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Building social capital through outdoor education

Simon Beames^{*} and Matthew Atencio

Department of Education, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

Over the last 15 years, the body of literature surrounding the subject of social capital has witnessed steady growth. While sociologists have extensively discussed how social capital can be created and sustained within local communities and national contexts, there is little evidence of the social capital discourse within the outdoor education sector. Hallmarked by trust, reciprocity and voluntary associations within social networks, social capital may offer outdoor educators a helpful framework from which to conceptualise the impacts of their practice. This paper outlines the principal themes of social capital and explores outdoor education's role in building social capital within the local communities where they often operate. The notion of bridging, as articulated within the social capital concept, offers a way of exploring the recursive relationship that exists between outdoor education programmes and host communities.

Introduction

The concept of social capital involves the quality and aggregation of social relationships that exist within and amongst communities (Stoddart, 2004). This notion of social capital is currently generating much discussion in the realms of public policy and the social sciences, as evidenced by a steady increase in related research conferences, journal papers, and government initiatives (Halpern, 2005; Johnston & Percy-Smith, 2003). Although the academic discourse surrounding social capital is relatively recent and diffused (Coleman, 1988; Narayan & Cassidy, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993; Walters, 2002), the ideas hallmarking this body of literature have a number of themes with which outdoor educators will find sympathy. As noted by Stoddart (2004), the field of outdoor education is well-placed to enhance young people's ability to access social capital at the community level. Scholars have highlighted the significant role that outdoor education can play in the development of social relations that benefit both individuals and their broader communities (Maeda, 2005; McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006).

^{*}Corresponding author: The Moray House School of Education, The University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ, Scotland. Email: simon.beames@ed.ac.uk

However, while ideals such as community intervention and improving social welfare have gained currency within outdoor education, we suggest that these notions can be significantly extended by the concept of social capital. As it currently stands, social capital remains a topic that has received little attention in peer-reviewed outdoor education journals.¹ This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring the important role that outdoor education can play in benefiting participants as well as their broader communities.

Theories of social capital

According to Putnam (2000), 'the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value' (p. 19). These networks benefit the 'productivity of individuals and groups' (p. 19). So, although an individual can possess physical capital (such as a car) or financial capital (such as money), only a group or community can possess social capital. Crucially, however, individuals may gain a wide variety of benefits by virtue of their membership within certain groups. For example, formalised groups such as the Parent Teacher Association, and more informal networks such as those found at the local pub, might yield information about a job opportunity, the name of a reliable baby-sitter or the loan of a cordless drill.

The ideas situated within the concept of social capital are not new; they have recently been presented in what can be considered 'a more appealing conceptual garb' (Portes, 1998, p. 21). Portes (1998) and Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003) claim that the concept of social capital as deployed within the academic literature has been ambiguous and imprecise, despite its increasing popularity as an analytic tool with which to understand the symbolic and material by-products of social relations. Johnston and Percy-Smith, for instance, argue that 'Social capital "feels" as if it ought to be a useful way of conceptualizing and explaining certain social and economic phenomena. However, the closer one gets to it, the more slippery it seems to be' (p. 322). They further add that 'Given the claims that are made for social capital it is perhaps surprising that the concept is so lacking in a widely agreed definition' (p. 323). Writing in the field of physical education, Walseth (2008) has similarly noted that several assumptions linked with the concept of social capital 'such as voluntarism, citizenship, democracy, community well-being, trust, inter-cultural knowledge and social networks' (p. 4) have not been fully outlined or examined by research. Taking these perspectives into consideration, we outline the various ways in which social capital has been previously conceptualised and deployed. In so doing, we seek to provide a clearer picture of the ways in which certain concepts associated with social capital might prove beneficial to the field of outdoor education.

The notions associated with social capital were evident more than 100 years ago in the work of de Tocqueville 2004 [1840] and Durkheim 2006 [1897].² Certainly, Durkheim's seminal work in sociology demonstrated how suicide was more common in societies hallmarked by tenuous and fragmented social bonds. The first explicit use of the term social capital appears to have been by Hanifan in 1916 (Halpern, 2005). In a later work entitled *The community centre*, Hanifan (1920) referred to

social capital as ‘good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals who make up a social unit’ (p. 78).

Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) were amongst the first scholars to develop the theoretical concept of social capital (Portes, 1998; Walters, 2002). Both addressed how individuals may gain cultural and economic benefits as members of families, social groups and institutions. Portes (1998) describes Bourdieu’s interpretation of social capital as

decomposable into two elements: first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of those resources (pp. 3–4).

From a Bourdieusian perspective, social capital, in various amounts and forms, is accrued by individuals through their investments in particular social relationships. This perspective suggests that institutions play a crucial role in developing social networks that can be drawn upon by individuals to garner social capital; this social capital can be subsequently translated into economic and cultural benefits.

Coleman (1988) similarly highlighted the significant role played by institutions or social groups in reproducing mechanisms through which individuals could generate and access social capital. Part of Coleman’s work commented on the high levels of trust that existed amongst Jewish diamond wholesalers in New York City. Developing a social context of trust and shared norms allowed the wholesalers to trade thousands of dollars worth of diamonds without the bureaucratic constraints of contracts and insurance; the threat of negative sanctioning by the social group served to deter members from fraudulent activity. Coleman used this case study to explain how social capital simultaneously works within certain networks as a regulative and productive force, ‘making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible’ (p. 96).

In comparison with Bourdieu and Coleman, Putnam considers social capital in more structural terms—as something held by ‘communities, cities, and even nations’ (Johnston & Percy-Smith, 2003, p. 324). Putnam (2000) conceptualised social capital in terms of connections among individuals and the ‘social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (p. 19). His version of social capital involves investigating the attributes of collectives (Walters, 2002) by focusing on aspects such as trust and reciprocity. His earliest work on social capital compared the effectiveness of regional governments in northern and southern Italy. He found that the impact of a region’s government was determined by two principal aspects: inhabitants’ social associations (for example, leisure and voluntary) and the degree to which individuals trusted strangers within their communities. Putnam placed a high value on supportive and communal social relations that worked as a ‘social glue that holds societies together’ (Walseth, 2008, p. 4).

Putnam’s (2000) book *Bowling alone* is considered the most widely read work on social capital. It highlighted how the decline of social networks outside the family and workplace, such as social, sporting and service clubs, were becoming extinct. Putnam argued that the disappearance of these clubs contributed to lower levels of

social capital in local communities. This decline in social capital was reflected by indicators relating to increased political and civic disengagement, fewer informal social ties, and lower tolerance and trust. Putnam went on to claim that communities with higher levels of social capital were more likely to have lower crime, higher educational achievement, more economic growth and better public health.

In this discussion we have highlighted the different versions of social capital that have gained currency within both academic and political debates. We now articulate how these different versions of social capital might be drawn upon in order to conceptualise the role of outdoor education. Despite the criticisms levelled at Putnam's version of social capital, we argue that his notions of bridging and bonding, in particular, are useful to understanding the role of outdoor education in benefiting participants and their communities. We then suggest that a Bourdieusian (1984, 1986) approach sheds further light on the complex and diverse ways in which social capital is negotiated and held within the 'social field' of outdoor education.

Exploring the possibilities of using social capital in outdoor education

Bridging and bonding

As part of outlining how social capital might underpin contemporary outdoor education approaches, we first pay close attention to Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital as endemic to 'the social relationships that exist between individuals' (Johnston & Percy-Smith, 2003, p. 325). In addressing the ways in which social capital was inherited in social relations, Putnam highlighted instances of 'positive experiences of trust and co-operation within a group or community' (Johnston & Percy-Smith, p. 325). In this context, Putnam (2000) identified two principal kinds of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging*.

Putnam (2000) defined bonding social capital as being internally generated within a particular group or (typically) smaller community. Bridging social capital is considered to be more outward-looking, developed through the relationships existing between people in different social groups. By reaching out to build networks across social divisions, bridging has the capacity to 'generate broader identities' (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). While bonding social capital is described as 'sociological superglue', bridging can be seen as a 'sociological WD-40' (p. 23).

