"Loose Change" Edited findings.

Concerning the personal development of fathers participating in a Men & Their Children project.

Practice setting

The research setting is a MATCH (Men & Their Children) Project involving Adult Learning staff from a local authority CLDS (Community Learning & Development Service) in the south of Scotland and staff from the Family Learning and Schools Services.

There is one MATCH Group, 'A' and 'B', centred on each of the two local Primary Schools, and another, which evolved from these two, associated with the local secondary school. Activity evenings take place monthly with a Saturday or Sunday excursion usually once a term - a feature of the groups intended to include dads and kids who are otherwise unable to participate due to other commitments. There is also an annual residential weekend organised. To date over 100 dads with well over 200 children have participated in the three groups.

The school cluster catchment area, home to around 5000 people, suffers from poverty, high unemployment, alcohol and substance misuse, and, although only 'twenty-five miles from anywhere', rural isolation, with the associated restricted access to services. Over 20% of local residents of working age are 'employment deprived' compared to a national average of 11.6% (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 2009).

In the six years since the project began there is a perception by the team, in the context of the groups' gatherings, that several dads have exhibited significant personal growth in their time with the MATCH groups, particularly in relation to their personal 'agency' i.e. noticeably developing in their ability to contribute to the groups in a range of ways including their disposition toward offering opinions in group situations, their willingness to 'get involved' in helping with the groups' activities, and in volunteering to serve on the groups' committees or in other organisational roles. Since the groups became constituted - necessary in order to apply for funding but also for the purpose of 'building community capacity' by virtue of giving participants the experience of running the group and organising events - each has gone through four or five evolutions of sets of office-bearers (chair; vice-chair; secretary; treasurer); this study examines attitudes to change in a sample of past and present committee members.

Unsurprisingly, given the number of actors, the underlying narrative contains myriad sub-plots involving or touching overlapping casts of respondents and others. A relevant

narrative concerns the attitude and actions of one committee which kept note of attendance at the weekday evening activity sessions with the voiced purpose of excluding non-participants from weekend trips, which they saw as reward for regular weeknight participation. This ethos caused divisions in the group which have yet to heal since, despite none of the instigators remaining in post, some of their successors maintain this view.

Agency Defined

The third national priority of "*Achievement through building community capacity*" (Scottish Executive, 2004:8) provides the impetus for CLD practitioners to support communities by "*enabling individuals, groups and communities to develop the confidence, understanding and skills required to influence decision making and service delivery*" (Scottish Executive, 2004:8). In daily CLD usage the word 'capacity' is employed interchangeably, and often confused, with other terms including: 'self-efficacy', which, it is acknowledged, many commentators describe as self-belief in one's own capabilities consequently *contributing* to agency (see Bynner, Butler, Ferri, Shepherd & Smith, 2001; Gecas, 1989; Moen & Skaalvik, 2009); the even less exact 'self-determination' – linked by the Scottish Executive to "*supporting the* right *of people to make their own choices*" [author's emphasis] (Scottish Executive, 2004:7) rather than to their actual ability, motivation or willingness to do so; and, infrequently, but more accurately in relation to the subject of this study, the term 'agency', defined in context here as the ability of individuals "*to exert control over and give direction to the course of their lives*" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006:9)*.*

Study Findings

The origins of this work were in the observation of change in a few individual dads who appeared to have grown from shy actors on the periphery of the group tableau into leading players in the story. This led to an investigation focussing on these changes with the aim of verifying or refuting the existence of change and identifying salient factors which might be used in replicating the effect, if found. Analysis of the data has also revealed a potential extension to an accepted framework describing the various continua of social capital.

The first three of four sections comprising the following discussion, therefore, examine firstly, evidence concerning the occurrence of change in individuals and/or groups; secondly, the identified catalysts for change and their replicability in relation to the

maintenance of the subject groups and usage in projects elsewhere; and thirdly, the description and development of the triple-type conceptual model of social capital - each of which will to some degree support or frustrate the future existence of the MATCH Groups project. The fourth section proposes an extension to discussion on the relationship between social capital and agency akin to that extant between agency and structure.

