



Her Majesty's  
Inspectorate of  
Probation

## Social capital building supporting the desistance process

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HM Inspectorate of Probation

Academic Insights 2021/06

JUNE 2021

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## Foreword

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Katherine Albertson, summarising the concept of social capital and how increases in the strength, range and quality of bonding, bridging and linking opportunities can be beneficial in supporting the desistance process. A six-stage social capital building process model is presented to aid the practical identification of a wide range of such opportunities. The model highlights the importance of working in close partnership with local communities, enabling practitioners to support the building of social capital in the wider community context. As set out in the standards framework for our probation inspections, we will continue to examine whether local services are engaged to support and sustain desistance during the sentence and beyond.



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### Author profile

**Katherine Albertson** is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University. Most recently, Katherine has conducted research on the role of community hubs delivering probation services to support desistance and was involved in an evaluation of a social capital building veteran-specific project. Katherine led a community capacity building project involving the co-production of Armed Forces Covenant action plans with the armed forces community across South Yorkshire. Katherine has extensive experience of research in the community sanctions context, such as Intensive Alternatives to Custody, Integrated Offender Management, Prolific and other Priority Offenders, Restorative Justice Panels and Specialist Domestic Violence Courts. In the custodial setting, Katherine's work has largely focussed on prisoner engagement with creative arts-based activities, such as the Writers in Prison Network, the Prison Radio Association and Toe-by-Toe prison reading schemes.

**The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.**

# 1. Introduction

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The concept of social capital is understood (and measured) in different ways in different academic disciplines. The current popularity of social capital stems from Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) use of the term to describe relationships, social connections and networks as assets that can either enhance or hold back an individual's life chances; that is, opportunities to realise individual goals. As a concept, social capital has since been extended. Across the social sciences, the term is more frequently used as a label for the 'positive effects of sociability' (Portes, 1999: 22). Importantly, however, Bourdieu's (1986) definition distinguishes between social capital resources and one's ability to obtain them, a significant point obscured in many later developments (Portes, 1999).

In the context of criminal justice, individual's goals – and wider society's goals – include, but clearly are not limited to, probationers' desistance from crime. Desistance from crime research and theory development is an ever evolving and contested area of study, however it is commonly accepted that people are more likely to desist from crime:

*'when they have strong ties to family and community, employment that fulfils them, recognition of their worth from others, feelings of hope and self-efficacy, and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives'*

Maruna and Mann, 2019: 7

In practice, probationers' access to the positive relational and social ties cited above can be limited or disrupted, or facilitated by life circumstances beyond their control (Weaver, 2013; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), underlining the relevance of Bourdieu's (1986) distinction when thinking about the links between social capital and the desistance process. Further, it must be borne in mind that social capital may not always support desistance. For example, probationers may have access to 'negative' relational and social ties that maintain offending behaviour (Kay, 2020).

This *Academic Insights* paper seeks to clarify the concept of social capital for practitioners, alongside mapping the emerging links between opportunities to build social capital as supporting the desistance process. In the following sections, we consider social capital to be comprised of relationally dependent processes of social interaction. We present a theoretically informed social capital building process model to aid the practical identification of a range of social capital building opportunities, highlighting the links to supporting the desistance process. We conclude with the broader implications of these academic insights for both criminal justice practitioners and policy makers/commissioners of criminal justice services.