Putnam emphasised the importance of developing bridging capital over bonding capital; bridging is considered to be more socially-integrative and more likely to help people 'get ahead', whereas bonding can be overly exclusive and supportive of the status quo (Walseth, 2008). Yet, it is also important to note that these two forms of social capital may exist and develop fluidly and simultaneously. This idea is put forward in Walseth's (2008) study of the social networks endemic to Norwegian immigrants' physical activity participation. She suggests that bridging and bonding are not 'either-or' concepts; that is, 'many groups bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others' (p. 4).

Stoddart's (2004) study of socially excluded youth in Cumbria illustrates how participants may have developed a bridgeable form of social capital through outdoor

education. She suggests that participants who were required to trust people they had not met before (for example, group members during a rock climbing session) were more likely to trust strangers when they returned to their home neighbourhood. Drawing from Putnam (2000), Stoddart highlighted both *thin* and *thick* forms of trust. Thick trust is typically established through encounters over a considerable period of time, as one might have with a neighbour over several years. Of greater importance, according to Stoddart, was the thin trust that emerged when individuals were forced to trust and rely upon strangers in a new environment.

Stoddart (2004) argued that during the 10-month programme, participants developed thick trust, which facilitated the development of bonding social capital. Through informal communal living and participation in adventurous outdoor activities, the young people were able to strengthen group 'bonds and establish group norms relating to trust and reciprocal support within the group' (p. 11). At the same time, they also developed thin trust by establishing relationships with people who they did not know previously. It was suggested that, through their participation in group-oriented activities with new people, the students developed thin trust that could be extended to wider communities. This generation of thin trust came to represent bridging social capital, as it could support the development of potentially beneficial social networks outside of the group. Stoddart's study reveals the fluid ways in which bonding and bridging might take place within a specific outdoor education context.

Irrespective of whether the type of social capital is bonding or bridging, Putnam (2000) claims that the concept of generalised reciprocity is as important as trust. Strong community networks are hallmarked by 'sturdy norms of reciprocity' (p. 20). Generalised reciprocity occurs when individuals think 'I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road' (p. 21). Norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity benefit societies because individuals help others without feeling obligated to immediately receive something back in return.

From this understanding of social capital, we now turn to outline instances where the bonding and bridging social capital may develop through outdoor education programmes. Following Putnam (2000), we suggest that bridging social capital is more beneficial to communities than bonding, as bridging involves building new relationships across social divisions rather than merely maintaining existing relationships.

Developing social capital through community education and place-based education

While the outdoor setting has been described as a 'powerful medium for exploring the nature of community' (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993, p. 12), much of the literature in North America (Mitten, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997), Australia (Quay, Nettleton, & Dickinson, 2000) and the United Kingdom (Gair, 1997; Mortlock, 1984) conceptualises outdoor education communities as being the small and internally-oriented groups in expeditions and at residential centres. Historically, many outdoor education programmes have focused on the bonding aspects of social capital through

group initiative tasks that necessitate 'teamwork'. For instance, numerous authors who have addressed the role of outdoor education within a community building perspective have championed programmes that model positive human relationships. The key assumption here is that the appropriate facilitation and modelling of healthy community living within small groups enables participants to return to their home communities and become more socially aware and contributing citizens (Lugg, 2001; Mitten, 1999; Quay, Dickinson, & Nettleton, 2000). Indeed, Mitten states that with a positive group experience to serve as a model, participants can return home and recreate communities in healthy ways for themselves (p. 254). This kind of generalisability and transfer of learning from one social situation to another has its share of critics (see, for example, Brookes, 2003), however, and may not be a convincing supporting argument for community-building programmes that take place far away from participants' homes.

