PARENTING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: ACCESSING HELP AND SUPPORT FROM INFORMAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

This paper explores the resources and support that parents in the UK are able to access through their social networks, and analyses how these networks are organised and sustained. Concern over a perceived demise in community relations and trust have driven many recent UK family policy initiatives and have underpinned proposals to increase parenting support services. However, drawing on data from the project ‘Resources in Parenting: Access to Capitals’ it will be suggested that parents remain tightly connected to a social network from which they derive help, advice and reassurance. Based on data from 35 in-depth interviews with parents from 24 households across a range of social backgrounds, the paper will provide an insight into the levels of practical, financial and emotional help received by mothers and fathers from family members, friends and acquaintances. Particular attention will be given to significance of gender and class in enabling and delimiting access to various kinds of assistance. In contrast to commonly voiced claims about the fracturing of traditional support systems it will be argued that parenting is characterised by resourceful engagement with a variety of personal and social relationships.
KEY WORDS social capital, parenting, support, social networks, resources

Introduction

According to the current UK government parents in Britain are under ever increasing strain. Transformations in contemporary personal relationships and a fracturing of traditional support structures are making unprecedented demands on families, and undermining the practice of good parenting. Increases in cohabitation, divorce and separation, lone parenting and people living alone, are viewed as evidence of a destabilization of traditional values and identities and are assumed to lead to a decline in social capital. This is seen as leaving parents isolated, unsure and unsupported and has stoked fears about a deficit in parenting skills. In this paper I will critically examine this premise, drawing on data from a large scale qualitative survey and in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers from households across a range of social backgrounds.

Setting the context: parenting and social policy in the UK

While families have long been a source of concern for politicians in the UK, recent years have seen an explicit focus on parenting as a designated area of policy intervention (Wasoff and Hill 2002). The advent of the New Labour government in 1997 pushed parenting practice to the centre stage of the social policy curriculum, in line with stated commitments to support families and tackle social exclusion. The political association between parenting and social ills came to prominence in the early seventies when the term ‘cycle of deprivation’ entered the political lexicon. Keith Joseph, a Secretary for State for Education in the ruling conservative government was a keen advocate of the theory, which suggested that poverty ran in families as a result of children inheriting values and lifestyles which lock them into permanent disadvantage (Joseph 1975). From the perspective of Joseph and other right wing commentators, breaking this cycle of deprivation required a change in the attitudes and moral mind sets of poor parents. Extensive research was commissioned by Joseph in an attempt to prove that poverty was transmitted through families. However, the results of this study effectively discredited the theory, highlighting the significance of multiple structural factors as opposed to culture or attitude (Morris 1994).

Regardless of the evidence, the focus on the conduct of the deprived and disenfranchised was further developed in the 1980s by an emerging ‘New Right’ who sought to shift policy away from state assistance and towards moral regulation (Davies 1993, Dennis and Erdos 1992). In an echo of the Victorian concept of the
‘undeserving poor’, theorists such as Charles Murray proposed the existence of an ‘underclass’ populated by the feckless and work shy, and perpetuated through a ‘culture of dependency’ (Murray 1994).

However, despite the preponderance of traditionalist, authoritarian rhetoric, conservative family policy was in practice contradictory and ambivalent (Fox Harding 2000). As Rodger (1995) has pointed out, the attempts to control and regulate the moral behaviour of family members unavoidably conflicts with the individualistic ethos underpinning Western culture, not to mention the libertarian instincts of many positioned on the political right. There was a renewed focus on the role of parents when the New Labour government in came to power in 1997. Their approach derived from a perception that families had been left unsupported by the state through a period of sustained social change. Transformations in contemporary family relationships were viewed as weakening family values and identities to the detriment of good parenting (Edwards and Gillies 2004). From the perspective of New Labour, families have right to expect and to receive support from the Government, particularly given the ever increasing stress they are under (Jack Straw 1998).

The wide ranging and often contradictory policies directed at families were also heavily shaped by efforts to address public concerns about crime and public order. The current prime minister Tony Blair campaigned for the Labour leadership declaring that ‘the break-up of family and community bonds is intimately linked to the breakdown in law and order’ (cited in Fairclough 2000: 42). This marked a new policy focus on personal responsibility and the role of community and the family in crime prevention (Sim 2000). Drawing on a communitarian discourse as opposed to New Right rhetoric, the incoming labour government proclaimed its intention to prioritise families by placing them at the heart of the policy agenda (Wasoff and Hill 2002). While ostensibly distancing themselves from the more punitive aspects of conservative policy, New Labour developed a social democratic critique of individualism, borrowing from the work of communitarian philosophers such as John Macmurray (1995) and Amitai Etzioni (1994). Tony Blair’s ‘third way’ philosophy aimed to balance individual rights with social responsibility through a contingent emphasis on both liberty and personal obligation.

