

# **A National Approach to Measuring Social Capital**

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## **Abstract**

Social capital is a topic of considerable interest to a wide range of people because of its links to individual and community wellbeing. Following extensive consultation, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has developed a broad conceptual framework for statistics on social capital as well as a set of possible indicators for measuring aspects of social capital.

Social capital is a multidimensional concept and different elements of the framework may be appropriate for different purposes. Those interested in education or public health, for instance, may focus on different areas from those whose interest is in community renewal. The ABS framework provides a way of organising and relating these different approaches.

Information relating to different elements of the framework is available in existing ABS collections, including the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). A social capital topic under development for the 2006 GSS will expand the range of national data and represent further elements of the framework. Design and testing of questions take place up to August 2005, and some results of the testing are discussed. A further issue considered in this paper is the relationship between data collected at a national level, the different state government collections and work being done at local community levels.

## **Keywords**

ABS, Framework, GSS, reliability, collaboration

## **1. Introduction**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is currently preparing a module of social capital questions for the 2006 General Social Survey. This paper deals with the ABS's involvement, along with many others in Australia, with the measurement of social capital. It describes some of the conceptual and policy issues associated with social capital and the key achievements and continuing work in the ABS work program. The paper begins by discussing Australian interest in social capital and the statistics that measure it. It goes on to outline the ABS's consultative approach to developing a framework and indicators for measuring social capital and to selection

of data items for a survey. It then considers the process of designing and testing questions, and concludes with a discussion about possible directions for future work and collaboration in this area.

## **2. The importance of social capital statistics**

In Australia, social capital has emerged as an area of great interest to a large number of government agencies, community and welfare organisations, research institutions and community development practitioners. Research studies have suggested that social capital can make a positive contribution to outcomes in many areas of social concern such as health, community safety and education. The ABS has responded to the need for statistics that measure the concept of social capital, and that can be applied to policy development and research, by developing concepts and methods to measure social capital.

There are many examples of Australian initiatives that seek to promote or measure social capital. Through its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has focussed on community building. The strategy, which provides funds for various community-based projects, aims to build family and community capacity to deal with challenges and find local solutions to local problems. The strategy is also trying to encourage partnerships between all levels of government, the community, individuals and business. In the National Agenda for Early Childhood, a new emphasis has emerged on the role of communities in supporting families in the early development of children. To support evidence for further development and monitoring of the policy initiatives, the department has funded influential work in developing indicators of family and community strength.

State governments in Australia have been active in measurement also. Most states have included a substantial social capital section in one or more of their regular surveys, most often associated with health or with civic participation. Queensland and Victoria, for example, now have social capital data for several years, and Victoria has recently released a set of 13 indicators (11 previously agreed as core indicators) for local government areas (DVC 2005a, 2005b). State and territory governments are also trying to draw social capital and community building into a whole-of-government approach to policy. Some examples are the Tasmania Together plan, Growing Victoria Together and the Community Cabinets and interactive websites that allow Queenslanders to participate in policy discussions and make their interests known to government.

Growing Victoria Together (DPC 2005a) is a framework describing the priority actions needed to achieve a fair, sustainable and prosperous Victoria. That initiative explicitly recognises the

important role active and inclusive social, cultural and volunteer networks have in building cohesive communities. It identifies related priority actions and measures of progress.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has done significant work in the theory, measurement and analysis of social capital (Winter 2000; Stone 2001; Stone and Hughes 2002; Stone et al. 2003). There have also been a number of fine scale community studies investigating social capital, such as the Jenny Onyx and Paul Bullen (Onyx and Bullen 2000) study of social capital in five communities, and the Swinburne Institute for Social Research's Participation and Planning in Surf Coast survey. The Onyx and Bullen survey has since been repeated in a number of other local areas in New South Wales by organisations, such as the Benevolent Society of Sydney, and has been used by some state government agencies for state and regional level information. Other state agencies have used an instrument developed by Janice Dillon from Curtin University. Development of the theory and measurement of social capital is now taking place in large numbers of Australian universities, frequently accompanied by practical activities supporting local community ventures.

