different opportunities like, jobs and that, everything, what you need to get them, everything, what they actually entail, cos, if you go, you think you want to be like a Vet or something, and you have no idea what you need to do.

She seems to be aware that the sources of information available to her are quite limited, and not surprising that so many children in the study had what might be seen as a realistic reflection of the opportunities that existed for them in their localities, and/or a reflection of the experiences of people close to them; their aspirations also reflected the gendered nature of their work roles if they already had jobs/worked outside school, for example, several girls described babysitting for relatives or in their neighbourhoods as a way of earning money. In social capital terms, then, the children seemed to be aware of potential sources of information, mostly located in familial networks and occasionally in their neighbourhoods, and these were differentiated along gender lines.

## **2. Trust and reciprocity: informal social networks**

Other than familial networks, social networks mostly consisted of informal sets of networks based on groups of friends from school or their neighbourhood. Membership of voluntary associations (so central to Putnam's argument) was quite limited and very gender-specific - six boys mentioned being members of a formal sports team (mostly football - some girls mentioned *watching* football); one girl mentioned attendance at a club, one boy mentioned how important his membership of the rugby team at his Air Training Corps was to him and photographed the trophy cabinet); ten children mentioned using the local youth clubs. Mostly, children described 'hanging out' with friends, and/or participating in various informal sporting and leisure activities (including skating, swimming, and (even!) bowling) with their friends, and friends were enormously important for a range of reasons. In many cases, how children felt about where they live seemed to depend on proximity to friends: as Maggie, S2, age 15 put it: 'I love my house and my area, because there are three parks near me, the town is a five minute walk away, the school is close and I can visit my friends without having to take a bus or walk miles. Most of my friends live in Hill Ward, or my area'. NOT having friends living nearby was a problem, and this seemed to be more marked in School 1 which, as noted above, was in a quiet, sprawling, suburban locality with few facilities for young people. It was also mostly girls who described this, which could reflect constraints on girls' mobility. For example, Olanda, 14, S1, described how 'I'm fairly happy with where I live but would rather live in my old house ... this is because a lot of my close friends live up there. Usually I walk up there most days after school. It would be a lot less hassle if I lived up there near them'. Jade, 14, S1: 'I've known my best friend for about 10 years... she is more like my sister. ... I live in West Ward and have done so for 10 years and [my best friend] lives across the road from me'. Rebecca, (13, S1) described how she doesn't like her neighbourhood:

its boring, there's not many people of my age living round there. Because my best friend moved away she only lives 10 minutes away, but its too much to walk every day there. I've been best friends with her all my life, and I've never broken up with her once. We do a lot of things together, she's coming on holiday with me this year as well, I can't wait.

Children provided freely-written definitions of friendship. These definitions were intended to provide some insight into children's beliefs and norms about friendship. Seventy children answered the question, and nearly a half of those responses (n=33) contained the word 'trust' as an element of friendship. Other components were: emotional support, providing a sympathetic ear, respect, being there, providing

advice, help, caring, sharing, reciprocity, someone to share secrets with, to have fun with. Gender differences in the definitions were not particularly marked though girls tended to give much more detail. Boys tended to define friendship fairly briefly, and used notions of fun and having someone to go around with, though some boys reflected the importance of having someone to listen to them, who could be trusted, for example: 'A friend is a person who you can talk to and listens, and won't laugh or tell anyone about it. A friend is a person you can rely on' (Peter, 12, S1). Three boys, two in School 1 and one in School 2) used the phrase 'a shoulder to cry on' in their written definitions. To some extent, boys are using a different language - of sticking up for each other, having fun together, but they also use the notion of uncritical support, in a similar way to girls. This could be partly related to the methods used. Children were providing freely written responses, and writing is (technically) a private matter - would boys have described the emotional significance of their friends if the question had been asked in group discussions, where pressures to behave 'like boys' might have constrained their responses?

Girls tended to categorise their friends as: 'close' friends, 'very close friends', 'oldest friends', 'best friends', even 'my most best friend', rather than groups of friends. The themes of uncritical support, trust, and 'being there' were frequently mentioned in girls' accounts of why their friends are important to them. Kellie, age 12, S1, described how 'I have known Stacey for two years and she is my most best friend in the world, she is caring, I like her she is very kind and I can talk to her about my problems at school or at home'. Carly, 13, S2: 'My best friend Angelina is important to be because I can tell her some secrets and she won't tell nobody else'. Isabelle, age 15, S2, described how she has friends she hangs around with who had already left school: 'They are really important to me because I can talk to them about arguments/things that have upset me in school and they help because they are looking at the problem from the outside. They aren't all caught up in the situation'. Maggie, age 15, S2, described how 'Even though all of my friends are important to me, some are much more important than others, my very close friends or my oldest friends are most important because they've always been there to help and support me'. One girl, Dion, age 13, S2, wrote: 'My friends are important.. One of them is like my sister'.

