

Social Cohesion, Higher Education and Marginal Areas: Local Nets, Learning Communities and Social Capital

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Abstract

It has been a common theme in the literature of social science that changes in urban industrial society have undermined the local community and led to a reduction in social capital. More recently, however, developments in communications and information technologies (C&IT) have been hailed as providing a new basis for the formation of community. The use of local nets, in particular, has been seen as having considerable potential for changing the way in which social capital is created and maintained, especially in marginal areas.

The impact of local nets on social capital provides a critical test for analyses of the effects of C&IT on community and society. The question is whether the use of local nets can (re-)create social capital in local communities. Can participation online lead to more participation in the community or to further fragmentation and isolation? Can local nets provide a foundation for the growth of trust and a sense of belonging? What role can online learning communities play in helping to bridge barriers between local communities and the rest of society?

In this paper we report the early stages of a research project that is concerned with the impact of local nets and online learning communities in marginalised communities. Local nets aim to increase social capital, especially with reference to disadvantaged groups such as single parents, immigrants and low-income families, but by encouraging cohesion within the local community may inhibit the growth of wider social cohesion. The development of learning communities, based on online collaboration in the production of community portraits, is presented as a potential way of bridging the gap between groups. Initial analysis of a survey administered in one of the communities involved suggests a relatively low level of social capital, but a high degree of optimism about the potential impact of the local net and considerable enthusiasm for online collaboration.

1. Introduction

The development of the Internet and its associated structures has been heralded as providing both a threat to existing forms of community and a means to providing new bases for social integration.

Critics argue that differences in access to electronic networks provide the basis for new forms of social exclusion and marginalization, differentiating between the information-rich and the information-poor (e.g. King & Kraemer, 1995; Schiller, 1996). Others argue that the use of C&IT for interaction may lead to less face-to-face contact and a further atomization of society (e.g. Stoll, 1995).

Commentators taking a more positive view concentrate on the potential of C&IT to increase social cohesion through the ability for users to link up with others regardless of the barriers of time and place and to provide the basis for a recreation of social contacts and community identity (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Slevin, 2000). From this perspective the use of C&IT offers the possibility of reintegrating marginalised groups and increasing social integration. The development of online learning communities has been proposed as one way of bridging gaps between locality-based and interest-based communities.

The basic question is: *To what extent can the use of C&IT (re-)create social cohesion in marginalised communities? In more detail: Can participation online lead to more participation in the community or to further fragmentation and isolation? Can local nets provide a foundation for the growth of trust and a sense of belonging? What role can online learning communities play in helping to bridge barriers between local communities and the rest of society?*

2. Social Capital

2.1 The Nature of Social Capital

Recent work on the nature of community and social cohesion has emphasised the importance of *social capital*.

Social capital is an umbrella term and appears to have been independently invented a number of times during the twentieth century, most recently by Putnam (1993; 2000), Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988) and Loury (1992). Putnam, the most well-known populariser of the term, defines social capital as “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, p.19). There are close links between the construct and a number of other terms used in the social and policy sciences to describe the state of social organisation or disorganisation, *e.g.* social cohesion or social integration. Reviews of the construct are provided by Woolcock (1998) and Harriss & de Renzio (1997).

Putnam focuses on those forms of social capital concerning civic engagement: “people’s connection with the life of their community” (1995b: 665), concentrating on such relationships as membership in neighbourhood associations, choral societies or sport clubs, but also including less formal networks. He notes that

“social capital is closely related to what some have called civic virtue. The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (2000, p.19).

The consequences of low social capital for health and welfare are legion. At an individual level, social connectedness has been shown to one of the most important determinants of economic success (Loury, 1992) and of physical and psychological well-being (House *et al.*, 1988; Seeman, 1996). Wilkinson (1996: 5) notes that

“People with more social contacts and more involvement in local activities seem to have better health, even after controlling for a number of other possibly confounding factors.”