### **3. What is social capital?**

Social capital relates to the resources available within communities in networks of mutual support, reciprocity and trust. A number of definitions of social capital have been devised, and the ABS has chosen to use the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition to guide work on the development of measures of social capital: "networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (OECD 2001).

ABS chose the OECD definition for a number of reasons:

- (a) It captures important elements of social capital reflected in the literature, such as networks and shared norms, values and understandings.
- (b) The inclusion of the words "which facilitate cooperation within or among groups" reflects the idea that social capital operates at a variety of levels, and enables diverse groups to work together. It includes the potential for bonding, bridging and linking relationships.
- (c) The choice was also supported by positive feedback from stakeholders, and recognises the important role that the OECD has had in progressing work on social capital internationally.

### **4. Interest in social capital among policy-makers**

In Australia, there is considerable interest in understanding why some communities adapt better to change than others, why some communities are able to do better with a given set of resources, and what influences community confidence in achieving goals. If the links between social capital

and community confidence and adaptability are shown to be sufficiently strong, then building social capital in communities is likely to become an increasing focus of policy.

Many researchers have suggested the positive benefits of aspects of social capital for outcomes in areas such as: health and wellbeing; community safety and crime; education, employment and training; families; housing and transport; and immigration. Fostering social capital may become a useful way to support other policies and programs in achieving desired long-term outcomes. This will require allocation of resources to communities identified as being most in need of support, as well as monitoring of the effectiveness of the policy.

The ABS has produced a paper on the potential policy applications of social capital entitled *Social Capital and Social Wellbeing* (ABS 2002a). It is available on the Social Capital theme page on the ABS website <<http://www.abs.gov.au>>.

The interest in measuring social capital is strong from agencies and groups at all levels — local, regional, state, and national. Data will be required at all levels and will need a cooperative effort between agencies. Data from an ABS survey could establish national benchmarks, and benchmarks for particular subpopulations of interest, for example people of different age and sex groups, lone parents, and people who are not proficient in English.

13. The inclusion of social capital topics in a suitable ABS national survey will also provide a set of data items and questions that may be repeated by local councils or other groups conducting their own surveys, and so promote comparability between results. While ABS sample surveys will not provide information for small areas, there is potential for drawing together a small set of census items relevant to social capital to provide a basic profile for small areas, which could be used with studies undertaken locally. The new questions on voluntary work and informal caring activities to be included in the ABS 2006 census will provide valuable information for this purpose.

## **5. The ABS Social Capital Framework**

In November 2000, the ABS released a consultation paper *Measuring Social Capital: Current Collections and Future Directions* (ABS 2000). A large number of stakeholders including commonwealth and state government departments, representatives of local governments, researchers, and non-government organisations provided comments on that work, and supported the ABS involvement in this field. In July 2001 the ABS set up a small unit to undertake further work.