We believe that outdoor experiential education programmes, including those that are adventure-based, environmentally focused, or operated through schools (although conducted outside of the school's confines) would be more able to build bridging social capital by being embedded into their home communities. In this way, programmes would have specific relevance to the unique communities where they are situated. Universal programmes that can take place anywhere—or in 'Anywoods, USA' (Baker, 2005)—have been criticised by a number of writers (Baker, 2005; Brookes, 2002a; 2002b; Higgins & Nicol, 1998; Knapp, 2005; Stewart, 2004). Brookes (2002a) is particularly critical of 'neo-colonialist' understandings of the land, in which some locations are viewed 'as empty sites on which to establish social or psychological projects' (p. 2). To operate outdoor education programmes while ignoring the various families, businesses, public services, voluntary groups, and social groups in the communities where these programmes are situated may mean that rich opportunities for bridging social networks are being lost. This insularity is a negative consequence of cultivating bonding social capital; while internal social bonds are enhanced as participants develop thick trust, these participants simultaneously lose out on chances to develop thin forms of trust that might facilitate connections to their broader communities.

Brookes (2002b) states that outdoor education programmes need to incorporate 'knowledge of local patterns of community relationships with nature' (p. 7). This 'place-based' approach involves creating an educational context that is more attuned to human and environmental relationships, and, as such, directly supports the development of bridging social capital. Maeda's (2005) research on communities and 'life environmentalism' in Japan provides one example of how levels of bridging social capital might increase when programmes are enmeshed in their local communities. Maeda described how primary school pupils spent several days working with local elders. Together, the 'bridged' group gathered food and prepared lunch, went out in canoes to catch fish with nets, and played traditional games. This has resonance with two of Ife's (2002) key principles of community development: valuing residents' local skills and letting the community develop in culturally appropriate ways.

Maeda's (2005) work demonstrates how community-based and place-based programmes can foster the building of bonding and bridging social capital. While the pupils in his study may have bonded together during their activities, they also formed significant relationships with people from a different and previously unknown social circle. In a clear indication that bridging took place, Maeda suggested that 'the purpose is to give the participants experiences with which to understand the connections between their whole life and nature in their community' (p. 42). Maeda added that these connections provided students with opportunities to think about, and contribute to, their local culture in ways that served to benefit their broader community and natural environment. We therefore argue that Maeda's community-based and place-based programme provides a rich context for bridging social capital to benefit the local culture and community.

Another example of a place-based initiative that may enhance social capital is the *Outdoor journeys* programme currently being developed in Edinburgh, Scotland. In this programme, students plan and undertake journeys from their school grounds, as a means of learning about human history, local land use, and other living things that inhabit their neighbourhood (for example, trees, bugs, birds). Inevitably, new social relationships are created and built through the students' encounters with local residents and workers. These student-directed ventures further demonstrate how outdoor education might help to build bridging social capital by developing programmes that emphasise the connections between students, local communities and the natural environment. While programmes operating in decontextualised sites may increase levels of bonding social capital within participant groups, they often fail to build bridging forms of social capital that would broaden participants' social networks within their communities.

Social capital and an ethic of care for 'community others'

Recent work in outdoor education has highlighted the importance of developing an ethic of care (Beames, 2008; McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006). McKenzie and Blenkinsop highlighted several distinctive notions of caring; we suggest that these notions fluidly overlap and relate to both bonding and bridging social capital. The concepts of *Care for self* and *Care for close others* both encapsulate aspects of bonding social capital within outdoor education groups, as they involve activities such as discussing how 'one's personal and cultural values relate to those of the program' and 'expressing needs or issues to the group' (p. 100). The theme of 'transference of learning to home life' (p. 100), which falls under the category of *Care for self*, would also support the development of bridging social capital. Within the categories of *Care for distant others* and *Care for the natural world*, much more explicit links to bridging social capital can be made. For instance, 'commitment to community service' and 'local and global community service projects' are highlighted in the former category (p. 100), while the latter category incorporates bridging themes such as 'seeing one's efforts make a difference', 'environmental service projects', and 'environmental ethics/activism' (p. 100).

While we suggest that these latter two ‘spheres of caring’ seem to demonstrate the possibilities of developing bridging forms of social capital within an outdoor education curriculum, we also contend that bridging could be enhanced by adding a further ring of *Care for community others*. While we are sympathetic to McKenzie and Blenkinsop’s (2006) model, we feel that incorporating the *Care for community others* might specifically address the vital bridging relationships that are often missing or given little attention in many outdoor education settings. Educational programmes that focus on *Care for close others* (within the same group or classroom) or on *Care for distant others* (for a village in Sudan) risk failing to establish meaningful relationships with those people in local communities with whom participants have little to no face-to-face interaction.