At a community level, low social capital - often translated as social disorganization - has been implicated in a variety of social problems, including high rates of crime (Sampson & Groves 1989; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997), child abuse (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980), developmental difficulties among adolescents (Furstenberg & Hurst, 1995) and poverty (Thomas *et al.*, 1998). The relationship between social disorganization in local communities and higher rates of deviant and aberrant behaviour was one of the major findings of researchers belonging to the Chicago tradition of human ecology. Kornhauser (1978, p. 63) noted the concentration of deviant behaviour in socially disorganised districts: communities “that cannot supply a structure through which common values can be realised and common problems solved.” More recently, the connection between high social capital and positive behavioural and social outcomes has become part of the communitarian agenda developed by Etzioni (1998) and enthusiastically taken up by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic

Social capital is concerned with connections between individuals and wider groups. In order to analyse the extent of social capital or to examine its effects, it is important to consider the social context involved. Individuals may well be integrated into their immediate community yet isolated from the wider society. People in marginalised and stigmatised communities may feel discriminated against and excluded from the wider society and may, in turn, disengage (Foundations, 1999). Castells (1998) warns of the danger of a "new tribalism" in network society. Putnam (2000, p.21 - 22) points out that

“Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive....it is important to ask how the positive consequences - mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional efficiency - can be maximized and the negative manifestations - sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption - minimized.”

Strong social capital within a group can lead to the exclusion of outsiders. In addition, dense, closely-knit social groups can create pressures for conformity among members that restrict freedom and may make it difficult for them to gain access to resources and information that are available elsewhere (Portes & Landholt, 1995). Inner-city gangs can be seen as an attempt by members of an excluded group to develop a high degree of internal social capital through an emphasis on exclusivity and internal bonding. To avoid fragmentation, bridges between groups are an essential element in social cohesion, knitting groups together.

In an oft-quoted article, Granovetter (1973) pointed to the importance of weak ties as a means of bridging densely-connected groups and making scarce resources generally accessible. This is a function which developments in C&IT seem well designed to facilitate

2.2 Traditional Communities and the Decline of Social Capital.

Ideal-type descriptions of traditional communities stress the active engagement of people living in the same area and the existence of strong social capital (*e.g.* Tönnies, 1957). Relationships within these forms of community are characterised by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment and social cohesion.

It has been a commonplace of much social theory that changes in urban industrial society have led to the decline of social capital and to the severe weakening of the traditional community. There is, however, considerable disagreement among commentators on the timing and causes of the decline.

According to Putnam (2000), referring specifically to the United States, social capital increased during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, but then went into a steep descent. A variety of causes are implicated: changes in the nature of work and the rise of the two-career family, suburbanization and commuting, new forms of private entertainment, especially television, and generational cultural change. The decline in social capital is presented as reflecting an increase in privatisation and the atomisation of society. Oldenberg (1991) talks about the decline of “third spaces” or the “great good place”: public arenas where members of the community can meet, celebrate ties and seek informal support. In the sub-title to his book, Oldenberg refers specifically to

a number of physical locations such as cafes, coffee shops, community centres, beauty parlours, general stores, bars and hangouts, but Wellman (1997) suggests that virtual meeting places may be just as effective as “real” ones. Wellman argues that the sites where people meet have been transferred from the public to the private arena and cites the use of electronic forms of communication as a way of maintaining informal association. The question to be addressed is the extent to which these channels of communication can provide a new route to the creation and maintenance of social capital.

3. Social Capital and Computer Networks

The relationship between the use of electronic networks and social capital has been the subject of considerable argument, but remarkably little empirical study. Wellman and Gulia (1999) point out that the area is dominated by anecdotes, assumptions and prejudices rather than empirical research.

Critics of the social implications of C&IT believe that computer-mediated communication (CMC) may replace face-to-face contact between people with less-satisfactory “virtual” interaction, which will lead to further isolation and the atomisation of society. Stoll (1995:58) claims that “computer networks isolate us from one another, rather than bringing us together”, pointing to the danger that “by logging on the networks we lose the ability to enter into spontaneous interactions with real people.” According to McClelland (1994:10):

“Rather than providing a replacement for the crumbling public realm, virtual communities are actually contributing to its decline. They're another thing keeping people indoors and off the streets. Just as TV produces couch potatoes, so on on-line culture creates mouse potatoes, people who hide from real life and spend their whole life goofing off in cyberspace.”