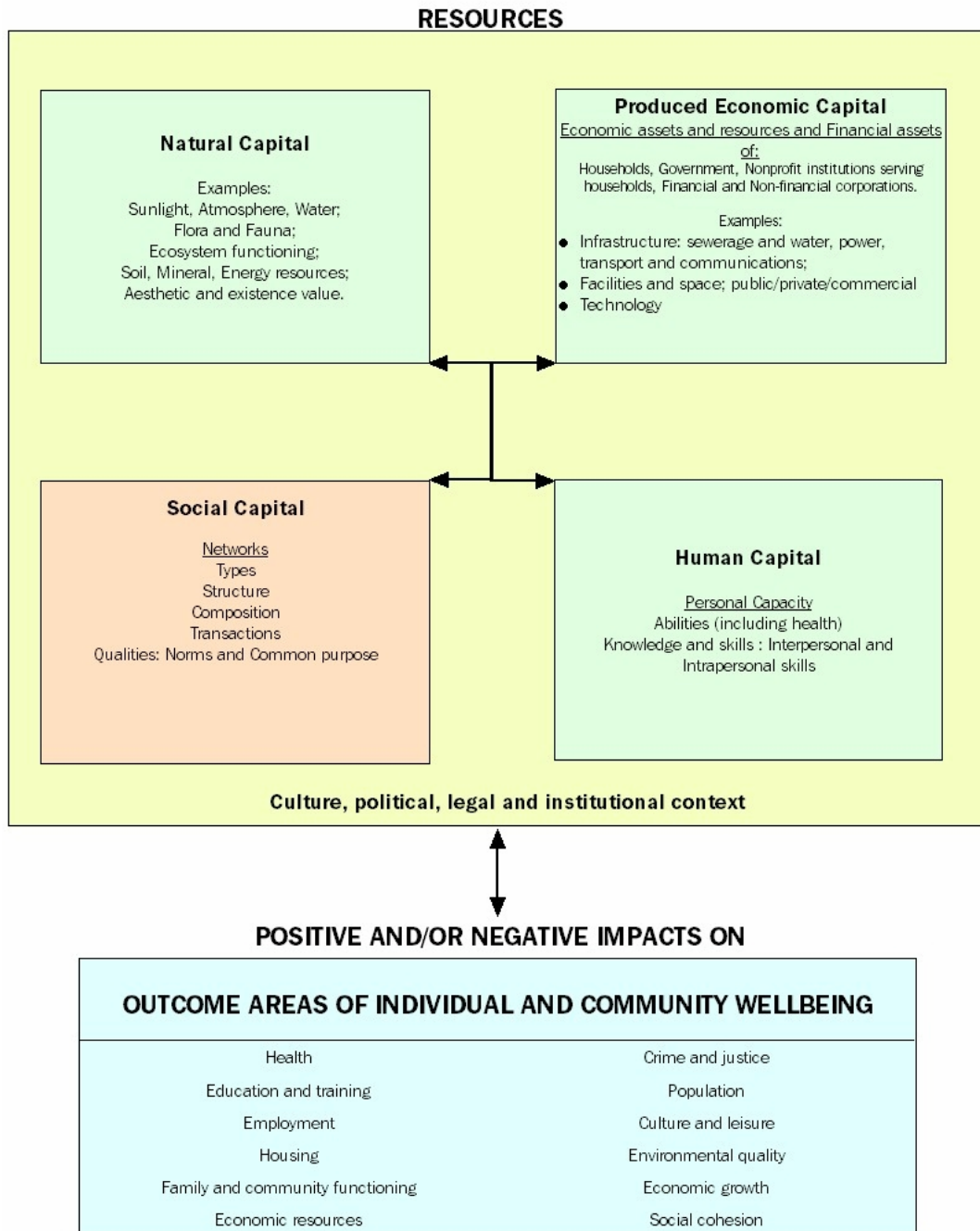
Well attended consultations were conducted in all states during the first half of 2002. A variety of views were expressed by attendees. Some were skeptical or cynical; some felt social capital represented old approaches under a new name; many, working with communities, felt that the ground-up involvement of communities of various types in the setting of objectives and the way they might be achieved was having promising results in resolving intractable problems, such as the conditions in public housing estates or the survival of regional towns. A common view among people attending was that, while the economic bottom line was important, there were important social relationships and values that needed to be taken into account when considering wellbeing. Overall there was strong support for continuing the ABS work on a statistical framework and indicators.

Our objective during the consultations in 2002 was to find out what characteristics were needed to be understood and measured. Much of this was covered in the draft proposal, but other ideas came up repeatedly, such as the cognate ideas of power relationships, sense of efficacy and locus of control. It also became clear over time that people from different policy interests had somewhat different emphases in the information they required. For some, the quality of close personal relationships was primary; for others, active participation in civic activities, or setting up structures of cooperation that would enable the negotiation of differences, were the important aspects.

