

**This is a chunk of text about social capital, which was originally written as part of the book '*Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*', by David Gauntlett. The book was published by Polity Press in March 2011.**

In the end, it was cut to save a bit of space – this chunk didn't seem essential. In the published book, on page 131, it says: "In the past two or three decades, scholars have taken an interest in three different perspectives on social capital in particular. These are based on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. The first two are part of the background story, and I wrote a few pages on them for this book – but then needed to make the book a bit shorter, and so now I've cut those out and put them on the book's website instead ([www.makingisconnecting.org](http://www.makingisconnecting.org))."

This PDF gives you the longer chunk of text about Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, as referred to there.

For more information and videos about the book, see: [www.makingisconnecting.org](http://www.makingisconnecting.org)



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## Three approaches to social capital

In the past two or three decades, scholars have taken an interest in three different perspectives on social capital in particular. These are based on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. The first two are part of the background story, so they get a couple of pages each here, and then Putnam – the king of social capital writers, and the key source for most discussions of the topic today – is discussed in more depth.

### Pierre Bourdieu

The influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was interested in the ways in which society is reproduced, and how the dominant classes retain their position.

(1) – Text originally written for 'Making is Connecting' by David Gauntlett – see [www.makingisconnecting.org](http://www.makingisconnecting.org)

For Bourdieu, this could not be explained by economics alone, and he is especially known for his discussion of *cultural* capital – the ways in which people would use cultural knowledge to undergird their place in the hierarchy. His most famous book, *Distinction* (1984), explores the ways in which the trappings of middle-class taste and cultivation are used by people as cultural signifiers, as they seek to identify themselves with those ‘above’ them on the social ladder, and to demonstrate their difference from those ‘below’. This is not an especially creative struggle, and serves to reinforce those middle-class pretensions. Nevertheless, *Distinction* was groundbreaking as a detailed study of the ways in which cultural artefacts and knowledge were brought into play, alongside basic economics, in the dynamics of social class relations. Reflecting on this work, Bourdieu has said that:

A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognised as economic must endeavour to grasp capital, that ‘energy of social physics’... in all of its different forms... I have shown that capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.

(Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 118–9)

He goes on to define social capital as follows:

Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

(Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119)

This definition, in itself, is similar to other definitions, such as those that we will see below, and Hanifan’s approach above. Where other writers see social capital as a fundamentally heartwarming network of social connections, however, Bourdieu uses it to explain the cold realities of social inequality. Here, social capital reflects the very worst side of the saying, ‘It’s not what you know, it’s *who* you know’. His term points towards a world where the elite jobs go to the posh men (yes, typically men), who went to the exclusive schools. Bourdieu could well be right – in fact, studies of social mobility continue to show that, to varying degrees, this is what happens.

As a use of the idea of social capital, though, it is the most depressing of the models, as its focus is only upon the middle and upper classes making sure that their spheres remain exclusive. Although distinct from economic capital, and operating in a different way, it is inseparable from it. Here, social capital is another tool in the armoury of the elite, deployed to ensure that the ‘wrong’ kind of people don’t enter their circles (Bourdieu, 1986, 1992). Most models of social capital picture it as a force binding groups together in a way which is basically lovely for the people concerned; the sweetness only turns sour – revealing the ‘dark side’ of social capital – when we judge

that the group in question may have unsavoury intentions towards *other people*, as in the Ku Klux Klan example above. Bourdieu's model seems to involve little warmth anywhere: rather, social capital is just a nasty exclusionary device – although its users would see it as neutral and rational.

The Bourdieu approach is an important reminder that social capital can be exclusionary. But to see it as *only* exclusionary is, I think, going too far. Or at least, it's an unhelpful use of a potentially powerful idea, because there's not really anything we could do about that. As I discussed in *Creative Explorations*, Bourdieu likes to talk about people actively 'playing the game', but ultimately sees them as pretty powerless (Gauntlett, 2007: 63–70). On the one hand he highlights the individual's subjective experience, which – if we simplify a bit – he calls the 'habitus', and its dialectical relationship with the wider world (which he calls the 'field'). But, as Richard Jenkins has said, Bourdieu tends to assign so much power to the social context that his universe 'ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies' (Jenkins, 2002: 91). His version of social capital lands in this context, offering an explanation of the ways in which those at the top of social hierarchies can hold onto their position through a range of subtle techniques which cumulatively form an iron grip. This is unappealing to those, like myself, who would like to have some optimism about the possibilities of social change, although that doesn't mean it's wrong. Nevertheless, we might like to consider some alternative models which at least hold out some *potential*.

## James Coleman

At a similar time – the late 1980s and early 1990s – and across the Atlantic, the eminent American sociologist James Coleman (1926–95) was also writing about social capital. Indeed, although their approaches were rather different, he collaborated for a while with Bourdieu, co-chairing a 1989 conference in Chicago, and co-editing a 1991 book, on 'Social Theory in a Changing Society'. Coleman also linked social capital with economics, but in a different way. He sought to combine the insights of sociology and economic theory, seeing social capital as a way of making sense of the overly rational and individualistic models of traditional economics. In particular, he used it to give a human and more collective social face to rational choice theory, which seemed to offer a grand predictive model of how things work, but – less helpfully – saw people more like ants in an ant farm, than as citizens in a civilisation. Coleman's approach leads to a broader view of social capital, where it is not seen only as stock held by powerful elites, but notes its value for all kinds of communities, including the powerless and marginalised.

