CSI 15: The uneven distribution and decline of social capital in Britain

Summary

- Social Capital is "multidimensional" and comes in different types and combinations. It is usual for individuals to have high levels by some measures, but low on others.
- Isolation - that is being low on all indicators of social capital - is a rare state, although our data may underestimate the true extent of social isolation.
- The 'civic forms' of social capital (social trust) are not in decline as far as we can see. It is stronger in Scotland and NI, weakest in London. It is also weaker among some ethnic minorities and among the less educated.
- Voluntary associations (an 'instrumental form' of social capital) are in long-term decline. This form is quite unequally divided, especially along socio-economic (educational) lines. Over time, it appears that these gaps are widening. Those with lower level qualifications are dropping out of voluntary associations faster than those with a degree, as are ethnic minority groups compared to whites.
- Social support, the quality of informal relationships is not in decline. Some groups in society, including the well-educated and ethnic minorities may be experiencing small increases to their social support; others, including white men and those with low qualifications, are being left behind.

Is social capital an individual or societal good?

Social capital is too often taken to be synonymous with community feeling and reflects a position in which (moral) value is attached to helping, getting involved with the community, being trusting and so on. All of these things are good and worthy in their own right. However, it is important to be critical of the concept of social capital, to be aware of its intellectual roots and the implications for how we measure and interpret trends. We can distinguish two main traditions in social capital research. The first we might call the *Civic Tradition* which is strongly linked to civic virtue; here the trust and reciprocity that develop from our social interactions are thought to be a public good – they help the smooth running of our democracy and economy. The second is the *Instrumental Tradition* in which social ties bring individual-level goods such as improved health and happiness, access to jobs, or improved educational outcomes. It is an important distinction: social capital cannot increase the number of available jobs at a given moment in a particular society, for example, but it can provide a means of getting ahead for those with the right social ties at the expense of those without. The civic approach suggests that we should be concerned about aggregate decline in society. On the other hand, the instrumental tradition suggests that what matters is how social capital is distributed between different groups in society; some disadvantaged groups may need, more than others, the 'leg up' that social capital can provide.

Though the presence of social capital can be determined by looking at many different indicators, we concentrate here on just four: trusting other people, trusting the neighbours, voluntary associations, and informal social support. We would expect these different outcomes to have different consequences. Informal support is necessary for health and happiness and may even have small-scale economic benefits (e.g. getting a friend to look

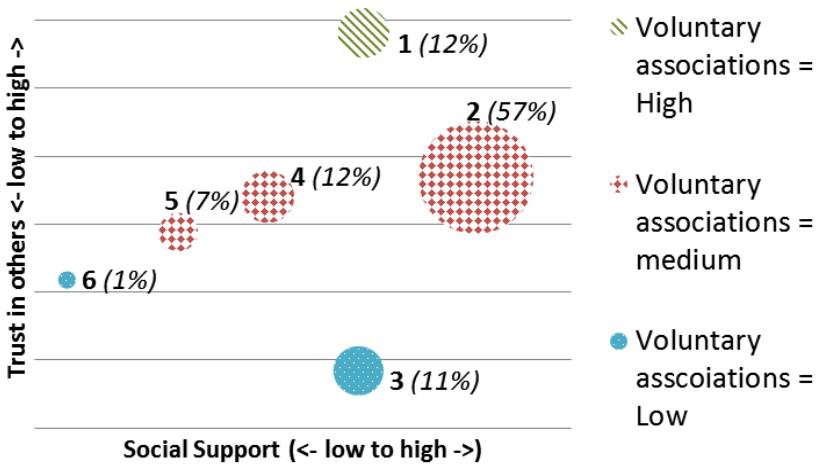


Figure 1: Social capital is not a matter of simply 'more' or 'less' but can be considered as types.
Source: UKHLS, waves 1-3, 2009-2012. Shows results of a Latent Class Model (Note that this is one particular 'model' based on our data and does not represent a single truth about all possible types of social capital)

after the children); trust may be considered a public good under the assumption that high-trusting societies are nicer places to live; voluntary associations, on the other hand, may have civic value but also bring about wide-reaching and varied social networks and thereby have the potential to improve access to jobs and education. We firstly look at how these four measures cluster together using a statistical analysis of the probabilities of individuals to score high or low on the different dimensions. The result is several different *types* or *classes* of social capital – see Figure 1, the bubbles are sized by the proportion of the population estimated to fall into that category. Class 1 (up at the top) is very civic with high trust and participation levels and makes up about 12% of people in the UK. However, class 2 is more populous (57%) – they have more middling levels of trust but higher levels of informal social support. People in class 3 are not very trusting but their informal ties offer as much support as our civic class 1. Class 6 is the only one we might describe as isolated on all measures; they make up just over 1% according to our sample though this is likely to be underestimated because some vulnerable groups such as the very old, recent migrants or people with drug and alcohol problems, are less likely to be reached by the survey. To conclude; the vast majority individuals appear to have 'mix and match' profiles of social capital, rather than levels that can simply be described as 'high' or 'low'.