The ABS framework was developed to accommodate the different emphases and data needs, and so has a wider scope for measurement than would be included in some important theoretical constructs of social capital. The Australian Institute of Family Studies, for instance, restricts the concepts to networks characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity, and excludes voluntary work as an effect (Winter 2000). Michael Woolcock from the World Bank has been arguing that trust is an effect (Woolcock 2001), and therefore not in the base concept, although it is very important for the strength of communities. The ABS framework also potentially accommodates the concept of social capital within and among businesses and in the relationships between organisations from different sectors, although indicators for these have not yet been systematically developed.

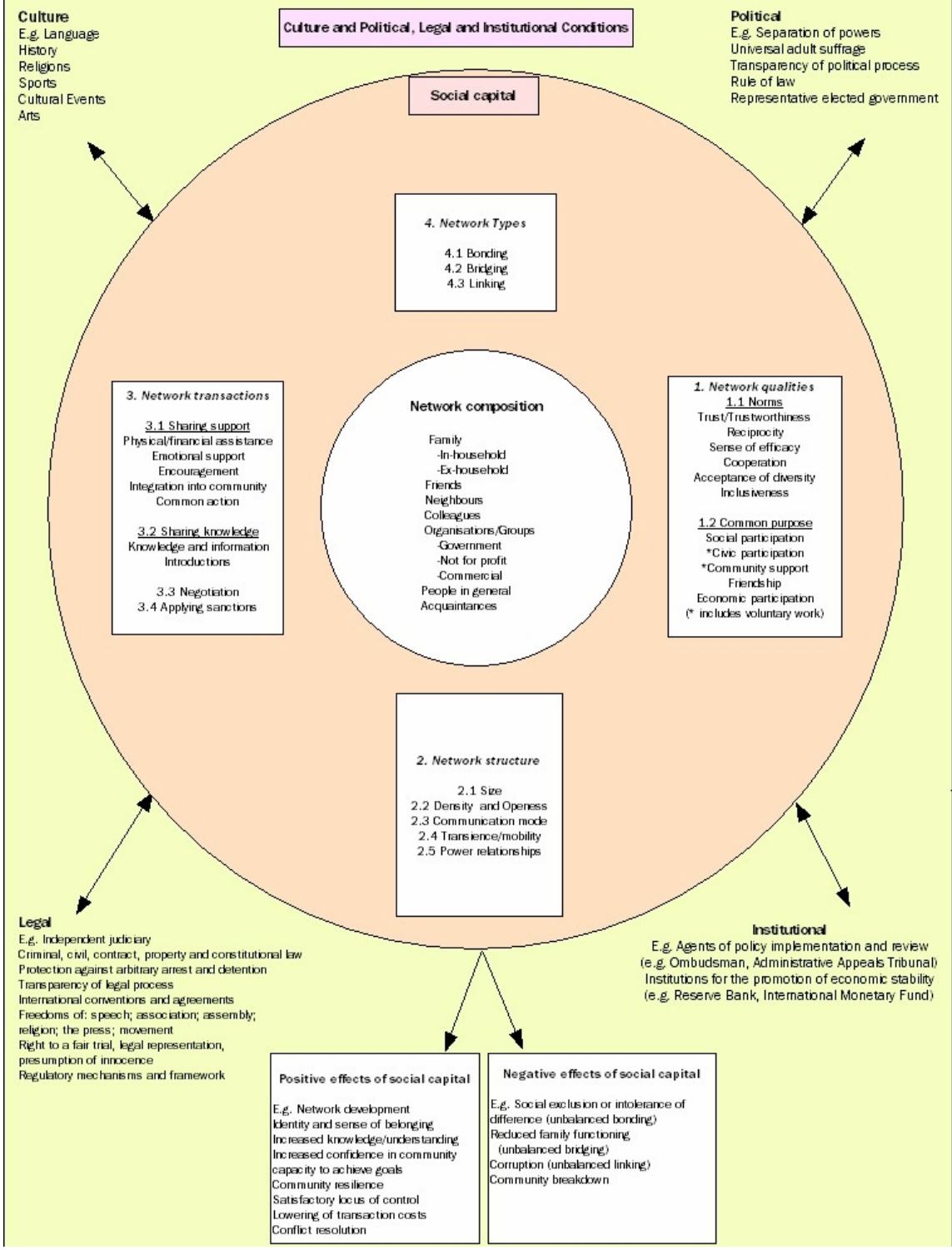
In 2003 ABS released a draft of its Social Capital Framework for comment; a revised version modified by the feedback was subsequently published (ABS 2004a). The framework conceptualises social capital as a resource, drawing on and feeding back into other types of resources. These other resources are grouped as natural, produced, and human capital. The four sets of resources interact in a context of cultural, political, institutional and legal conditions, and contribute to a wide range of individual and community wellbeing outcomes (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Resources and Outcomes**