Let's look at Coleman's arguments in more detail. He opens his key paper introducing social capital by outlining 'two broad intellectual streams in the description and explanation of social action' (Coleman, 1988: 95). The first is the sociological approach, which sees the individual in a social and cultural environment, subject to 'norms, rules, and obligations' (*ibid*). The second is the economic approach, which is about self-interested, independent individuals seeking to fulfil their goals. He says that the problem with the first one is that if the actor is a product of their environment, then they have no 'internal springs of action,' and no individual drive or purpose. We know that life is not like that. But, despite being drawn to the elegance of economic models, Coleman saves particular scorn for this second approach:

The economic stream, on the other hand, flies in the face of empirical reality: persons' actions are shaped, redirected, constrained by the social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organization are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy.

(Coleman, 1988: 96)

Coleman seeks to develop a version of sociology which borrows from both these streams, taking in particular the economist's idea of a rational individual engaging in purposive action, but using it to 'account not only for the actions of individuals in particular contexts but also for the development of social organisation' (1988: 96).

He proposes a model in which social capital is one of the potential resources which an actor can use, alongside other resources such as their own skills and expertise (human capital), tools (physical capital), or money (economic capital). Unusually, though, social capital is not necessarily 'owned' by the individual but instead arises as a resource which is *available* to them. So, for example, if you live on a street where you can rely on your neighbours to look out for your children, then you have access to a form of social capital which other people, in less trusting or well-bonded streets, do not. Furthermore, this is not a resource which I could give or sell to my friend on the other side of town. To get access to it, she would have to move into my street (or one like it) and establish some relationships with her neighbours – all of which would take time and effort – because social capital is a resource based on trust and shared values, and develops from the weaving-together of people in communities.

Coleman also highlights the role of social capital as a source of useful everyday information, and of norms and sanctions, which can facilitate certain kinds of actions, but can also be restrictive (Coleman, 1988: 104–5). In particular he singles out 'one effect of social capital that is especially important: its effect on the creation of human capital in the next generation' (*ibid*: 109). This 'human capital', such as a secure sense of self-identity, confidence in expressing one's own opinions, and emotional intelligence, enables young people to become better learners, and so to be more successful in school and in society. This human capital emerges out of social capital,

because this kind of development depends upon *relationships*, most obviously within the family (or other support network). As Coleman points out:

If the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a small amount, of human capital.

(Coleman, 1988: 110)

In other words, the wealth of knowledge inside the head of a well-educated journalist or lawyer, reading his newspaper at the breakfast table, will be of no use to his son unless he puts down the paper and communicates with him properly – not just to tell him 'facts' but to support him as a human being.

Social capital, then, in any context, relies on people looking beyond themselves and engaging in supportive or helpful actions, *not* because they expect a reward or immediate reciprocal help, but because they believe it's a good thing to do. Coleman can't quite square this with the kind of rational action that his theory assumes:

[Social capital] is an important resource for individuals and may affect greatly their ability to act and their perceived quality of life. They have the capability of bringing it into being. Yet, because the benefits of actions that bring social capital into being are largely experienced by persons other than the actor, it is often not in his interest to bring it into being.

(Coleman, 1988: 118)

You might think that he could overcome this problem by suggesting that when people are altruistic, they might still be carrying the (perfectly reasonable) hope that if one gives support to others, one contributes to a general culture of community helpfulness and support, which might 'pay off' one day when we ourselves need a hand. But actually Coleman gets around the apparent 'irrationality' of altruistic behaviour by saying that social capital arises as a 'by-product' of other activities. This particular assertion seems to be an unnecessary return to the individualism of economics from which he sought to escape. I would argue that many people engage in supportive activities, helping colleagues or neighbours, because they are 'knowing actors', aware of the values of community and mutual support, and that they want to make that part of their lives. They also may simply be happy to do nice things for people that they like.

As John Field notes, Coleman has in common with Bourdieu that 'neither pays much heed to affect, to the fact that people like, love or loathe one another – and therefore associate together or avoid each other – for reasons that lie outside the domain of rational calculation' (2008: 31). We have also seen from the happiness studies, discussed above, that people are not good at predicting what will make them happy – as seen in our tendency to invest too much time in efforts to get a little more money. Indeed, the irrationality of human beings has become a whole field of study in itself.

This research is nicely summarised in Joseph Hallinan's book *Errornomics* (2009), which digests the evidence into chapters which answer the question of why people make mistakes under headings such as 'We all think we're above average', 'We skim', 'We look but don't always see', 'We wear rose-coloured glasses', and 'We'd rather wing it'. Each of these is an empirically-documented fact about everyday psychology, which we cannot really change: after all, how could we hope to persuade the population that their belief that they are the exception to most rules, and have above average abilities, is false? However, these quirks of common psychology need to be accepted by those trying to create scientific models of human behaviour.

Coleman's contribution, then, offers a broader view of social capital. Unlike Bourdieu's pessimistic description of the eternal self-reproduction of elites, Coleman highlights the usefulness of social capital as part of a potential solution for marginalised learners, and its importance in parenting, for people of any social class. Less helpfully, he doesn't seem willing to entirely follow through on his own observations about the limitations of rational, individualistic economic theory – as seen in the rather robotic 'does not compute' refusal to understand why someone might be helpful to someone else without any obvious reward.

## Alexis de Tocqueville, and Robert Putnam

Bourdieu and Coleman are well-known within academic circles, but Robert Putnam is perceived as the popular, public face of 'social capital' theory. A professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Putnam's article 'Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital' was published in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1995, and, surprisingly for an academic article, shot its author to fame – or, at least, fame amongst journalists and policy wonks – as he was invited to meet President Clinton and other influential officials. Putnam then turned his short article into a substantial and thoroughly-researched book, packed with data, also entitled *Bowling Alone*, and discussed it on a tour of numerous venues and radio stations across North America and Europe.

*[Continues as in the book . . .]*

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