Outdoor educational programmes that focus on caring for the natural environment, for close others, and even distant others may be ignoring the potentially rewarding social networks that exist within local communities. Explicitly framing student learning around an ethic of *Care for community others* is profoundly important if the intention is to build bridging social capital. McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) suggest that if we ‘all did our best to live caring public lives through an increased consciousness of the implications of our actions, or lack of them, more humans and other aspects of the natural world would likely have their needs met’ (p. 97). While we agree with this statement in principle, we argue that this ethos needs to be specifically extended to the local communities where programmes and participants are situated.

Discussion

Putnam (2000) emphasised the important role played by bridging forms of social capital in helping communities to get ahead (p. 23). It seems clear from our discussion of community and place-based programming that there are several necessary antecedents for outdoor education to play a meaningful role in building bridging social capital within communities. First, programmes need to be situated within participants’ local communities, as opposed to taking place in distant, decontextualised, and exoticised environments that are presented as being more beautiful, natural or wild than home. As Maeda (2005) explains, ‘Community-based outdoor education should be implemented in the participants’ place of residence, not in an “invaluable” eco-system in another place’ (p. 42). While bonding social capital might develop within universal, decontextualised programmes (through team-building exercises, for example), these programmes are internally-focused and do not place little importance on bridging networks across local communities. Indeed, an over-emphasis on team cohesion and group identity may unwittingly sponsor an unhealthy ethos of non-contribution (even antagonism) to all non-group members. This is not to say that bridging does not ever take place in outdoor education; there are likely to be instances where participants build bridging social capital by, say, learning about diverse cultural practices and environments. However, we suspect that these instances are rather rare, decontextualised, and *ad hoc*.

We contend that community-based and place-based programmes more systematically provide participants with opportunities to work on projects involving face-to-face interactions with strangers. These programmes would facilitate 'loose' social connections and networks that would require the development of thin trust relationships. In developing these social dynamics, which could be characterised as an ethic of *Caring for community others*, these programmes could benefit both participants and their wider communities over the long term.

To this end, we argue that outdoor environmental service projects are effective ways for bringing together different social groups within a community. This has resonance with Ife's (2002) work, which stresses the importance of building relationships across social divides, as 'the more people who are active participants, the more ideals of community ownership and inclusive process will be realized' (p. 219). In addition to developing 'loose ties' and thin trust, programmes of this nature may also increase positive understandings and perceptions of the local area in which people live—this is another indicator of high social capital (Babb, 2005). This suggests that community transformation (and arguably building social capital) is heavily dependent on Putnam's (2000) critical concept of generalised reciprocity, where individuals help and play with one another without looking for a specific return.

Addressing the problems of using Putnam's notion of social capital in outdoor education

In suggesting that Putnam's (2000) version of social capital is useful to frame the role of outdoor education, we also acknowledge that there are significant critiques surrounding this concept. Portes (1998), for instance, has argued that the 'the same mechanisms appropriable by individuals and groups as social capital can have other, less desirable consequences' (p. 15). He goes on to outline four possible negative consequences of social capital. First, he argues that groups with strong internal bonds often exclude those considered to be outsiders. So, as mentioned above, team-building exercises that focus predominantly on bonding through the enhancement of thick trust may exclude those considered to be 'outsiders', both within and external to the programme.

A second possible negative consequence is the claims to social capital made by individuals playing marginal roles within their community's social fabric. Portes (1998) attributes the term 'free-riding' to those individuals who benefit from being part of a group with high social capital, while contributing little to these conditions. This might occur on an expedition where one person enjoys the benefits of being with enterprising group members who set up the tents, cook the food and scrub the pots clean, but contributes nothing.