Social capital and the family

Concerns about the status of family life and the perceived demise in community relations have generated a particular interest in the concept of social capital as a policy framework for theorising and promoting social resources. The prominent theorist Robert Putnam (1993; 1995; 1996), has generated the most
commonly referenced definition of social capital, focusing on trust, norms and networks and explicitly linking their measurement to economic growth and the health and well being of populations. Putnam has concentrated his work in the main on localised communities, but along side other theorists (Newton 1997; Fukuyama 1999), he identifies family as a crucial foundation for social capital. As Ian Winter (2000) notes, these authors do not outline the precise way in which family life supports social capital, suggesting a vague, generalised idealisation of family as providing positive role models. A more detailed consideration of the relationship between families and social capital is offered by James Coleman (1988), who has specifically analysed parent child relationships as a feature of family social capital. His work focuses on the function of norms and networks, defining social capital in terms of the value individuals derive from it. Coleman and various other writers (Furstenberg and Hughes 1996; Amato 1998; Runyan et al. 1998) have attempted to measure the social capital available to children in their families and relate this to outcomes such as educational success, development or wellbeing. Such studies adopt a narrow and largely normative approach to families, evident in Coleman’s negative assessment of household in which both parents work, and his description of the single parent family as ‘the most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families’ (p111; 1988).

However, this theoretical approach to understanding families and social capital resonates with the wider concerns about family breakdown and social fragmentation discussed earlier. Both Putnam and Coleman identify diminishing levels of social capital, linking this ‘decapitalisation’ (Putnam 1995) to perceived changes in family life. In his early work Putnam (1995) identifies loosening of bonds within the family as a major precipitator of the decline of US civic social capital, although he has more recently shifted culpability to television as undermining of trust and group membership (1996). For Coleman (1988) it is ‘strong families and strong communities’ (118) that generate social capital, features of social life that he argues are becoming increasingly less common. As Virginia Morrow (1999) points out, this mainstream social capital literature both draws on and feeds into a powerful political rhetoric about the damaging impact of family breakdown on children and society in general.

This ‘social capital lost story’ Edwards (2004; 5) resonates with wider concerns about social fragmentation, and provides a clear focus for policy initiatives. Given that families represent a crucial foundation for social capital, the state is posed as having a responsibility to address the current deficit in parenting support and to ensure that parents are helped to fulfil their essential duties. This ‘support deficit’ framework has inspired a new approach to family policy in the UK and is characterised by a range of interventions designed to advise and educate parents. These have included the setting up of parenting classes across the country, a national telephone helpline dedicated to parents and the establishment of the National Family
and Parenting Institute with a remit to act as a ‘centre of expertise’ in providing information and ‘authoritative’ advice on parenting ‘good practice’.

The research framework

This paper draws on data derives from the project ‘Resources in parenting: access to capitals’. The project had two phases, with the first based on an extensive survey of parents, and the second involving intensive interviews. More specifically public norms were addressed through survey data, and everyday practices through theoretically sampled qualitative data.

Our intention with the first, survey phase of our research was to determine consensus or lack of it in parents’ publicly expressed norms about appropriate sources of support. The survey was completed through commissioning a series of questions as part of the NOP Parentbus survey. This is an omnibus service conducting face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of parents, within which we were able to focus specifically on parents of 8-12 year olds. Four consecutive waves of the survey were conducted in October 2002, reaching a total sample of 1112 parents. 61 per cent of these parents were mothers, and 39 per cent fathers. 62 per cent were working class and 38 per cent middle class (based on occupation and education). The questions we asked focused on the sample’s views of levels and kinds of help that contemporary parents might access in relation to a number of areas and circumstances of childrearing. In analysing the data from the survey, we used ‘consensus baseline’ and ‘difference of proportion’ tests. These allowed us both to identify key areas of normative consensus in relation to who to turn to for what sort of help amongst our sample as a whole, but also significant gender, class and ethnic differences on some issues.

The second, intensive phase of our research then involved pursuing what resources parents themselves draw on and provide, in the complex and specific circumstances that face them in their own lives, through theoretically sampled in-depth interviews. We explicitly drew on features of Coleman’s categorisation of levels of social capital in order to sample for this stage, focusing on his notion of high and low social capital families. From this perspective the category of high

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1 This study is part of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group programme of work, funded by the ESRC under award no. M570225001. Details about the Group’s remit and specific projects can be found at www.lsbu.ac.uk/families.