Is social capital in decline?

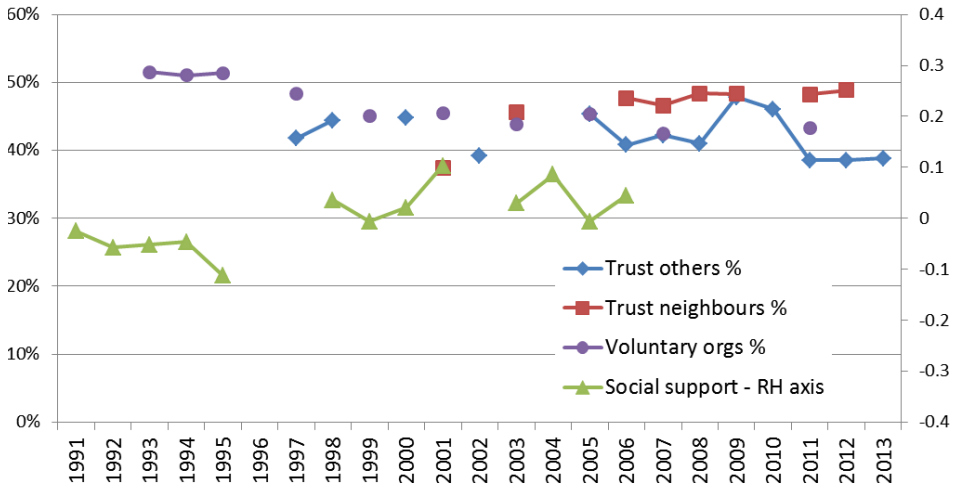


Figure 2: Trends in four measures of social capital
Sources: BHPS/ UKHLS, CLS, HSE

When we compare trends over time, we can also see that social capital is not a single unified construct. The different outcomes are changing at different rates. The only aspect of social capital that is in decline is associations with voluntary organisations; the percentage of the UK population active with one or more organisation fell from 52% in 1993 to 43% in 2012. Trust in other people in general seems to fluctuate year by year (we do not have a very good explanation for this) but there is no trend in either direction. Neighbourhood trust, on the other hand, may have increased since the start of the data series in 2002. Social support levels have fluctuated but also appear to have improved overall by a small amount since the 1990s (this data only to 2006).

Researching Social Capital

One of the problems with social capital research is in its conceptualisation. It is often talked about as if it is a single real 'thing', and people worry about 'social capital decline' as if all outcomes follow the same trend. We take a critical approach and draw attention to the different strands of social capital, both theoretical and empirical, to show that there are very different ideas about what social capital is and what it does.

The empirical work presented in this briefing note builds on an earlier briefing note CSI 8; please refer to this for more details about trends over time http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/. Additional analysis supports the results presented here but is not shown due to space constraints; in general we always corroborate our findings from multiple data sources in order to reduce concern about the possibility of measurement error. We use the most reliable data sources available: the *British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS), the Citizenship/ Community Life Survey (CLS), and the Health Survey for England* (HSE) – these are all representative surveys of adults; however, CLS and HSE cover just England (and Wales in some years). The cross-sectional analysis by region, ethnicity and education are all based on UKHLS therefore we have full UK coverage. Where relevant we include error bars; these confidence intervals are calculated using the subsample size and as such tend to be larger for small groups (such as the Chinese in Figure 4).

A particular problem when it comes to measuring social capital in the population is that it is difficult to know if we are accurately counting lonely people. In panel studies, for example, there is evidence that lonely people are more likely to drop out of the study; it is unlikely that we adequately correct for this with survey weights and accept that our estimate of the number of isolated people may be on the low side.

Is social capital equally distributed?

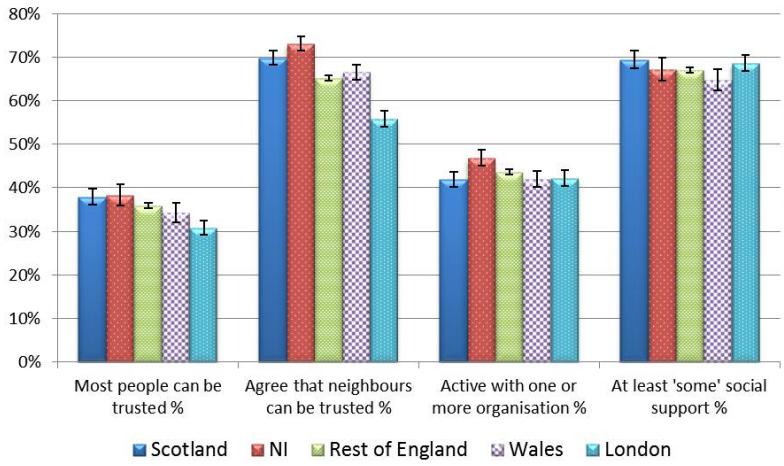


Figure 3: London has low levels of trust but average social support and voluntary associations *Source: UKHLS 2012*