Friends were also significant at school throughout the school day. For example, Kerry, 14, S1, described how: 'In school when I am not in my lessons, I hang around with my best friend Sally and my friend, I walk to school with Becky. We normally just walk around having girly chats', and Isabelle, 15, S2: 'I have friends in school that are important to me and we talk all the time in school'.

Boys were more likely to list names of friends rather than to categorise them as 'best' friends, though there were exceptions to this. The assumption is often made that boys' friendships fulfil a different function to those of girls, that of active contributions, like sticking up for each other, and doing things together, and there were examples of this, in the descriptions of what they do outside school in terms of sport and other leisure activities. For example James, 14, wrote 'if I didn't have friends I wouldn't be able to do exciting things like go out to places with them like swimming etc'. However, as noted, some boys described how their friends are important for them because they listened, were loyal and could be trusted: some of them had known their friends for a long time. Bob, age 14, wrote: 'My longest known friend is Dave. I have been friends with him since nursery school. He is a good friend and I value his opinion greatly'. Dave (who was in the same class) had written: 'My most important things is family, but in and around school, the most important thing to me is my friends. Some of my friends like Bob and Fred I have known for about nine or ten years... A friend is someone who is there for you, when you need them most. They don't abandon you in times of need. Friends are for talking to, being there for them, giving them your support'. Joseph, 15, S2 described how in the mornings, he would 'call for my friend and go to school' evenings 'go out with my friends and party, weekends: get up in the afternoon and then go out with friends. Mostly parks and down town. My friends and family are the most important people in my life. They're there for me when I need them. I trust them'.

There were very few examples of close supportive mixed-gender friendships though if children listed names of their friends, these usually included both boys' and girls' names. One boy explained that 'My friend Heather is important to me because I don't see any of my other friends at the weekends and I can talk to her about things I don't have anyone to talk to about. I have known Heather for a long time, for about 4 years.

I know her because her mum is friends with my mum.' (Bart, 13). This is an example of the close connection between mothers' and children's social networks.

In summary, informal social networks seem to work differently for boys and girls, with girls explicitly recognising friendship as a source of emotional support, while boys on the other hand appearing to value their friends for shared activities and sport. However, it is important not to overstate the difference here as some boys obviously use their friends as a source of belonging and trust. And there is also a downside to friendship, very small numbers of boys and girls mentioned the hurt that had felt through falling out with friends.

### **3. Community identity and use of public space**

Previous research has shown that girls tend to have more restricted access to public space due to parents' fears and stereotypical gender expectations (Valentine 1997). Girls in the study were not confined to their homes, however, and described a great deal of time spent out in parks and on streets. However, as Matthews (2003) has also found, girls appeared to be more fearful than boys, and accounts differed by gender, particularly among the older group: threats of sexual assault, anxiety about public spaces, were mostly (but not always) expressed by girls. (This was unfortunately NOT a case of 'stranger danger', as is often claimed in the literature: at the time of the research, a serial rapist was attacking women and girls in the town): As Natalie, aged 12, commented:

I don't feel safe where I live, because we've got flats near us, and because we've heard that people have actually been killed in those flats and stuff, and we have like rapists go round our area... it wasn't very long ago, and I don't exactly feel safe round my area.

And in an older age group, Amy described how:

like someone was assaulted down [in the local park], I mean, that makes you scared to go down there, and that was in broad daylight, so God knows what its gonna be like at 10 o'clock at night. /.../ I live in like a secluded road, hardly anyone comes down my road, but there's nothing there, there's like a little park down the road, but someone was assaulted there, you're scared to go there. So if I was, like, 20, and I had two little kids, I'd have nowhere to take them in [this area], that was safe.

Amy's comment also shows her thinking about others (relationally, Gilligan 1982, 1990). Girls were more likely than boys to show a concern for others, often

expressing a strong sense of morality in their comments - and very often they showed a particularly concern for younger children. For example, one of the themes that recurred were 'No ball games' signs that prevented them from playing near their homes on patches of communal grass. The signs were photographed, depicted on maps and discussed in groups. Isabelle, 15, explained her photo: 'This is a sign that is on a piece of greenery on my road. It stops children from playing typical games, but little children need somewhere to play ... they may not be allowed to go to the park'.