2 The research has been influenced by the methodology used by Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) in their landmark study of adult kin obligations and responsibilities, which combined quantitative and qualitative data.

3 See Edwards and Gillies (2004) for more detail on the methodology and tests used in the study.
social capital is limited to a homogeneous family form characterised by two biological parents with a working father and a mother at home caring for no more than 2 children. The family should have lived in the same area for some time and be on a middle range income. According to Coleman this domestic arrangement maximises social capital, ensuring that children receive full time attention from a primary care taker, while reciprocal social relationships are maintained with outside of the family with parents seeking and receiving help through their social networks.

In contrast, Coleman’s category of low social capital encompasses a range of less traditional family circumstances including lone parents, parents who are both in full time employment, families reliant on benefits and high income families whose financial status has freed them from reciprocal commitments. There are, however, various family forms and circumstances where Coleman’s social capital categorisations are less clear. For example, a family’s social capital status might be considered ambiguous if the mother only works part time during school hours. Coleman implies that there are situations where low social capital indicators are ‘off-set’ by more positive circumstances. As a result, we decided to include an additional category of middle social capital to encompass families who appeared to fall between definitions of high and low. Parents from 27 households in the UK were interviewed for this qualitative phase, with the sample spanning a wide range of social backgrounds. Using Coleman’s categorisations, six of these qualified as high social capital arrangement, 15 would be viewed as low social capital structures, while a further 6 fell into the category of middle social capital.

While our theoretical sampling for the qualitative phase of our research drew on the work of Coleman, the content and analysis of the in-depth interviews with parents was influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990, 1997) alternative conception of the interdependence of social and other capitals. Our intention was to contrast Coleman’s predefined and formulaic assignment of social capital on the basis of household structural characteristics with Bourdieu’s more dynamic and contextual approach. In contrast with Coleman, Bourdieu’s understanding of social capital does not centre on its erosion in contemporary society, but on its consistent deployment in the reproduction of privilege and inequality. For Bourdieu social capital is inextricably linked to a number of other central resources, or capitals which determine an individuals standing as well as their likely trajectory. Along with social capital, Bourdieu stresses the significance of economic capital, cultural capital in the form of institutional status and personal values, and symbolic capital representing the construction the other capitals take when they are legitimated with symbolic power. With social capital deriving from family and other social relationships, its type and content is inevitably shaped by the material, cultural and symbolic status of the individual concerned (Bourdieu 1990,1997). Like Coleman, Bourdieu also sees families as motors of social capital, but focuses instead on enduring family practices that perpetuate inequity. Family members with access to symbolic and material
resources are able to draw on these capitals in order to cement their advantage, and transmit the benefits to their children. In contrast, the social capital possessed by the materially disadvantaged enables survival but offers little opportunity for increasing prosperity.

Drawing on a Bourdieu informed analytic framework, the in-depth interviews with parents focused on issues of time, money, locality, children’s health and development, practical aid, schooling, and kin and other social networks. Our analysis then addressed the interaction between social and other capitals in the resources that parents can draw on and give.

**Accessing support in families**

Focusing first on our quantitative survey, we asked questions to find out what people thought in general about the condition of contemporary society. We asked whether they thought parents received less, more or the same levels of help and support from family as they did in the past. The sample was given three options to choose from and we calculated a consensus baseline at 50 per cent.

Table 1: Do you think parents receive less, more or the same levels of help and support from their family as they did in the past? (consensus baseline 50%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option chosen:</th>
<th>All parents</th>
<th>Working class</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As the table demonstrates there was only just normative agreement that parents receive less help and support. The rest of the sample was fairly evenly divided between saying the same or more, but if the sample is broken down by class we can see that consensus was actually stronger among middle class parents, with working class parents not reaching the consensus baseline.

To explore the possible basis for these answers we gave the sample a menu of reasons and asked them to choose as many as they wanted. This is where we had to turn to difference of proportion tests because establishing a consensus baseline would be unfeasibly complex.
Reasons chosen for saying ‘less’ help/support from family than in the past

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Menu of reasons</th>
<th>Percentage of parents answering less*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families are not as close knit as they used to be</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different family structures nowadays, more divorce, single parents etc.</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater geographical distance, families tend to live further apart</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are more stressed and under pressure</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are brought up differently now</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are more independent</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline in community spirit</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are more selfish</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline in religious / moral values</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents tend to get more support from friends</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families are smaller nowadays</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better state provision</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families trust each other less</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Parents gave more than one answer

Looking in particular at those parents who felt there was less family support, we can see the most common answers given were that families were not as close knit as they used to be, that the rise of separation and divorce had been instrumental, and that families live further apart. These reasons tended to be selected together, but we found that middle class parents were most likely to cite them. We also found that fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to suggest that there was a decline in community spirit and in religious or moral values.