Concerns that the use of CMC will lead to a decline in face-to-face relationships have found little support in empirical studies of interaction online. A number of researchers (e.g. Beamish, 1995; Hamman, 1998) report that the use of C&IT serves as a complement to face-to-face interaction,

rather than a substitute. Others suggest that relationships formed in cyberspace may be just as emotionally-charged as ones based on physical presence.

The on-line community is often referred to as a “virtual community”, a term popularised by Howard Rheingold in his book of the same name. Rheingold (1993, p.5) offers this definition:

“Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

Describing the experience of participating in one of the earliest on-line communities, the WELL, Rheingold (1993:3) notes

“People in virtual communities...exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friend and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you on the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries.”

Wellman (1997, p.179) points out that “When a computer network connects people, it is a social network”. Hawthornthwaite *et al* (1998, p. 213) note that “Virtual communities extend the possibilities for community; just as CMC extends possibilities for interaction.” Blanchard and Horan (1998) note that virtual communities provide the basis for new forms of social capital.

While accepting that computer-based communication may provide the basis for the development of virtual communities and a sense of community identity, other critics of the potential impact of C&IT on social cohesion fear that its use may increase divisions within society. In addition to existing divisions it is feared that a new distinction will develop, between the connected and the disconnected (Luke, 1993). Participation in computer-based networks requires access to machines and networks, makes demands on skills and may be associated with certain cultural stereotypes relating to appropriate roles. These factors lead those of a pessimistic mind to conclude that rather than

being taken up by the whole community, electronic networks are likely to be dominated by traditional computer users, notably young well-educated men from high social classes. Recent evidence on the use of the Internet suggests that at least in many Western societies the early dominance of young, well-educated males is rapidly evaporating, but designers of systems designed to be as inclusive as possible need to pay attention to potential barriers.

3.2 The Local versus the Global

A distinction needs to be made here between the use of C&IT for interaction across wide distances - the *Internet* - and efforts to use it in more local or community contexts - *local nets*.

Local nets, also known variously as free-nets or community nets, have been established in many marginalised communities, especially in North America and Scandinavia. Residents in areas served by local nets are provided with free or heavily subsidised access to the net, either in community centres or, preferably, in their own homes. Addressing a meeting of the European Alliance for Community Networking, Borgstrom (1998) provided the following definitions:

“I like to define community networking as what happens when people get together to solve problems or respond to opportunities. ... Community networks... are the place-based, community owned and operated electronic spaces where this community networking can take place”.

In contrast to the Internet, which is essentially global in scope, local nets are place-related Intranets. Schuler (1996) points out that

“While virtually all community network systems ... offer access to at least some Internet services (e-mail at a minimum) the focus of a community network is on the local community”

In addition to a geographical focus, local nets almost always espouse social as well as technological goals. Schuler (1996, p. 26) notes that they

“are generally intended to advance social goals, such as building community awareness, encouraging involvement in local decision-making, or developing economic opportunities in disadvantaged communities.”

Many supporters of the development of local nets believe that electronic networks can be used to bring fractured communities together (*e.g.* Morino, 1994), suggesting that they provide a base for the re-creation of a sense of local identity and cohesion. If people can use a local net to get to know their neighbours better online, this will lead to an increase in face-to-face contact, encourage further participation in the community and lead to a strengthening of trust (Åström, 1998). The effect will be an increase in social capital: the denser the networks of civic engagement, the greater the sense of identity and the more likely it is that members of a community will co-operate for mutual benefit (London, 1997).

As noted previously, local nets generally offer connection to the Internet, as well as to local pages. In a typical application, residents can use the local net to obtain information about local services, can "meet" friends for an online chat at any time and can use the local net as a portal to information and services available on the Internet. The common availability of local and global networks raises the possibility that access to the Internet may encourage users to bypass local community agendas in favor of more glamorous opportunities elsewhere. The question then becomes one of whether local nets and local communities can survive in an environment in which people are connected to the global net (Doheny-Farina, 1996).