To maximise confidentiality, interviewees' names are not used; an interest in Norse mythology leads the author to observe similarities in the diverse relationships between actors in Asgard – home of the Norse Gods - and the subject context. For this reason, the study participants referred to hereinafter are named thus: Odin, Thor and Tyr (Crossley-Holland, 1980). In deference to the interviewees' common allusion to the egalitarian nature of the dads groups, the names have been randomly allocated therefore their assignation does not signify a parallel with the hierarchy of Valhalla.

1. Loose change

Based on the evidence gathered, there seems no doubt that change has indeed occurred in participants. What is worthy of deeper cogitation is whether changes in personal agency are the result of a progressive, developmental learning experience as in the case of Thor, who, via connections made through the MATCH Group, accepted CLDS support to develop his literacy skill which appears to have led consequentially to an expansion of his community activism; or an awakening of a hitherto dormant faculty as seems to have taken place with Odin. Since Thor seems be the 'type of guy who got involved', having been Cub helper pre-MATCH Group, progressed to become Cub Leader during his time with the group. But would he have become Cub Leader without the MATCH Group experience? And if so, does this make the study irrelevant?

The argument is posited that Thor *may* have joined other community groups, but that the help available to develop his literacy skills would, in probability, not have been encountered or taken up had he not joined the group, and without the increased confidence his new skills gave him, he may *not* have accepted the responsibility of running the Cubs. Odin's agency came into flower via a different route, in that he stepped into the breach when the needs of the group challenged him to do so, e.g. involving himself fully in fundraising activities. Again, it appears to have been the nurturing environment of the group setting which allowed the awakening of Odin's dormant agency which has remained active beyond his participatory time with the project.

It is argued, then, that the investigation is not irrelevant, since, whilst acknowledging that the results of 'awakened agency' may not always be as intended (see 'Tyr's Tale',

below), the evidence points to dads like Odin and Thor being empowered by their experiences, accepting responsibility when offered and new challenges as they arise. The level of agency to do so may always have existed, but it was not previously given the opportunity to express itself.

The provision and facilitation of this opportunity, it is suggested, equates to capacity building in its purest sense.

2. Making it work

The two factors identified as the most influential in engendering change in participants were shown to be the 'dads only' and the socially-equalising aspects of the project.

That the homogeneity of the group is a coveted feature is emphasised by the continuous reference by interviewees to a "*dads'*" or "*fathers'*" "*group*" or "*club*" with few of these incorporating "*children*" or "*kids*" in their descriptions. This is an indicator perhaps that the dads view the Group as primarily their domain; a place where they feel themselves to be in charge of, and able to interact with, their children without the distractions of television, video games, homework or, indeed, partners. It is noteworthy that several respondents remarked that their partners welcomed the time apart as much as the dads; the absence of distractions it seems, is appreciated by all adult parties. That the dads enjoy the group and why they do so seems clear; the challenge for new groups however, might be attracting the dads in the first place, which also has a bearing on the second factor.

Whether the social equality or egalitarianism of the groups is replicable elsewhere is a question which may not be straightforward to address; it is important to note that the Family Learning/CLD non-deficit approach, as highlighted by Whalley (2001:74) and employed in the subject project, is deemed desirable particularly in such areas of deprivation, in that it consciously seeks to avoid alienating parents by giving the impression that 'the professionals' are there to save the children from their own families and impoverished circumstances, or stigmatising the group within the wider community by attempting to attract only the hardest-to-reach families. From launch, the aim was for the MATCH project to be socially inclusive and therefore free at point of delivery for all who wished to participate. This is in contrast to the findings of Potter, Schneider, Lee, Carpenter & Williamson (2005:32) who, inquiring about barriers to participation, found that fathers in an equally socially deprived area interpreted the fact that participation in a similar group was free of charge as "*stigmatising in itself*"; proof, if proof were needed, that in community work, one size does not fit all.