A shift of focus to the qualitative sample contextualises this data. At a basic level we found no evidence that parents were isolated or unsure of who to turn to. On the contrary, all of the households we interviewed were socially integrated in reciprocal support networks. In terms of family support, we found a majority of parents did receive help from their family members in some form or another. However, expectations and understandings of this help varied, as did the needs of the parents concerned. Although many parents subscribed to an ethos of family as an unconditional support structure, few sustained this in practice.

Siblings and parents were the main sources of family support for most parents. Sibling relationships were the most reciprocal, with support predominantly
shared between mothers and their sisters. The amount of support that parents received from family members was dependent on family size, composition, and geographical location as well as quality of relationship. Not all parents had siblings, and some had deceased or sick parents. Some family members were separated by hundreds of miles, and some relationships were problematic to the point of estrangement. Significantly, parents who faced these constraints were most likely to construct an ideal of real family as offering an unconditional support structure. Several mothers in particular expressed a poignant sense of missing out on this ideal, despite having access to day-to-day support from friends.

For example, Louise and Garry, a White working class couple, had next to no contact with any of their family members. This was due to a long history of bad feeling among Louise’s family, and bereavement and mental illness in Gary’s. From their perspective, ‘normal’ families are emotionally invested in looking after children, as Louise’s quote illustrates:

The worse thing I suppose is not having any family, there’s no like off to nans in the afternoon, dumping them off at aunties and uncles to let them play a little while, so it’s just, it’s harder because we don’t have that release…. [It would] make my life easier, basically to have someone on hand, like one of our parents, or whatever, auntie or some family relative which you could, you know not feel so much, how can I put it that they have more of an input and stuff, they, you wouldn’t feel as if you had to ask somebody to look after them, or what we doing next, or would you mind having them for two days, where as I think in other families it would just be like an unwritten rule they don’t have to worry about.

It’s important to note that parents who had limited or no physical contact with family members were particularly well integrated in supportive networks of friends, neighbours and work colleagues. However, most still regarded themselves as missing out. Like Louise, they tended to portray other families as providing the kind of unqualified support that few parents in our sample actually received. Referring back to our quantitative survey for a moment, most parents specified family members as the most appropriate source of regular help with child care. In answer to this question 40 per cent specified family, with a consensus baseline set at 30 per cent. But, data from our qualitative sample, points to the greater significance of friends in providing day to day childcare support.

**Parenting and support networks**

In terms of the quantitative survey, there was no consensus on whether more, less or the same levels of support in parenting was available from friends.
Do you think parents receive less, more or the same levels of help and support from their friends as they did in the past? (consensus baseline 50%)

<table>
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However, our qualitative analysis revealed that all the households in this study were remarkably well networked socially, with most having negotiated a range of reciprocal arrangements with friends around accessing support. Parents tended to make friends with other parents, providing and receiving help with childcare/babysitting, picking up and ferrying children around. They also circulated useful information, and discussed and reassured each other over mutual health, development and education concerns. Although many friendships had been built over time, children themselves were active in determining and shaping the supportive relationships parents were able to access. As they grew older, children tended to develop their own social networks, throwing different sets of parents together. This provided opportunities for reciprocal arrangements around sleepovers, lifts and lending and borrowing.

Moving back again to the quantitative survey sample, there was no normative consensus that family and friends were an appropriate source of financial assistance. Friends were particularly unlikely to be regarded as a source of financial support. For example only 2 per cent of our sample thought that friends could be turned to for a loan to buy a new school uniform.

But the qualitative interviews revealed greater complexity, as well as social class differences in parents’ reliance on financial support. In general middle class parents didn’t consider their friends to be an appropriate source for economic help, but they often received interest free loans from family members to buy furniture or new cars. They also tended to see their parents as a potential financial resource if money were suddenly needed at short notice. Working class parents on the other hand were much more likely to lend and borrow smaller sums of money among both family and friends.

A number of parents in the sample had developed close, supportive relationships with neighbours with children of their own. Carol and Nick, a white working class couple described how they had become really good friends with the family next door.