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**Figure 2: Social Capital, Culture and Political, Legal and Institutional Conditions in Australia**



**Figure 2. Social capital, culture and political, legal and institutional conditions in Australia**

Social capital resources are presented as attributes of networks in Figure 2. Social capital is organised into four ways of looking at networks: qualities; structure; transactions; and broad types (bonding, bridging and linking). Potential network participants (such as individuals, families, friends, organisations/groups) are indicated by network composition.

The following paragraphs list the four dimensions and their elements. Definitions for each of the elements are provided in the published framework and indicators paper (ABS 2004a).

### **5.1 Framework dimensions and elements**

*Network qualities* include norms and common purpose.

*Norms* are the expectations, values and ideals that may exist within networks, and serve to enhance the functioning of networks. In the framework, norms comprise elements including: trust and trustworthiness; reciprocity; sense of efficacy; inclusiveness and acceptance of diversity. Trust in particular is viewed as a key aspect of social capital in much of the literature. In the framework, trust is considered to be confidence in the reliability of a person or a system. It is based on the expectation that people or organisations will act in ways that are expected or promised, and will take into account the interest of others.

*Common purpose* is a shared intention or motivation, an intended or desired result, end or aim for which a group or community come together. Five types of common purpose are identified in the ABS Social Capital Framework: social participation; civic participation; community support; friendship; and economic participation. Social participation is considered to be involvement in activities that are valued in their own right and reflect personal interests and a desire for enjoyment such as: dining out; going to a concert or dance party; playing sport; involvement in hobby clubs and groups; and visiting a museum or art gallery.

*Network structure* refers to size, frequency of interaction, density and openness, power relationships and transience/mobility. Network size is a key element of structure in that it often reflects the amount of investment made in relationships and the provision of support, and increases the capacity of an individual to draw on these resources. Network size refers to the number and variety of attachments that individuals or groups may have.

*Network transactions* are those interactions that simultaneously invest in and maintain relationships and draw resources from them, such as sharing knowledge, information and introductions and sharing support. 'Sharing support' includes sharing financial and physical support such as money, equipment, providing transport, and assisting with tasks. Emotional support and encouragement are other forms of sharing support.

*Network types* represent a more aggregated level of classification, drawing on items illustrating other dimensions. In the ABS framework, 'bonding' refers to relationships between similar kinds of people or groups; 'bridging' to connections where members have less in common, or even differences; and 'linking' to vertical relationships with sources of influence or authority, which assist with access to financial and other resources.

## **5.2 Effects of social capital**

Potential positive and negative effects of social capital are shown as flowing from and feeding back into the operation of social capital. Examples of the positive effects include: identity and a sense of belonging; lowering of transaction costs; and an increased capacity to achieve community goals. The potential negative effects of social capital include: social exclusion or intolerance of difference; reduced family functioning; corruption; and community breakdown.