The administrators of local nets may make it difficult for subscribers to access non-local pages. The construction of boundaries between the local community and the wider world may have the desired effect of supporting local identity and a sense of belonging contributing to what Putnam refers to as “binding” social capital. However, there is a danger that if communication is restricted to the local net, this may encourage the further fragmentation of society and weaken social capital overall. One way to include local groups in the wider society is to work together to build interlocking networks that can help address problems that transcend local boundaries and contribute to “bridging” capital. Morris and Hess (1975) refer to the "outward movement", which is about interconnecting

communities throughout the world. For this to succeed, it is important to identify common issues and build common agendas (Schuler, 1996). One way of doing that may be through the development of online learning communities based on collaboration. This provides an opportunity for higher education institutions and is one of the main components of SCHEMA (Social Cohesion through Higher Education in Marginal Areas: <http://www.stir.ac.uk/schema>), a project supported by funds from the EC Educational Multimedia Taskforce.

4. Collaborative Learning Online and Social Capital

4.1 Online Learning Communities

Part of the remit of SCHEMA was the development of a number of continuing professional development modules for online delivery to health and welfare workers living in geographically isolated areas of Scotland, Sweden, Finland and Germany. The aim was to use the technology of the Web to develop learning communities, spanning disciplinary and geographical boundaries. Each of the modules was based on social constructivistic principles and was intended to bring together workers from different disciplines and different countries in order to form “communities of practice”. Wenger (1998) points to the importance of mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise as defining characteristic of a community of practice and suggests that a self-sustaining learning community will only come into existence when these properties are present.

A description of one of the earliest modules to be developed, *Community Portraits*, has been provided by Timms (1999a). Community Portraits began life as part of an introductory programme in social work, but was transferred to an on-line environment as part of SCHEMA. The module is based on two principles that provide part of the framework for SCHEMA:

- ? The importance of the community context
- ? The significance of collaboration for work and learning

4.2 The Community as Context

Two decades ago, the Barclay Working Group, set up to examine the role and task of social workers in the U.K., presented a case for community oriented social work based on a definition of community in terms of

“local networks of ... relationships with their capacity to mobilise individual and collective responses to adversity” (Barclay, 1982, p. xiii)

In an article examining the implications of the community-based approach to social work Timms (1983) observes:

“Social workers at the local level will need to obtain a grasp of community life - cultural patterns and the meanings these hold for members of the community. ... Clearly what is needed is a service that works in partnership with the community as a whole, supporting existing support systems, promoting new support systems when appropriate and mobilising appropriate specialist help only when that is the most precisely suitable action. In working with the community the emphasis would be on supporting and extending the caring systems that already exist - neither taking them over nor supplanting them.”

During the latter part of the twentieth century the dominant model in the practice of the health and welfare professions focussed on the individual. The emphasis has been on solving private troubles rather than tackling public issues. Espousing a rediscovery of community, Barter (2000) points out

“Unfortunately, embracing community continues to be more in social work professional discourse than in actual practice. Although the concept of community has always been acknowledged in social work practices, it often appears as an afterthought. ...organizational and professional responses to social problems have tended to be more focussed on problem-solving personal troubles without the necessary attention to public issues”

The result of this concentration on “cases” and on therapeutic interventions by professionals has been to disempower communities and the development of considerable strains in the relationship between professional workers, their employers and the public at large. Weils (1996: 497) suggests that the time is right

“... to adapt social work interventions and education to community-based models, and to focus social work on its historical mission of working with people to improve the quality of their lives and to build community and social justice”

In Britain the work of Smale at the *National Institute for Social Work* supported a network of community-focussed social workers during the 1980s and 1990s and produced a number of case studies of social work practice and service with a community based approach (Smale, 1995; Smale & Bennett, 1989; Darvill & Smale, 1990). Recently there have been signs of a resurgence of interest in the possibilities of a community-based approach to social work in North America and Hadley and Leidy (1996, p.826) refer to the irony that

“there are some in America who are looking to Community Social Work as a way out of the dilemmas created by the very system the British are now emulating”.