In discussion another girl (S2, Yr10) described how 'Outside my house, we've got this green, and they put a notice up, saying 'no ball games', we had two trees, we used to use it as goal, there was this woman she always complained and she got the council to dig up the trees and put bushes on the grass so we couldn't play, we used to play rounders and stuff'. Another girl, Katie, age 13, included the sign on her map, and wrote underneath 'not fair'. The fact that girls highlighted this may reflect constraints on their mobility: they may want to play nearer to home and not at the parks (where football dominated). As one 12 year old girl (S2) said

I have to come in at 8 o'clock, but if I am in my road I can come in at 9 o'clock, something like that, but when I'm somewhere my mum don't know, kind of thing, when I'm out with my other friends, 8 o'clock.

It was mostly girls who described their parents looking out for them, one girl who had a newspaper round explained that her parents help her with it: 'My mum and dad are overprotective, so they do it with me'. Cameron (12) explained,

'My mum don't like me going up [to another part of town] on me own, because you never know what its like, there's a rapist about at the moment up our area, so its hard. Because you have to watch where you're walking and you're not allowed to go anywhere by yourself, you have to be in a group, and if the police would actually do something about the rapist, then we could like go up [the Park]

In one group discussion girls felt strongly that leisure provision in terms of facilities and activities was geared towards boys 'there's nothing for girls: all they do is play football and basket ball, that's all they do, so there's no point going' (Marissa, 12, S1).

Cameron (12, S2) complained about joy riding, and described how:

Round my area, there's these few boys, and they have this car, and they were speeding down the road, putting the brakes on, and swivelling round. I was

walking my cousin home, and the car come up onto the pavement, and nearly knocked her over'.

She suggested a solution 'most of the boys down our area are interested in cars, and motorbikes, if they could learn about mechanics, then maybe they would be off the streets'. There was one example in a group discussion of two girls describing anti-social behaviour, Natalie (S1) was describing an incident, and admitted 'we were vandalising the bridge, I'm honest' at which point Agnes explained: 'everyone vandalises our bridge'. There was a strong sense that both boys and girls get into trouble because 'we're hanging around on the street because there's nothing to do'.

Shortcuts, paths and routes away from busy roads were very important to children, but these were often experienced as frightening and unpleasant. One girl (S2 12-13) described how

I hate walking through subways, I walk through two subways on the way to school, and I think, am I ever going to get to school? Cos you don't know whether there's someone hanging around the corner, or whatever, or following you behind, ... I hate walking through. Me and my sister just speed through them, but if I'm with like a bigger group, then I don't care'.

Some boys also agreed about these problematic aspects of public space and there were particular difficulties for young men from black and minority ethnic groups who felt under threat not only from older groups of young people but also queried police 'impartiality'. But overall the girls' comments about fear and safety are reflected in the research literature on women and safety in neighbourhoods.

#### **4. Participation**

The final set of questions explored the extent to which children participated in school and community decision-making and while there was a clear shared experience based on age, gender differences weren't particularly marked. Putnam's emphasis on civic participation as a key aspect of social capital is obviously somewhat limited in the case of children, given that they are positioned outside of democratic structures by their very nature as 'minors', though the 'Better Together' Report (Saguaro Seminar 2000) on social capital in USA devotes a whole chapter to 'youth'; and acknowledges that 10-21 year olds are 'too rarely included in American civic life, either in decision-making or contributing roles' and suggests that this group are 'old enough to understand civic obligations but still young enough to be forming civic habits'.

Participation in community decision-making for children in my study was extremely limited. Only one boy felt he could go to his local residents association and make suggestions about his local area and when he said this, other children in the group whispered, 'ah, but that's a posh area'. If representatives from the local town council did come and ask about local facilities, they felt that their parents were consulted, not them. Amy said: 'they send questionnaires to our parents but it's not our parents who want to go to the Youth Club, it's us. So they should ask us'. One girl commented that she felt they should have a say in the community, 'because what happens does affect us as well as the adults and they don't seem to think about that when they're making decisions'. The town council had recently started a 'Youth Forum', but children in the study were not aware of it:

Gemma: No-one knows about it, if there is one

Tamisha: I think there should be one, but

Miranda: but they'd chose the people who do all the best in school, and everything, and they're not average people, are they?