I see Annie practically everyday. We take it in turns with the kids, they go up to school. She takes them up in the mornings, and I pick ’em up. And if she’s still working at [the supermarket], I have her little Michael and Kerry for her, so… but
Val Gillies: Parenting and Social Capital: Accessing Help and Support… 255

Annie lives next door, you know, we look after each other’s kids. If they want to go out, I go and sit with theirs, or if we want to go out, she comes in and sits with ours, you know. (Carol – White, working class mother)

Neighbours without dependent children of their own (mostly elderly women) also featured in the support networks accessed by parents in this sample. Many mothers described how neighbours could be relied upon for occasional babysitting, picking children up from school in an emergency or to more generally keep an eye on children when they’re playing outside. There was though a highly gendered dimension to this kind of support in that it was almost exclusive to female neighbours.

The mothers in our sample gained considerable practical support from friends and acquaintances, and on the whole were most likely to rely on close friends or sisters rather than their parents for emotional support. This reflected the findings of our quantitative survey. A normative consensus that family and friends are the most appropriate sources of emotional support was reached among the survey sample. 22 per cent identified it as a likely reason that parents might need help from family and friends. This was with a consensus baseline of 21.3 per cent.

Although a number of mothers described having a good relationship with their own parents, sharing experiences and concerns with friends or sisters with children of their own appeared to be more of a day to day practice. Mothers also saw themselves as fulfilling an important supportive role themselves by being available to listen to and sympathise when their friends or sisters had problems of their own. Emotional support was also linked to more practical of help. Close relationships could develop from, or lead to hands on assistance. Again this dimension of support was highly gendered. Fathers tended to be less comfortable with the whole concept of emotional support, often stating this kind of help wasn’t something they wanted or needed. When asked about who they were likely to talk to about their worries and concerns most were highly resolution focused. They tended to give examples of particular instrumental problems to do with work or family decisions, and explain how they approached people with useful advice or a direct stake in the issue. Also on a more general level mothers were at the forefront of organising and maintaining social networks, and they appeared to value their friendships more than fathers.

Advice and information

While emotional support was highly valued by mothers, the concept of advice was more generally mistrusted and associated with interference. In terms of our quantitative survey there was no normative agreement about whether or not parents need professional advice and guidance. A majority of 61% felt they did not, and this
view was reflected in the qualitative data, with very few parents themselves seeking formal advice about parenting. Nevertheless, many felt they had gained useful tips through sharing experiences with other parents.

Working class parents, in particular expressed a level of contempt for the professional advice they had received in the past. They experienced it as neither relevant nor wanted. Kelly, a White, working class mother was the only parent in our qualitative sample who had attended parenting classes. She had sought help because her son’s behaviour was demanding and he had become extremely disruptive at school, but she was not impressed with the advice that she received. I find that going to the authorities and that just hasn’t helped at all. I mean they give me this silly parent book thing and it was just a waste of time. I mean 8 weeks I was going there and we got nothing out of it at all…. they’d say to me things like make sure you do 10 minutes a day playing with him. Well I’ve always spent time with my kids anyway, so that really didn’t make a difference.

For a number of working class mothers, this kind of professional advice cut across their own sense of expertise as parents. Most felt they were already skilled bringing up their children, and many expressed pride in their abilities to parent well in demanding and difficult circumstances. Julie, an African Caribbean, working class lone mother, was particularly confident in her proficiency as a parent.

No, no it’s not something where I feel I’m weak in, you know, I think when it comes to like parental skills I have to take me hat off to meself⁴, you know, because erm as like me children didn’t ask to come into this world, I know a hundred and ten per cent I’ve got to make sure that my children have got that erm foundation.

**Conclusion**

Concerns about social capital deficits were not upheld by our data, which demonstrated that parents in our sample were socially very well networked. We did, however, find a strong ethos of family as an unconditional support structure amongst our interviewees. Even though this was rarely lived out in practice, feelings of disappointment or deprivation were sometimes experienced in the absence of family support. The strength of this ideological construction of family, and its distance from day to day reality may have informed the answers given by the 50% of the survey sample who felt parents now receive less help and support from their family.

The crucial role that friends and neighbours played in the provision of practical help underlined the extent to which parents were embedded in reciprocal support networks, however it is important to note the highly gendered dimension of

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⁴ ‘Take my hat off to myself’ is an UK colloquialism meaning to congratulate oneself.
this support. Our data suggests that social capital in this context is predominantly generated, maintained and managed by women. Our study has also highlighted the sensitivities that characterise the concept of advice. Parents tended to associate the term with intrusion unless it related to the more formal aspects of their children’s lives. This underlines the uphill task faced by the UK government in attempting to instil a pedagogic culture where parents routinely seek support from childrearing ‘experts’. Significantly our research also reveals the gender and class dynamics obscured by the generic term ‘parent’, and highlights the limitations of policy measures which fail to address these fundamental divisions.

References