The impact of communities on social welfare is not necessarily benign. There is a mass of research evidence pointing to both positive and negative impacts of living in one community rather than another. In the social work literature, Martinez-Brawley (1990; 2000) and Hearn & Thomson (1987) refer to the negative as well as the positive pressures and impact of communities on their members. Local and personal networks play a major role in enhancing or undermining the opportunities and constraints of their participants. Not only do local communities provide very varying contexts for individual welfare but they also possess the potential to undermine unwelcome social work intervention strategies. In order to effectively address personal troubles attention must be paid to the context in which they are embedded.

The implication is that social workers ignore the dynamics of the community at their peril. The impact of the local community is likely to be all the greater in cases where geographical or social distance have led to the community concerned being marginalised and “turned in upon itself”. A community building approach may be the most effective way of tackling the problems of the people living in such areas. According to Naparstek (1997: 14)

“In a community building approach, private citizens and public systems come together in joint endeavours that are conceived, planned, and implemented on a small scale we commonly think of as a community or neighbourhood.”

Local nets provide an obvious basis for community building efforts. In order to exploit their possibilities it is necessary to provide a focus for common endeavours, enabling members of the community to collaborate. This is precisely the rationale behind the *Community Portraits* module.

4.3 Collaboration, Joint Working and Community Portraits

The necessity for collaboration and joint working has long been accepted in the theory of social work practice. Social problems do not occur in neat and discrete disciplinary forms: dysfunctional families or individuals may suffer a plethora of problems, some relating to physical or mental health, some to characteristics of the housing or employment markets, some relating to break-downs in personal relationships. Attempts to improve the welfare of a community require attention to be paid to all dimensions. Despite this, the extent of collaboration in practice remains problematic. Structures and procedures have been established designed to provide a framework for collaboration between the various health and welfare professions, such as case conferences, child protection committees and guidelines, but, helpful though these may be, they tend only to deal with problems in collaboration that are themselves structural or procedural. Professional collaboration is an interpersonal process involving relationships with colleagues within and between professions and/or agencies. It is about people working purposefully with people, across boundaries of various kinds and regardless of personal congruity. Joint working in the provision of health and welfare services requires the building of communities of practice which span disciplinary allegiances.

Community Portraits set out to provide a forum for collaboration between members of different health and welfare professions in different communities. In the trial run of the module, in Spring 1999, small groups of workers in Lapland, the Highlands of Scotland and north Germany, worked online to produce portraits of the communities in which they worked. The portraits were produced as the result of a collaborative, comparative approach, based on the notion that the identity of communities is established through a process of dialogue between members of the community and outsiders (Suttles, 1972). Participants were expected to use their cultural and individual perspectives to sharpen each other's awareness of their own community. The aim was to use the experience – and reflective exercises built into the course – to enhance participants' awareness of the advantages of collaboration for extending ways of gathering and interpreting information and for deepening understanding. On the whole, despite the inevitable technical teething problems associated with online courses delivered across professional, national and cultural boundaries, the module succeeded in achieving each main objectives (Timms, 1999 a & b).

Other online units developed in SCHEMA, concerned with the development of services for dementia sufferers, quality standards in the provision of health and care services and the management of drug abuse, have followed the Community Portraits example, stressing the role of interdisciplinary and transnational collaboration. Each unit has been designed to form part of a portfolio of continuing professional development courses, oriented especially towards workers in remote communities. A more radical activity is to extend the scope of the operation beyond the professional area, to include the community at large. This forms the next step in the SCHEMA programme and involves an extension of professional learning communities to embrace participants in local nets.

4.4 Collaboration Online and Social Capital

In the autumn of 2000, a revised version of Community Portraits is being used as a means of engaging members of local community networks in developing their own views of their local areas, comparing them with others, and, hopefully, enhancing their social capital. The approach is based on the belief, expressed by Smale, 1995: 75) that

“People are, and always will be the experts in themselves, their situation, their relationships, and what they want and need.”