We look at differences across the four nations of the UK, splitting London out from the rest of England. In Figure 3, we can see that all areas have very similar levels of informal social support; all regions are similar in the average level of voluntary associations, with Northern Ireland being slightly higher on this measure. There are far bigger regional disparities on the trust measures. London has lowest level of trust, both in neighbours and others generally – perhaps this is not surprising as London, being the most urban, has more people living in flats and more residential mobility. Northern Ireland and Scotland have higher levels of trust and Wales and the rest of England fall in the middle.

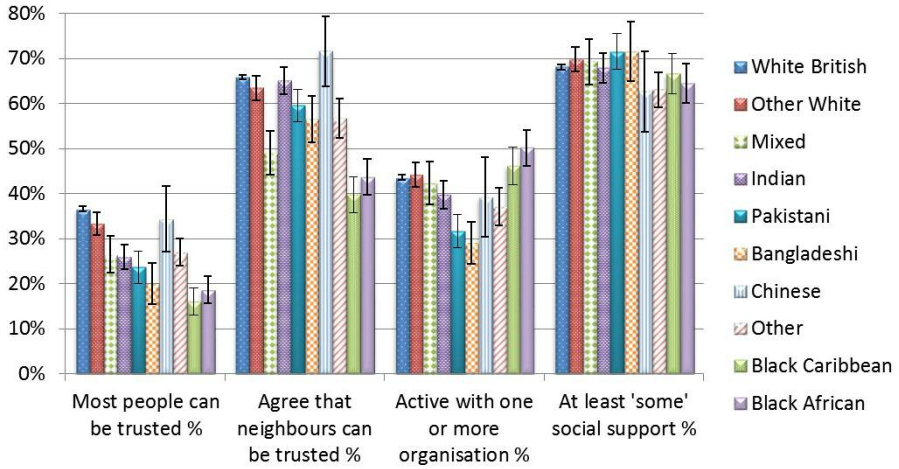


Figure 4: There are considerable differences by ethnicity in trust and voluntary associations *Source: UKHLS 2012*

There are large differences by ethnicity, particularly for social trust which is low among those of black and mixed backgrounds. On the other hand, in terms of activity with civic organisations, it is the Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other groups with lower levels of social capital, while both the black African and black Caribbean groups are more engaged than whites. On average those from black African, black Caribbean, other and Chinese ethnic backgrounds report lower levels of social support. The degree of ethnic inequality therefore depends upon the indicator of social capital.

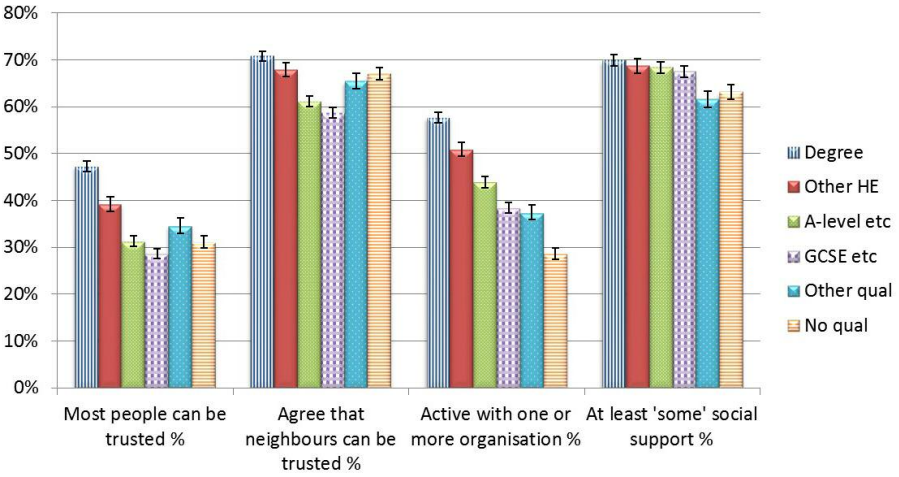


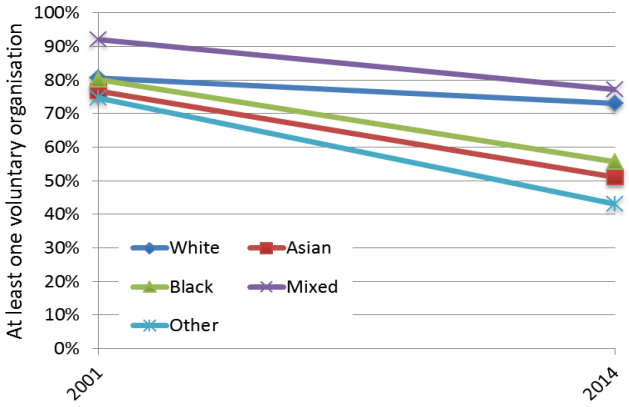
Figure 5: Across the board: higher education means more social capital *Source: UKHLS 2012*