Third, being part of a group or community that greatly emphasises the development of strong norms and shared values (often through negative sanctioning) may restrict an individual's freedom, autonomy and expression of identity. While this may be the goal of a 'Brat camp'-type programme, for instance, these initiatives often ignore the diverse nature of participants and wider communities. So, while Putnam views trust and reciprocity as necessary to develop shared values and behaviours, this approach

may also hinder our understandings of participants' complex lives and their diverse social and cultural communities. Stoddart (2004), for instance, suggests that socially-excluded outdoor education participants have quite different experiences and backgrounds. Putnam's social capital approach, in itself, may not be useful to understand the diversity of participants and the myriad ways in which they 'can be supported in their involvement in outdoor activities' (p. 15).

Finally, Portes (1998) warns that groups possessing high levels of social capital do not necessarily 'do good'. Street gangs and prostitution rings are examples of groups with 'downward leveling norms' (p. 15), where deviant, anti-social, and even criminal behaviour becomes normal. In these instances, 'group solidarity' is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society (p. 17). The creation of powerful norms and associated sanctions for non-conformist behaviour, can mean that members of these groups develop a form of social capital that is not readily transferable across different social networks. Participants in these highly normalised, and indeed regimented, social groups may not necessarily offer their communities positive forms of social capital. Participants in an outdoor adventure-based, youth-at-risk programme may experience living in a healthy, positive community that develops high amounts of social capital. However, upon returning to their home communities, the downward levelling of norms and sanctions associated with their old peer group may restrict them from implementing their newer ways of thinking and acting. At the same time, we suggest that certain normalising aspects of social capital, as developed within certain outdoor education programmes, may not be relevant to communities that are more heterogeneous and democratic in nature.

In particular, the first, third and fourth critiques surrounding Putnam's version of social capital seem to cohere around a central tenet; even as Putnam seeks to highlight the structural conditions that foster the development of social capital, he neglects to articulate

how norms of reciprocity and generalised trust develop in the first place or why the 'stocks' of social capital are subject to variation between countries and communities and over time (Johnston & Percy-Smith, 2003, p. 325).

From this perspective, we suggest that even as the concepts of bonding and bridging are useful, they require severe contextualisation along the lines of classed, racial, ethnic, gendered, geographical, cultural, and political lines. Walseth (2008) has already noted that in the realm of sport, 'social class seems to be a barrier to immigrant young people's potential of bridging' (p. 14). This perspective implies that social capital is not a homogenous entity, as it has different origins, and is thus accessed, constituted and employed in quite distinctive ways.

Portes (1998) takes up this argument and advocates for a more localised and individualised conceptualisation of social capital. He points out that 'the greatest theoretical promise of social capital lies at the individual level—exemplified by the analyses of Bourdieu and Coleman' (p. 21). According to Vyrionides (2008), Bourdieu conceptualises social capital as 'accumulated and reproduced to perpetuate social inequalities' (p. 869). This perspective indicates that we need to pay

attention to the many ways in which social capital is constituted, distributed and taken up by individuals, according to their diverse social and cultural affiliations. This might, for instance, involve closely considering the multiple experiences and backgrounds of participants relative to their engagements with local communities where programmes are situated, so as to better cater to their needs. At the same time, this approach would lend itself to a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between programmes, participants and local communities.

Several nuanced questions could be raised. For instance, how might participants described in contexts such as Nakashibetsu, Japan (Maeda, 2005) and Cumbria, England (Stoddart, 2004) negotiate place-based programmes in different ways, based on their unique social and cultural backgrounds? How might their engagements with these distinctive social contexts provide them with unique amounts and forms of social capital that might be variously transferable to their wider communities? These unexplored lines of inquiry provide examples of how we might extend Putnam's (2000) more structural understanding of social capital, in order to better conceptualise outdoor education's social contributions. As suggested by Portes (1998), 'there is nothing intrinsically wrong with redefining it [social capital] as a structural property of large aggregates. This conceptual departure requires, however, more care and theoretical refinement than that displayed so far' (p. 21).

Conclusions

Implications for practice

As people interested in how theory may inform outdoor education practice, we believe that the language of social capital is necessary to discuss the ways in which outdoor education may be used as a tool to help build richer and healthier communities—not just for group members but for wider communities where these programmes take place. To this end, we suggest that facilitating opportunities to develop bridging forms of social capital is to be emphasised, rather than simply creating conditions where bonding takes place.