It is recognised that other factors may have influenced change; for example, Emirbayer & Mische's (1998:963) "*temporal embeddedness*" is a potentially significant variable

which is obliquely referred to (i.e. "maturation") but not explored. By definition the groups exist because of the status of the men as parents, implying a biologically time-specific period in their lives, generally between 20 and 60 years of age - older if the participating male is a grandparent. Might this life-stage be the incubator of change in itself - giving the men some Darwinian purpose for which they might naturally become more agential, i.e. the protection and nurture of their children? Or might greater agency and social awareness be a cumulative result of the men's years of life experience, their maturation? It is suggested that the answer is likely to involve both and that this is a factor for change which is not within the power of project workers to influence.

3. Social Capital

In a CLD context, social capital is significant in contributing to personal agency (Bynner et al, 2001:6) and in being key to social cohesion (Bynner et al, 2001:7). A widely accepted model for social capital suggests three conceptual dimensions, simplified thus (after Islam, Merlo, Kawachi, Lindstrom & Gerdtham, 2006:5): *structural / cognitive social capital* – characterised by the number of memberships of associations, institutions, relationships / intensity and levels of values, norms, reciprocity, trust; *horizontal / vertical* – links between people/groups of similar societal strata / of different strata; and as a subset of horizontal social capital continuum, *bonding / bridging* – people/groups which are inward-focus, homogenous, exclusive, robust / outward-focussed, heterogeneous, inclusive, more fragile . McKenzie & Harpham (2006:16) on the other hand, describe bonding/bridging social capital as a distinct dimension equal to the other two.

Within this 'triple-type' model descriptions and definitions vary; however, for the purposes of this investigation John Field's description of social capital is considered a useful working definition:

> "*People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of those networks; to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they can be seen as forming a kind of capital. [...] In general, then, it follows that the more people you know, the richer you are in social capital*." (Field, 2003:1)

Finally, it is important to note that social capital has, what Putnam terms, its "*dark side*" (Putnam, 2000:350), wherein those most engaged in 'civic' life become insulated and exclusive to the detriment of the rest of their community.

3.1 'Socialisationism'? Tyr's tale

Although the bonds made through involvement in the group vary in strength and duration – indeed few of the respondents report noticeable changes to their external social networks – these interlacing filaments of personal relationships nonetheless contribute in no small way to social cohesion. Dads who, prior to their group connection, only knew each other "*to nod to*", will stop to speak in the street as a result of their mutual MATCH connection. It is equally important to note that the often fragile nature of these associations means they may just as easily dissolve: for example, when what are effectively socially exclusive 'policies' are introduced, or even merely mooted.

If, as Bynner et al (2001:6/7) suggest, social capital is both contributor to agency and key component of social cohesion, then the tale of Tyr illustrates these relationships. Tyr's enhanced confidence and agency arise in tandem with the social capital he accrues over the years by virtue of the new connections he makes through the group. In 2007 he talks about attending a computer class only because he was comfortable that he would know everyone there: this took two years from the launch of the group. Continuing to develop social capital and agency, in an exemplar of Bandura's (1989:1175) emergent interactive agency, combining the triadic drivers of: assimilation of the actions of his predecessor (cognition); the desire to help provide for his children (emotion); and actually making it known he was willing to step up (personal action), in 2009 Tyr feels secure enough to accept vice-chairpersonship of the committee before promotion to the position of chair a year later.

Over this period Tyr has acquired values relating to 'joint' and 'weekend' trips which have evolved with his strengthening social bonds to dads of a similar perspective. If, as previously suggested, enhanced agency affords its bearer greater conviction of values and the ability to act on those values, and agency is at least partly founded on social capital, then we can see a consequential spiral taking shape, contributing to, depending on its underpinning values, either more robust social cohesion or greater social divisiveness.

It is theorised, therefore, that by accommodating Putnam's (2000:350) 'dark' social capital as the negative of an additional positive/negative axis - applicable to any of the extant dimensions - of the discussed triple-type model, direct correlation and reciprocal relationship may be discerned between the three variables of social capital, agency and social cohesion.

As Tyr's social capital increases positively, so does his personal agency, both of which contribute to social cohesion, illustrated at its simplest by greater likelihood of stopping to talk to other dads (and children) in the street than prior to their participation in the MATCH Group. As Tyr's connections and influence metamorphose into a more negative aspect, however, the social capital fuels the agency in the opposite direction, leading to

a different emergent interactive agency. This agency is manifest in: Tyr's willingness to discuss the disapproval of joint trips and inconsistent attendees in the open forum of committee meetings (personal action); based on his belief that these values are widespread in the group (cognition); and interpreting opposition as a personal slight on his position in the committee (emotional). When this effect is combined with a similar spiral in other committee members, the result is a disenchantment of those whose connections with the group are less robust, leading to lower levels of participation and reduced social cohesion.