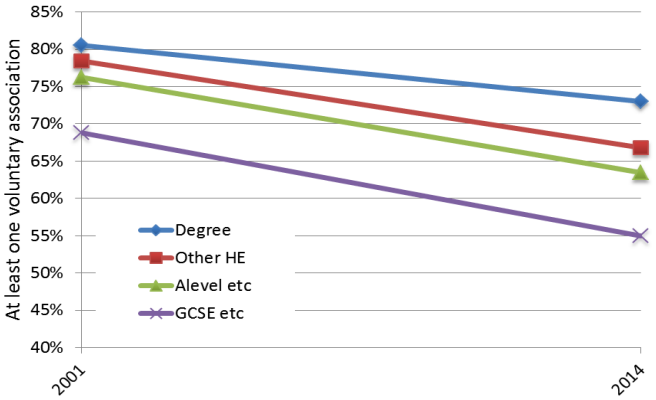
Finally we look at differences by education (Fig 5) where differences are striking. There is a steep gradient in participation in voluntary organisations: those with a degree have a participation rate close to 60% while those with no qualifications average just 30%. There is a similar pattern for trust in other people generally, but not for neighbourhood trust where those with other or no qualifications are more trusting than those with middle-level educational attainment. By this measure it is those with no or other qualifications ('other' may indicate a non-UK qualification that is difficult to categorise) who are lacking in informal social support, although there may be important interactions with gender and ethnicity here, which are discussed in the next section).

Is social capital becoming increasingly polarized?

We have seen that there are large inequalities in the way that aspects of social capital are distributed by education, ethnicity, and region. As social capital is a means to access resources this unequal distribution may have consequences for various outcomes, and existing economic (and non-economic) inequalities may become further entrenched. In a time of growing economic inequality, an uncertain job market, the increasing cost of education and so on, we ask the question: are these gaps growing or closing over time? Due to limitations of the available data, we use more crude categorizations here of ethnic groups and educational attainment, and we focus on a few significant findings rather than reporting all of our analysis. Examining participation in voluntary organisations, Figures 6 and 7 show 'modelled' effects in which year on year change is smoothed out into an average linear effect. Figure 6 shows that those of Asian, black or other ethnic backgrounds are 'dropping out' faster than whites. Similarly in Figure 7 we can see that those with Higher Education or A-levels are dropping out a little faster than those with a degree.

Figures 6 (left) and 7 (right): The gap between the participation in voluntary organisations by educational qualification and by ethnic background is growing *Source: CLS – predicted values from a binary logistic regression model with age, sex, and ethnicity controlled.*





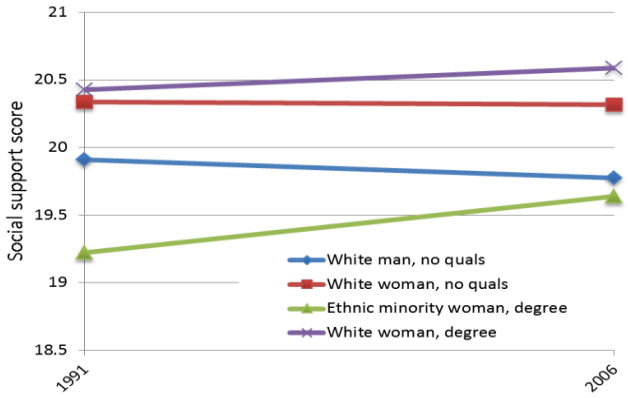


Figure 8: Social support is increasing for some groups but decreasing at a very slow rate for white men with no qualifications *Source: HSE –predicted values from a linear regression model with age, sex, and ethnicity controlled.*

For social support there is also an important difference by gender, with women on average feeling more supported than men. Our analysis also suggests that there are differences in the rate of change over time. We plot here hypothetical examples of people with particular attributes. Three of our examples have flat or upward slopes: ethnic minority women, for example, may be catching up with others from their low starting point. The only downward slope is for white men with no qualifications – this is a group which may be getting left behind in terms of their informal social capital.

This briefing note was prepared by L Richards and A Heath at CSI. It builds on an earlier briefing note (CSI 8) available online at http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/. **Publication date: 10th November 2015**

Some key references:

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