The literature on social capital suggests that, historically, outdoor education programmes have been 'inward-looking', focused predominantly on building bonding social capital. Our discussion shows how outdoor educators and programme planners who do not consider the potential benefits of developing bridging social capital are ignoring the socio-cultural backdrop in which their courses take place. An over-emphasis on bonding may limit individual autonomy and indirectly restrict the long-term levels of health, wealth, educational attainment, and law abidingness of those in the community (participants and residents). In comparison, an outdoor education programme that attempts to build bridging social capital would have resonance with the socially-benefiting ideals found in place-based education, 'life environmentalism' (Maeda, 2005), and 'caring communities' (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006).

While some wilderness expeditions in North America or Australasia may not feature face-to-face interaction with anyone outside of the group, and consequently

offer few opportunities to directly build bridging social capital, many other forms of outdoor education could. Programmes run in schools, urban youth centres, residential outdoor centres—as well as expeditions in non-wilderness areas (in the south of England, for example)—all offer possibilities for participants to build relationships across social divisions with other people who live in the same area.

At the same time, we acknowledge the complexities involved in fostering conditions where bridging and bonding may flourish through outdoor education practice. In critiquing Putnam's (2000) emphasis on normalising and collective values, we suggest that programmes need to pay specific attention to the ways in which participants and their local communities are differentially positioned socially, culturally and geographically. This heterogeneity implies that individuals will engage with outdoor education programmes in multiple and complex ways, and build various forms and amounts of social capital accordingly. So, in moving away from a 'one size fits all' understanding of social capital, we suggest that practitioners need to understand the diverse benefits and even negative consequences associated with their programmes. This perspective highlights the need for empirical research that investigates the nuanced experiences and outcomes that so often characterise outdoor education.

Implications for future research

Empirical research in the area of social capital could involve the use of a number of measurement tools, such as the questionnaire developed by the UK Office for National Statistics (Babb, 2005). This questionnaire is based on five underpinning dimensions: civic participation; social networks and support; social participation; reciprocity and trust; and views about the area (Babb, 2005, p. 4). However, although this survey holds promise in generating base data around the social capital concept, there are inherent problems associated with measuring social capital. Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003) comment that 'the lack of consensus about what social capital is and how it can be measured makes such evaluation difficult' (p. 330). Indeed, we have already articulated the diverse and fluid nature of social capital concepts, as well as the various criticisms of these concepts.

One significant research issue is that social capital needs to be considered in terms of its local context, as different communities and cultures possess different norms (Edwards & Foley, 1998). Another problem arises as different kinds of social capital need their own measurements (Halpern, 2005). As Halpern states, a 'healthy and effective community needs a blend of different types of social capital' (p. 35). This raises questions about how to investigate both the singular and overlapping aspects of Putnam's social capital concept.

We previously articulated that notions of trust and reciprocity as implemented in outdoor education may elicit ideals of shared values and norms amongst participants. As such, research is needed to deconstruct the heterogeneous experiences, practices and outcomes associated with social capital. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted with participants, programme directors, and local communities could be used to address this line of analysis.

Our discussion supports the notion that there are significant possibilities for outdoor education programmes to exist as sites where individuals and their local communities mutually benefit. According to Smith (2007), the basic premise of social capital is that 'interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric' (p. 2). Our hope is that the social capital concept offers a useful language with which to better understand the social impacts of our programmes. Our intentions are unabashedly idealistic: we seek to help individuals and their communities 'get ahead' through the development and implementation of outdoor education programmes that foster social capital.

Notes

1. One notable exception from a non-peer reviewed source is Stoddart's (2004) case study of outdoor education in Cumbria, England.
2. See Halpern (2005) for a thorough treatment on the origins of the term 'social capital'.

Biographical notes

Simon Beames, is lecturer in Outdoor Education at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently developing an Upper Primary/Early Secondary programme where pupils plan and undertake journeys within their communities, as a means of learning about local human history, ecology and land use.

Matthew Atencio is a post-doctoral researcher with the Developmental Physical Education Group at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests include the socio-cultural aspects of physical activity, sport and physical education.

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