The first trial is focussed on residents of two socially-marginalised housing estates, one in Stockholm, the other in Glasgow, which are in the process of installing local nets. Each area is relatively deprived and has been stigmatised in the media. In comparison with national data, each community has relatively high proportions of lone parent families, low educational levels and high rates of unemployment; the Stockholm area has a high percentage of non-Swedish speaking immigrants. The local nets in each estate were originally sponsored by housing associations and aim to provide subsidised access to both a locally-managed Intranet and the Internet. The goals of the networking projects have been stated as being to increase information, interaction and social inclusion, especially with reference to disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed, elderly people, single parents and, in Stockholm, immigrants. In addition to the provision of access in resident’s homes each area also has an Internet Café, providing cheap public access and the ability to combine on-line and face-to-face interaction.

The initial trial of the Community Portraits module involves groups of lone parents in each of the communities. Each set of participants is being offered the opportunity of using Community Portraits as a way of forming a learning community focusing on the issues of social inclusion and social capital. Future extensions will involve other groups in the communities, including professional health and welfare workers along with their “clients” and a number of other community settings. Evaluation of the impact of the approach will throw further light on the capacity of contact between members of differing local nets to enhance social capital.

5. Social Capital in Marginalised Communities

5.1 Definition and Measurement

Social capital is a complex construct, not easy to measure and quantify. Following Putnam, we define social capital as *participation in social networks, the existence of social support and trust, and a sense of belonging*. The construct can be measured by a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. As many of the concepts are rather complex and need to be explored in some detail, research in SCHEMA makes use of focus groups and interviews as well as questionnaires.

In the initial phase of the research a questionnaire concerned with several aspects of social capital and people's expectations of the local net was administered to a sample of tenants in the Swedish community. The preliminary survey was designed to map the situation prior to the widespread dissemination of the local net and the first set of respondents had not yet been connected. In later stages of the research the sample is to be re-interviewed, along with respondents who have been connected from the early days of the local net. Those who take part in the Community Portraits project will form a sub-set. In addition to the questions relating to social capital, the survey includes items relating to respondents' expectations, opinions and experiences of C&IT in general and the local net in particular.

The survey asked respondents about the extent and characteristics of their associational activity and about information and communication in the community, *e.g.* contact with local authorities. Questions concerned with more informal networks include ones on contacts with and the extent to which financial, emotional and social support from family, friends, and neighbours. Trust is operationalised using the Srole anomia-scale (Srole, 1956) with statements measuring general mistrust such as: "These days you do not really know whom to trust". The sense of belonging, or identification with the local community, is measured by questions about commonality and social cohesion.

5.2 Initial Results: Social Capital in the Swedish Community

The initial survey, carried out in 1999, was based on a sample of 90 tenants. In conformity with the overall characteristic of the area's population, many respondents are single parents and almost one-third the sample were born outside the country, with a language other than Swedish as their mother-tongue.

In general, respondents exhibit relatively low social capital. More than three-quarters feel that they have difficulties in participating in the community. Few respondents belong to any association, especially local ones and the majority of respondents believe contacts with local politicians and officials in the community are very poor.

Most residents believe they get enough community information. Comparison with a study carried out in the area in 1995 (Ivarsson, 1997) suggests that in this respect there has been a considerable increase in the residents' satisfaction in the last few years. In 1995 only a quarter of the residents were happy with the information available (Ivarsson, 1997), compared with more than 90 percent in 1999. The main source of local information, quoted by over 90 percent of respondents, is the local newspaper. Unfortunately this ceased publication just after the survey was completed. The ambition of the local net to provide a weekly journal online may help to fill the void which the closure of the paper has created.

Most residents (71 percent) are satisfied with the social support they get and more than half with the number of friends they have. However, most residents have more friends and get much of their support from outside the local community. Half of the respondents feel lonely often or sometimes.

There is a relatively high degree of anomia or mistrust in the community. Most residents agree that "these days you do not really know whom to trust" (66 percent), that "there is no point writing to local officials since they are rarely interested in the problems of the average person" (56 percent) and "whatever people say most things are getting worse for the average person" (52 percent). A significant minority agree that "nowadays you must live pretty much for the day and take the future as it comes" (39 percent versus 29 percent disagreeing).

