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SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bowling along

Andrew Leigh in Boston
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Robert Putnam, author of the academic bestseller *Bowling Alone*, was described by one of his former researchers as “the General Motors of academic enterprises”. Andrew Leigh reports from the factory floor – a year spent working on Putnam’s research team.



IN JUNE 2000, three months before I began studying at Harvard University, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* hit the shelves. Encountering Putnam’s “civic decline” thesis, I must confess that I was initially sceptical. It took almost all of the 13 weeks of his class before I was convinced that the trends were consistent – the decreases in informal socialising, organisational membership, and political participation were linked together. By the end of the course, I also agreed with Putnam’s diagnosis – the leading factors that had led to the decline were generational change, women entering the workforce, a rise in commuting time, and more television.

As anyone who has read it will attest, *Bowling Alone* is a phenomenal work. Written with a light touch, and sprinkled with anecdotes, it is nonetheless grounded in a prodigious body of scholarship. To understand the depth of the research, one needs to peruse the footnotes – printed in magnifying-glass print – and read the acknowledgements, which note at one point that “By 1999, the roster of researchers had lengthened to nearly half a hundred”.

Fifty researchers? How could so many people possibly be utilised? The answer lies in the particularly interdisciplinary nature of social capital. Cutting across sociology and history; economics and urban development; psychology and political science, the task of reading everything that might pertain to *Bowling Alone* would probably have stretched to multiple lifetimes. So Putnam commissioned researchers to write literature reviews on many of the themes underlying the book, allowing him to focus on the most relevant writings in each field.

Since completing Putnam’s social capital seminar in July 2001, I have joined his current research team, which operates in a similar manner to the *Bowling Alone* team – though on a somewhat smaller scale. Around six of us, with background in history, sociology, and political science, have the task of writing literature reviews on issues that relate to the broad theme of “social capital and diversity”.

The decision to focus on diversity flows from new research that Putnam has conducted since *Bowling Alone* was released. In late-2000, and again in late-2001, the largest ever survey of social capital in America, the Social Capital Benchmark Survey, was implemented. Covering 29,000 individuals, the survey asked respondents over 100 questions about their personal characteristics and civic involvement. One of the major findings was that those places in America with the lowest levels of social capital also seemed to be those with the highest levels of ethnic diversity. Putnam's goal now is to investigate whether this is a true causal linkage (or is it merely the effect of other factors such as urbanisation and income inequality), and to understand how the effects of immigration and ethnic segregation have affected trust and social networks. The challenge of such an undertaking should not be underrated, since immigration and race also happen to be two of the touchiest subjects in America.

Meanwhile, most of the country is still digesting *Bowling Alone* – which has had the effect of rocketing Putnam from the ranks of distinguished academic to public intellectual. Although he had previously published eleven other books, US sales of *Bowling Alone* (150,000 to date) are at least four times larger than sales of all his earlier works combined. Social capital has caught the interest of political leaders (including the 42nd and 43rd Presidents of the USA, and a variety of European politicians), community groups (for obvious reasons) and talk show hosts. In the academic community, social capital has had a strong footing in sociology for some time, but has now also found its way into journals of political science and international development. Indeed, even economists have recently begun to turn their attention towards trust and social networks – with some of the same scepticism they showed towards human capital in the 1960s.

With such demands from the public and fellow academics, it is little wonder that Putnam spends a large portion of his time in the air or online. Maybe the biggest surprise is that he still manages to remain one of the most gracious and affable professors at Harvard.

Social capital in Australia

What implications does this all have for the social capital debate in Australia? On a brief visit in mid-2001, Putnam and Michael Woolcock (an expatriate Australian who is the World Bank's leading social capital researcher) noted that many of our policymakers seem to have a good grasp of the issues, and are keen to learn more about social capital in Australia, and what can be done to boost it. The challenge is working out where best to devote our scarce research and policy resources.

My personal view is that Australia needs more research on the history of social capital over the past half-century. The few surveys we have on trust seem to suggest that Australians trust their politicians and fellow citizens less today than they did in the late-1970s and early-1980s. But this does not answer the question of whether social capital began to decline in the early-1960s (as in

America) or the late-1970s (as in Britain). What we seem to lack most is detailed data – such as membership figures for professional and community organisations, attendance at religious services and (if they exist) lifestyle surveys conducted by marketing firms.

As to the present day picture, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is currently conducting the nation's first General Social Survey, the results of which are due for release in April 2003. Modelled on the US GSS (which has run annually since 1972) this survey will include some questions on social capital, and should help us understand whether the apparent connection between diversity and social capital applies in Australia as well. If so, it will likely have powerful political ramifications in a country where – just as in America – two-thirds of the population believes that the immigration intake is too high.

Lastly, Australia can also learn from some of the policy solutions that have emanated from the US. One such example is AmeriCorps, which provides young Americans with a college tuition credit in exchange for a year of service in a disadvantaged community. Modelled on the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps has operated successfully since 1993, and now receives bipartisan support. There are good reasons to think such a model could be implemented in Australia.

In other areas, Australia has the potential to lead the US. In many areas, our governmental structure is far more conducive to policies that foster strong communities. Smart urban development to encourage growth in smaller cities, policies to promote more family-friendly work hours, and using social capital impact statements when considering new initiatives are all instances where Australia can set the benchmark for the rest of the world. Beyond government, the Australian community sector and union movement can do much more to raise awareness of the importance of stronger social networks, and implement initiatives to create a more civic Australia.

Coda

Putnam sometimes remarks upon the coincidences that led him to stumble upon social capital in the first place. It was only in 1993, in the final months of *Making Democracy Work*, a twenty-year project on regional government in Italy, that he first came across the term in the library, and decided to incorporate it in the book's conclusion. Two years later, he published a relatively short article on American civic decline in the little-known *Journal of Democracy*. The extraordinary response to that piece led him into the intensive research project from which emerged *Bowling Alone* in 2000. A nice reminder that sometimes the best work comes from browsing the shelves, and following your instincts all the way.

Andrew Leigh is a PhD student at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and may be contacted at andrew_leigh@ksg02.harvard.edu, or via www.ksg.harvard.edu/students/leighan. He started his studies at Harvard's

John F. Kennedy School of Government in September 2000 – first as a Masters student, and now as a Doctoral candidate. Before that, he had worked in the High Court and Parliament, as associate to Justice Michael Kirby and senior trade adviser to Senator Peter Cook.