Depicting the converse, Thor's social capital permitted him to access literacy support which led to enhanced agency resulting in developing his involvement in the Cubs, joining a second community group, and wishing to maintain his connection with the MATCH Groups through volunteering, all of which reinforces social cohesion, and, returning to the spiral, has developed his social capital which adds to his agency, and so on.

From the descriptions above, and after Putnam (2000:22-24), Tyr's social capital could be described as 'bonding' social capital - a result of strong in-group loyalty; and Thor's as 'bridging' social capital - linking disparate groups via his other community activities. Neither is inherently positive or negative; such dimension, it is posited, in part comes from the choice of actors with which the individual chooses to associate, but also requires the seed of the species of agency which social capital may germinate.

If one of the aims of this paper is to verify the validity of supporting the groups in the professional context in which the author operates - and the evidence would indicate the affirmative inasmuch as, of those exhibiting change in personal agency, the majority have achieved a 'positive' outcome - is it then desirable, ethical, or even possible to influence the polarity of the change by intervening in group micro-politics? The answers are posited thus: whilst it may appear desirable to attempt to do so, 'for the greater good', the values upon which intervention is based would be subjective and therefore imposed; the required action complex and the outcomes unpredictable; and the ethics of such action questionable. Once the phenomenon of the negative spiral is identified, it is suggested, hope of a reversal in its direction must therefore lie in developing the self-awareness, emotional intelligence and/or "*social literacy*" (Field, 2003:145) of the individuals concerned, an area beyond the scope of this study.

4. Of chickens and eggs

An evolving understanding of what is meant by agency and social capital in the context of CLD with regard to the postulation that social capital is a resource which contributes

to personal agency has led to the following observation: if the argument that some level or category of agency develops naturally within the lifecourse is accepted, may it be that agency is as much a contributor to social capital as vice versa? It is suggested that a certain amount of confidence, determination, will to act, and vision of purpose, which are surely constituents of agency to varying degrees, are prerequisite qualities for the garnering of social capital. If social capital is the sum of a person's social connections, encompassing friendships, nodding acquaintanceships, memberships of social organisations, etc., it is contended that these are not easily acquired, entered into or developed without some minimum degree of agency - of propensity for action - on the part of the individual. Might it be, then, that agency and social capital enjoy a similar yin-yang type of interpenetrative or symbiotic relationship to that of agency and structure as in the sociological discourse? In illustration: an individual may invoke agency to choose to participate in a group likely to enhance social capital, which, in turn, fuels agency. Whether agency begets social capital or social capital begets agency, any enhancement to either will result in the aforementioned spiral; which comes first, it seems, is another question.

Summary and conclusion

Whilst recognising the pitfalls of drawing general conclusions from such small scale research as this paper presents, the author trusts that the robust methodology employed in its compilation bestows authority on its findings.

So what does it all mean?

In relation to the aim of verifying the presence of change in the dads, the outcome is found to be that change has indeed occurred. This nurturing of what is argued to be symbiotic change to levels of agency and social capital in individuals has, in the main, given rise to further positive change in the degree of the social cohesion of the wider community.

The primary enabler of change is found to be the overarching comfort-zone of the dad-centric project; this zone, it is suggested, is comprised of two complementary components. The first is the provision of opportunity for dads to meet as peers, with their children as the focus of mutual interest, which, together with the incorporation of male-oriented, practical activities to engage them, offers a forum where they may develop new connections within their geographic community. The second component is that the evolution, in at least two of the three groups, of a socially inclusive, egalitarian ethos, results in a non-threatening environment; supporting the less confident to

interact with others and permitting those with fledgling aspirations to experience committee work to do so with minimal pressure upon them. In considering these factors' replicability elsewhere, in the case of the socially inclusive premise of the project, strangely, the answer is postulated to be, 'not necessarily', with evidence that local values and norms need to be recognised and considered to prevent alienation.