The results show a low level of identification with the community and there has been no discernible increase in identification during the ten years which have elapsed since an earlier survey (Ivarsson, 1993). Few respondents (23 percent) think that there is a strong sense of community in the area. Most of them believe there is considerable tension between different groups, especially between the Swedish-born and immigrants, but also between different immigrant groups and different age groups. Less than one-third of respondents felt they had much in common with other residents in the community. Despite all this, two-thirds of respondents say that they like living in the area.

The relatively low degree of social capital revealed in the area provides both a challenge and an opportunity for the local net. Improving the attractiveness of the community and enhancing the extent of social cohesion and community “pride” have been advanced by the housing association as prime motives for installing the network.

5.3 Expectations of the Local Net

Despite their lack of direct experience, more than two-thirds of respondents (70 percent) express positive feelings towards the local net. There are few differences in expectations between the genders, between Swedish-born and immigrant-born or between young and old people. Those lone parents who have been involved in discussions about the Community Portraits project are noticeably enthusiastic about the possibilities of online collaboration.

Unsurprisingly, respondents with more computer experience tend to be more positive about the possibilities of the local net. Although the area is relatively deprived by Swedish standards, the level of computer usage is high: almost 40 percent of the non-connected respondents have used a computer for five years or longer.

The majority of the respondents believe that the local net is likely to contribute to an increase in social capital in the community. Almost half (43 percent) agree with the statement that the local net will lead to better contact between residents; only one-fifth (21 percent) disagree. Better contact with local officials and politicians is expected to be generated through the local net by 60 percent of respondents; only 11 percent think it will have no or little effect. An improvement in local information

is anticipated by three-quarters of the sample. Most respondents (54 percent) think that the local net will make the housing area more attractive and that it will lead to the development of a stronger sense of local identity (52 percent agreeing versus 10 percent disagreeing).

There is less unanimity in relation to the anticipated impact of the local net on social relations in the community. Just under half the respondents (48 percent) disagree with the statement that use of the net is likely to lead to less face-to-face contact among residents (30 percent fear it may); 42 percent disagree with the statement that use of the local net will be accompanied by lessened participation in the community (19 percent agree with the statement). The one area where there is a plurality of negative expectations is in relation to the impact of the local net on relations between groups: 24 percent believe that the local net will lead to an improvement in relations; 26 percent disagree and 50 percent believe it will have little impact.

6. Conclusion

The use of C&IT for social networking is a recent, but rapidly growing phenomenon. It can be used either as a force for further isolation and social differentiation or as a force for enhancing social capital. The question addressed here is how two applications of C&IT - local nets and on-line learning communities - affect the networks, support and trust that define social capital in the community.

A basic hypothesis of the research is that local nets provide effective bases for the development and maintenance of social capital. By linking computer networks to physical communities, new public spaces are created, where people can interact with their physical (and virtual) neighbours. Local nets offer the possibility for the creation of new social networks; providing new grounds for the development of relationships based on choice and shared interest. People can easily search for others in the community who share specific interests. As the overlap between online networks and face-to-face networks in the local community increases, so too will social capital.

Through an emphasis on the ability of local nets to enhance collaboration within and between local populations it is believed that the rift between the connected and the disconnected can be bridged. The benefits are likely to be especially pronounced in areas that have been marginalised. The local net and the Internet provide links to other people and to a range of services, including education. Access to local nets can thus improve the quality of local information and communication services, but it also makes easier to access opportunities in other areas leading to an increase in weak ties. The provision of on-line education is seen as a way of bridging local and wider concerns.

Local nets that intersect with communities of practice that span geographical boundaries can be seen as preventing (as well as embodying) many of the tensions between the local and the global that have accompanied the development of modern society. The local net projects, together with online collaboration between the Swedish and the Scottish communities incorporated in the research, may contribute to an extension of social networks across the communities and, therefore, increase social capital both on a local and a global level.

Examination of local efforts to connect residents to local nets and to engage them in online activities such as collaborative learning, will provide a measure of the potential impact of C&IT on social capital in the Information Society. Residents in the area served by the local nets in Stockholm and Glasgow have high expectations of the ability of C&IT to enhance their communities. Whether their belief that the use of local nets can (re-)create social capital in the local community will come to pass, only future research will show.

7. References

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