For example, a closely bonded community may strongly hold certain views about appropriate ways of living, so that people with different cultures or who want different things out of life are considered strange or deviant. For *most of* the group, there is a reassuring sense of belonging and identity, but those who are different may be harassed or ostracised. Similarly, a person or a community may benefit from having ready access to sources of knowledge, wealth or influence (linking social capital) to help them get things done. However, gaining constant preferential treatment from people in authority compromises equity and justice for others, and comes at a cost to the community as a whole. These excesses of one type of social capital may not be balanced by others, and have the capacity to destroy social cohesion.

## **6. Developing social capital indicators**

Each element of the ABS Social Capital Framework is associated with a small set of possible indicators and data items. Each indicator is designed to provide a useful summary measure of that particular aspect of social capital for reporting and analysis.

Most indicators and data items have been developed after examining a range of existing surveys that contain questions on social capital. These surveys include ABS surveys, surveys conducted by other national statistical agencies such as Statistics Canada (2004) and the Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom (ONS 2002), collections by international statistical organisations, surveys conducted by state government departments in Australia, and surveys conducted by research institutions and academics, both in Australia and overseas.

The majority of the indicators in the publication have been drawn from surveys of people, and so the indicators reflect an individual's behaviours, attitudes and perceptions. These individual responses are then aggregated to produce a measure for a given population. Behavioural indicators measure aspects of social capital such as participation in social activities, informal assistance to others, participation in voluntary work and attendance at community events. Attitudinal indicators measure aspects of social capital such as a sense of responsibility to contribute to the community, enjoyment of living among people of different lifestyles, and attitudes towards whether lying in one's self interest is ever justified. Perception indicators measure aspects of social capital such as whether people think that community participation in decision-making is encouraged, or whether people think that there is good local support for community events.

Data from personal surveys are not the only source of information on social capital. Business surveys also collect useful information in relation to social capital, for example about non-profit institutions (ABS 2002b), service industries attracting volunteer labour, and support provided by businesses to the community (ABS 2002c). There is also growing interest in the role of social capital in the knowledge-based economy/society (ABS 2002d). Administrative data may provide useful sources from which indicators for small areas or specific population groups can be derived. Sources of administrative data relevant to social capital are being further explored.

Social capital is now widely recognised as a multidimensional concept or cluster of concepts. The ABS has not proposed a single summary index measure of social capital, because much of the existing evidence suggests that this would blur the relationships between elements of social capital and different types of desirable outcomes. However, composite measures may be constructed for indicators of a particular element or items that show a close relationship in factor analysis, or that describe populations in terms of the balance of social capital types.

The ABS selection of indicators was a consultative process. Around forty representatives from interested groups were invited to a one-day workshop to review a range of indicators and data items organised in accordance with the framework structure. The working group identified the priority information and suggested useful approaches, leading to a refined set of indicators for the *Information Paper: Measuring Social Capital, An Australian Framework and Indicators* (ABS 2004a).

## **7. Data availability**

A number of existing ABS surveys provide data that relate to certain elements of the social capital framework. Information on informal caring (ABS 2004b), voluntary work (ABS 2001b), and

business giving, business–community projects and sponsorship (ABS 2002c) can be found in existing surveys. The Time Use Survey is a source of information on the time people spend alone and with others, on participation in a range of leisure, religious and civic activities, and helping and caring for others (ABS 1998). Labour force surveys show changes in the labour force participation rate and use of personal networks in job search activities (ABS 2004c). Environment collections provide information about cooperative attitudes and behaviours (ABS 2004d). The census (ABS 2002e) provides very useful information about the geographic distribution of cities, towns and sparse populations, the social relationships implied in living arrangements, the distribution of diverse groups, the relative mobility or stability of different types of areas, labour force participation, religious identification and the level of citizenship. These are all useful indicators, but they only partly address the elements of social capital.

### **7.1 General Social Survey**

In 2002, the ABS introduced a General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS asked a series of questions designed to capture key dimensions of social and economic outcomes for households and individuals. Demographic characteristics include age, sex and marital status. Social characteristics include health, education, feelings of safety, social participation and the availability of family and community support. Economic characteristics include income, wealth and financial stress.