In the subject setting however, these highlighted factors, when combined, produce a benign greenhouse effect, with the positive outcome of generating winds to power the sails of the once-moored longships of our heroes' agency. The use to which this agency is put and how it might be directed however, is a subject for separate discussion. At the heart of the action those dads who have most cherished their involvement in and contributed to the intended purposes of the groups have truly embraced and personified the ethos of 'the more you put in, the more you get out'; a motif which is arguably equally applicable to those with what can be interpreted as a socially exclusive agenda.

The analysis has proposed enhancement to an existing model of social capital, showing that an additional dimension indicating the value of positive and negative polarities of social capital is worthy of consideration; also identified is an augmentation to the discourse of the relationship between agency and social capital, arguing that the two concepts are mutually affective and thereby any positive or negative influence on one will have a similar effect on the other.

Finally it is noted that often the fledgling social connections made between dads (and kids), whilst integral to the garnering of social capital and essential to fostering wider social cohesion, are at the same time subject to dissolution as a consequence of the enhancement of the very agency intended to nurture them – which is, in turn, founded on the propensities of those individuals in whom the agency is cultivated.

Directions of further study

The contribution of this investigation to the wider corps of knowledge is in the identification of benefits specific to adult male parents in terms of the occurrence of personal change resulting from participation in an organised group setting involving dads and kids. In an area where the focus is more often on the benefits to children of such groups, larger scale research is desirable to verify the claims made for dads. Such work would also allow greater analysis of any wider effects of personal change, and if recordable change is found within the immediate families of fathers the natural progression would be expanded study of ripple-out effect on community.

Further investigation of the theoretical model of the spiral of social capital and the extension of the discussion of the relationship between social capital and personal agency would also seem appropriate. Work with the social capital model is in the assessment of the polarity of the capital, which necessarily must be judged in relation to the context, therefore inevitably subjective (to an extent at least) on the part of the observer, and dependent on the predicted outcome. Future research on social capital/agency, it is suggested, is also needed to ascertain the validity of the proposed relationship.

References

Bandura, A. (1989) *Human agency in social cognitive theory*. American Psychologist. September 1989 pp1175-1184

Biesta, G., and Tedder, M., (2006) *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency*. University of Exeter. (http://www.learninglives.org/papers/working_papers/Working_paper_5_Exeter_Feb_06.pdf)

Bynner, J., Butler, N., Ferri, E., Shepherd, P., Smith, K., (2001) *The design and Conduct of the 1999-2000 Surveys of the National Child Development Study and the 1970 British Cohort Study*. Centre for Longitudinal Studies: Institute of Education, University of London.

Crossley-Holland, K. (1980) *The Norse myths.* Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Emirbayer, M.; Mische, A. (1998) *What is agency?* The American Journal of Sociology. Vol. 103, No. 4 (January 1998) pp962-1023

Field, J. (2003) *Social Capital. Key Ideas.* London. Routledge

Gecas, V. (1989) *The social psychology of self-efficacy.* Annual Review of Sociology, Vol 15 (1989) pp 291-316

Islam, M.K., Merlo, J., Kawachi, I., Lindstrom, M., Gerdtham, U.-G. (2006) *Social capital and health, does egalitarianism matter? A literature review.* International Journal for Equity in Health Vol. 5, No.3 (April 2006)

McKenzie, K.; Harpham, T. (Eds) (2006) *Social capital and mental health*. London. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Moen, F.; Skaalvik, E. (2009) *The effect from executive coaching on performance psychology.* International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring. Vol. 7, No. 2 (August 2009) pp31-49

Potter, C.; Schneider, J.; Lee, S.; Carpenter, J.; Williamson, W. (2005) *Sure Start Ferryhill/Chilton, third year evaluation report, January 2005.* University of Durham

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. London, Simon & Schuster.

Scottish Executive (2004) *Working and learning together to build stronger communities*. Edinburgh. Scottish Executive.

Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (2009) http://www.sns.gov.uk (Retrieved 21.04.11)

Whalley, M., and the Pen Green Centre Team (2001) *Involving parents in their children's learning.* London. Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.