These data suggest that participation, in the sense of being actively involved in decisions that affect them in their neighbourhoods, appeared to be virtually non-existent for these children. Even where supposedly democratic structures such as school councils were in place, as was the case in one of the schools in the study, children did not seem to feel they were experiencing 'participation' through them, and the exclusion they appear to feel is likely to limit their sense of self-efficacy and control over their environments (see Morrow 2000). One of the problems facing this age group is that they have no formal channels through which to communicate, or to convert their energy into a positive resource for their neighbourhoods. Youth fora are the most common way of facilitating children's views, but they do not necessarily work effectively (see Fitzpatrick et al 1998). Miranda's comment, above, suggests that she is well aware of the limits of democratic participation and representation. A sense of participation could be fostered early on by including young people in decision-making processes, whether in schools or neighbourhoods. This is recognised in the (US) social capital literature (Saguaro Seminar 2000), but differences between children and young people are ignored and a bland, unitary concept of 'disaffected youth' is portrayed, and no consideration is given to how these differences may affect willingness or capacity to 'participate'. Further, there are also resource implications for

schools already under pressure to produce outcomes that are ‘measurable’ in exam results; and local government organisations, under pressure to save money.

## **Discussion**

There are of course many limitations to my small-scale study, not least the question of how general the findings might be. The methods used in the research may also have generated different accounts along gender lines, as masculinities and femininities are played out in the research process. Gender was salient at many points in the study - appearing to mirror or pre-figure gender relations and practices in adulthood- in accounts of friendship, the recognition of the emotional work of mothers, in job aspirations and in safety in neighbourhoods. There was clear evidence of caring responsibilities with girls describing a good deal of babysitting and child care activities within their families or neighbourhoods. On the other hand, when it came to having a say in decisions in schools and neighbourhoods, it was young people's shared social positioning and disadvantage based upon their age/generation that appeared to structure their experiences. So the conclusion, to try to answer the question I set myself, is social capital 'different' for girls, the answer has to be yes, in some significant respects, and no, in others. The study highlighted how ‘children’ are not a homogeneous category. ‘Social capital’ needs to be able to accommodate a range of differences; in terms of gender, for girls, personal safety was a crucial issue, and sexual assault was perceived (rightly in this case) as a threat. There were also intersections with ethnicity (not discussed in this paper): fear of racial harassment may lead to social and emotional exclusion.

Overall, the study highlighted how a range of practical, environmental and economic constraints were felt by this age group, for example, not having safe spaces to play, not being able to cross the road because of the traffic, having no place to go except the shopping centre, but being regarded with suspicion because of lack of money. The extent to which children were able to move around freely to participate in activities with their friends was constrained by the physical geography of the built environment, issues of community safety and traffic, parental norms about when children may go out. These constraints are likely differ according to gender. The study also concluded that while social capital may be useful as a tool, or heuristic device, it was also problematic for many reasons, not least around meaning and measurement (see

Morrow 2001b and c for further discussion of advantages and disadvantages of using 'social capital' in research and policy).

### **Plural forms of social capital?**

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam emphasises the centrality of social networks to his conceptualisation of social capital, and plays down the other elements (2000). He and others have suggested that there are several forms of social capital: bonding and bridging; i.e. groups may have high levels of social capital than maintain group solidarity by bonding members together, but show very little of the kind of social capital that bridges other divisions such as gender, social class, ethnicity or generation. Bonding social capital does not necessarily contribute to social cohesion. For example, the fact that children go round in 'gangs' appears to have a negative effect of social cohesion - at least from the perspective of others, whether younger children, or older people (see Campbell et al 1999). But at the individual level, children need both forms of 'social capital': bridging for the future, to enable them to 'escape from disadvantage'; 'bonding' for their social support and emotional well-being. In a way, children have an ambiguous status as existing in the here-and-now *and* in the future. The data about aspirations and networks reflect this: if young people see family members (or people in their neighbourhoods) as the main source of information about jobs, then this is how social inequalities - not least along the lines of gender - are reproduced (hence Bourdieu's emphasis on the importance of family as the site of reproduction; see also Morrow 2001c). Secondly, 'social capital' resides in friendship relationships and peer group, which provide a sense of belonging in the here-and-now. Others have suggested a third form of social capital, 'linking' social capital, connecting or bridging groups to influential others, enabling access to power structures (Foley & Edwards 1999) - this was clearly lacking for the children in Springtown. Molyneux, writing in the context of Latin America/development studies, suggests that the appearance of social capital in the policy field

might be seen as signalling a retreat from more problematic agendas... of citizenship and rights on the one hand, and of provision and policies to ensure greater social inclusion on the other. While citizenship and rights-based agendas raise questions about politics and entitlements, and debates about social integration and inclusion implicitly confront social policy issues, social capital, where it's focus is on micro-level phenomena, raises few such challenging questions. In its most common usages it occupies a terrain upon which politics typically only enters through the back door, while social

inequalities are rarely confronted either in theory or in policy. (Molyneux 2002 p174).

'Social capital' discourses are in danger of avoiding tackling inequalities, whether these are based on gender or other structural differences.

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