The GSS was considered a very suitable vehicle for the collection of social capital data because it was designed to support analyses of the linkages between the various dimensions of a person's social and economic circumstances. Unlike many other ABS surveys, which concentrate on one or two specific 'areas of social concern', the GSS was designed to capture leading indicators across a range of areas. The 2002 GSS (ABS 2003) collected information relevant to aspects of social capital that extended the possibilities for analysis. It included information on:

- contact with family and friends
- support given to children and other relatives living in different households
- sources of support in time of crisis
- ability to ask for small favours
- participation in social activities
- religious participation
- ability to raise \$2000 in an emergency
- feelings of safety alone at home during the day and after dark
- ease or difficulty in getting to places needed
- participation in voluntary work.

Other topics relevant to social capital about which the 2002 GSS collected information included: participation in sport and physical recreation, whether organised or not, including the type of role performed; attendance at a range of culture/leisure venues; and use of the Internet. These were supplementary topics on the 2002 survey and, except for a small number of core items, will not be repeated in 2006. The supplementary topics for 2006 are social capital and voluntary work.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) was also conducted in 2002 (ABS 2004e). It covered similar core and supplementary topics as the GSS. In addition to items such as contact with family and friends and participation in social activities, the NATSISS collected material relating to Indigenous culture and life experience. Much of the additional material relates well to elements or effects of social capital such as a sense of belonging, participation in community events and feelings of safety. Items include:

- identification with clan, language or tribal group
- identification with homeland
- whether lives on, or is allowed to visit, homeland
- whether removed from family
- whether relative removed from family, by relationship
- whether speaks an Indigenous language
- attendance at community events
- presence and type of neighbourhood problems.

Work is now underway on the development for the 2005–06 GSS of an expanded Social Capital topic, drawn from the indicators presented in the information paper (ABS 2004a). A Voluntary Work and Giving topic will also be included, providing more detailed information on some aspects of social capital, such as community support and forms of civic participation. The ABS has established and consulted an advisory group for the survey. The advisory group supported a broad approach covering a range of framework dimensions and elements, rather than addressing a more limited set in depth.

A data item proposal has been developed and provided for question design and testing. It includes items on the frequency, quality and diversity of personal relationships, trust, reciprocity, active group participation of various kinds, participation and proactivity in community events, and knowing people in formal systems.

Because of the subjective nature of some of the concepts to be measured, seeking attitudes and perceptions, there may be practical difficulties with some of the questions. For instance, attitudinal data may be influenced by context effects, both within the survey and in the external

environment. Some of the trust questions may be found to be difficult to answer, because of conflicting life experiences. Even some of the apparently factual questions present difficulties to the respondents.

Both cognitive and field testing are required to ensure meaningful responses. Where it has not been possible within the constraints of the survey vehicle and the interview time available to make the concepts clearly understood and effectively responded to by those being interviewed, some items have been dropped and others modified. Let us consider selected examples.

Two sets of three items were proposed to examine the diversity of people's networks. For both personal friendships and involvement in formal groups, questions were asked about the extent to which members of the group were similar in age, ethnic background and educational achievement. After settling what might reasonably qualify as 'similarity', and whether 'friends' should refer to those contacted within a specific period or to friends in general, the questions about informal friends were found to be understandable and able to be answered. However, the same questions about fellow members of organisations were found not to be answerable — respondents felt they did not know enough about other members of organisations, and were reluctant to venture a judgment. Consequently, the three items for formal groups were dropped.

Trust is usually seen as a constitutive aspect of social capital. It is prominent in a number of definitions. Three kinds of trust are commonly identified — generalised trust, informal trust (or trust in family, friends and neighbours) and institutional trust. Generalised trust is sometimes seen as a proxy measure for social capital, often using the double pole question from the World Values Survey (WVS), "Generally, do you think that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful dealing with people?". The advisory group agreed that informal trust was of lower priority than the other types; therefore this item was not specified for cognitive testing or for collection.

Institutional trust was seen as important. This information has been collected in a number of surveys, in respect of whole systems — the political system (or 'the government'), the health system, the justice system, the education system and others. However, each of these system concepts is highly complex. People will have had different experiences with different parts of whole systems and may be aware of the extent of some systems but vague about others. In a survey interview, it is not clear that there could be a consistent understanding of the questions. The 2006 GSS questions have been limited to two systems, health and justice, and operationalised at a much more specific level: Do you trust your doctor? Do you trust hospitals to do the right thing by you? Do you trust the police in your local area? Do you trust police outside

your local area? Response categories allow for some mixed experience – “All of the time, Most of the time, Some of the time, A little of the time, None of the time”.

There is much debate about the generalised trust question, and what might be understood from the results. Knack and Keefer (1997) have famously argued a reasonably consistent level of correlation across countries between the WVS generalised trust question and the experiment on the return of ‘lost’ wallets, but many others have argued about the lack of consistency of understanding. The ABS Social Capital Advisory Group wanted a generalised trust question asked, but agreed it would be better to have a question that could be consistently understood rather than opt for comparability with the WVS question. This may be difficult to achieve. Initially testing was for the question “Do you trust people you come in contact with on a day to day basis?” to limit the potential range of people referenced in responses (In the local area? In Australia? In the world?). However, respondents were thinking mainly about the people they knew rather than people in general, and were confused about how to respond when they trusted some in some circumstances but not others. The responses appeared to be more about informal trust, which is based on knowledge. The WVS question was considered, but it was concluded that a large number of questions would be needed to measure the concept adequately. For the pilot field test the ABS will include the question “How strongly do you agree or disagree that most people can be trusted?” (designed to avoid being a leading question).

Despite the items dropped from testing the effectiveness of questions, there may still be a greater number of effective questions than can be accommodated in the available interviewer time. Priorities will determine the survey content.

### **Further collaboration**

The level of interest in this conference reflects the interest around the world in appreciating the social relationships, mutual support and civic involvement that build strong communities and assist in making governments accountable, and in fostering their development. In response, many national and international statistical agencies have conducted surveys, and increasing numbers of academic studies are appearing. In Australia, a body of information is growing in many of the states, and for a number of individual local communities. Several Australian longitudinal surveys have included social capital questions — e.g. the Household Income and Labour Dynamics, Australia, survey (HILDA); the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY); Growing up in Australia, the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children; and the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, begun in 1995. Is it time to move towards harmonisation?

Some work has been done among national statistical agencies, led by the OECD and the Office of National Statistics (United Kingdom), on moving towards harmonisation. The focus here has been to develop a small module of common questions, recognising that different countries have different needs.

Even within a country, as in Australia, different types of agencies have different requirements for data. Many agencies are interested in, but as yet have had little experience working with, this type of data for evaluation or policy development purposes. There is room for much further analysis and use of the data before it becomes clear which items are the most useful.

In the meantime, the ABS Social Capital Framework makes a contribution towards relation, being potentially broad enough to accommodate many emerging social capital data needs, including the perceived need for understanding the role of relationships, organisation structures and the flow of information for the knowledge-based economy/society. The Victorian whole-of-government adoption of a selected set of indicators (DVC 2005a) is building a momentum that may spread to other states. In planning for the 2006 GSS social capital module, the ABS has included data items similar to most of the original eleven core Victorian indicators. It may be that other measures in the GSS may parallel items in other state surveys. The voluntary work and the caring questions to be included in the 2006 census will provide a useful addition to other census data, to assist in understanding the nature of communities, as a basis for local communities to carry out their own community investigations.

The ABS is keen to maintain and develop contacts within the fellowship of scholars, administrators and practitioners working in the fields of social capital and community strength.

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