## 2. Social capital and links to the desistance processes

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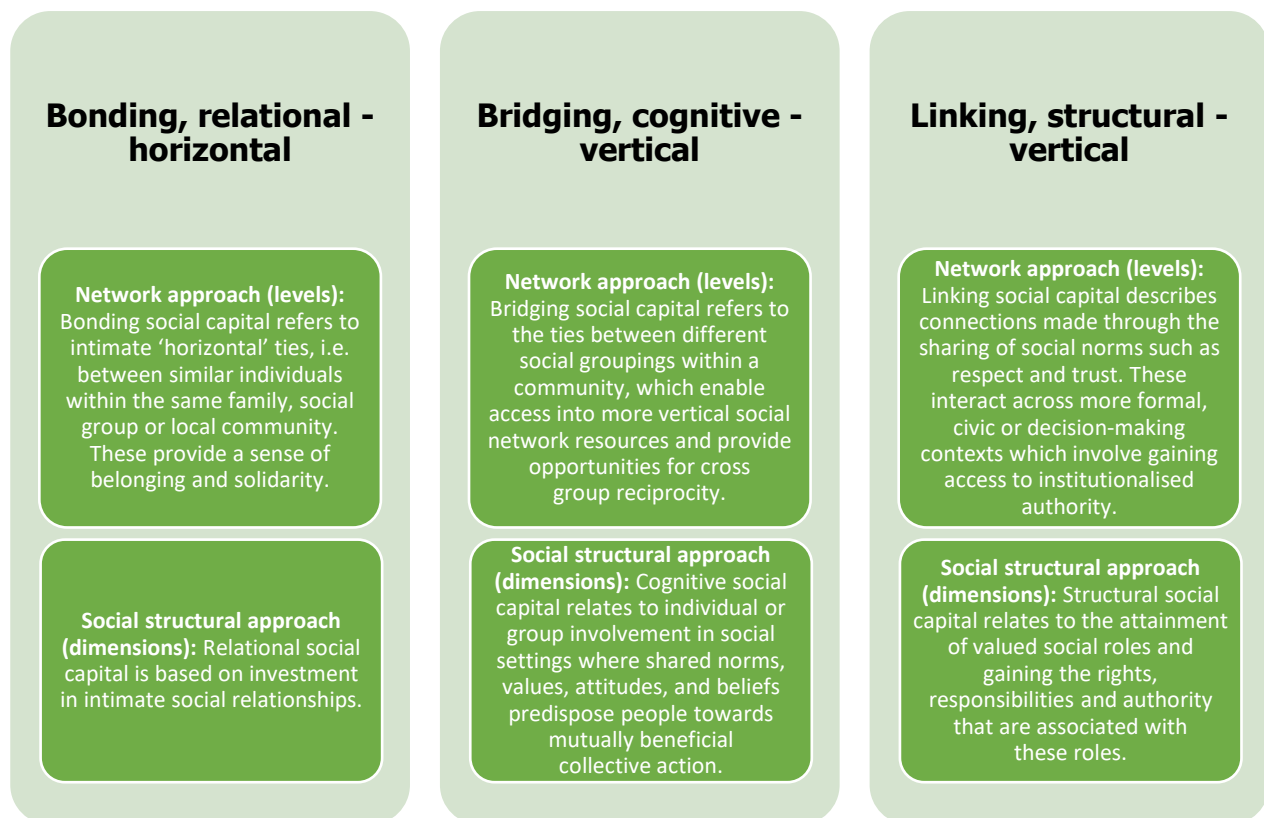
The term 'capital' broadly indicates resources which confer benefits to those who own or may access them. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. For Bourdieu, social capital produces or reproduces inequalities as instrumentalised assets that can provide returns, as: 'individual resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (1986: 248). The concept of social capital has since been extended to include community resources. For example, James Coleman (1998) describes social capital as a relatively neutral resource that facilitates both individual or collective action, generated by networks of relationships characterised by reciprocity and trust. For Fukuyama (2001), trust is also important as social capital operates to produce and reproduce a civil society, while for Robert Putnam (2000), social capital is the key component required for the maintenance of a healthy democratic state.

This *Academic Insights* paper has a pragmatic agenda. Social capital is theorised as relationally dependent processes (Weaver, 2015) that are most effectively defined as 'processes of social interaction' (Bankston and Zhou, 2002: 286). This implies that changes in probationers' relationships may be amongst the most important elements in supporting – or otherwise – desistance (Weaver, 2015). Developing the theory of social capital insofar as it supports the desistance process requires key distinctions to be made in social capital theory.

### 2.1 Key distinctions in social capital

The study of social capital has developed as an area of great interest to researchers, government agencies, and community and welfare organisations. We consider here three forms of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking – and two main approaches by which they may be analysed – the network perspective and the social structural perspective. These approaches may commonly be conflated or combined, but are presented here separately to underline the similarities in the three key distinctions in types and levels of social capital (for more details, see Albertson and Hall, 2019).

Both the network and social structural perspectives assert that increases in the strength, range and quality of bonding, bridging and linking relationships are beneficial (Granovetter 1973; Chapman and Murray 2015; Lin 2001; Costa and Kahn 2003; Pahl and Spencer 2004).



Source: adapted from Albertson and Hall (2019)

## 2.2 The desistance process and social capital

Desistance scholars cite the lack of access to pro-social capital resources as damaging probationers' desistance efforts (Uggen et al., 2006; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; McNeill et al., 2012; King, 2013). This point is underlined by the reporting of the social isolation and goal frustration experienced by those probationers with limited pro-social relational networks to support their desistance goals (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Gålnander, 2020). This highlights the value of considering probationers' social capital resources, acknowledging 'the importance of feelings and emotions in the process' which are 'central to our understanding of how people leave behind one identity (associated with criminal wrongdoing) and adopt new, more "pro-social" ways of being' (Farrell, 2005: 383).

A range of criminologists highlight the social and relational arrangements from which probationers gain support for their desistance.

### The intimate relational context

#### Benefits of social capital supporting desistance identified in:

- romantic relationships (Wright et al., 2001; Mills and Codd, 2008; Bersani et al., 2009)
- professional therapeutic alliances (Rex, 1999; Burnett and McNeill, 2005)
- spaces, activities and groups disassociated with offending identity (Hunter and Farrall, 2015).

### The community relational context

#### Benefits of social capital supporting desistance identified in:

- further education or employment (Brown and Bloom, 2018; Farrall, 2004)
- interaction with other social groups in volunteering roles (Uggen and Jankula, 1999; O'Connor and Bougue, 2010), linked to the facilitation of opportunities to engage in acts of reciprocity and generativity (Maruna, 2001; Barry, 2006; Farrall and Calverley, 2006)
- broader community resources, e.g., Restorative Justice, community reintegration and co-production initiatives (Levrant et al., 1999; Fox, 2016; Bazemore and Stinchcomb, 2004; Weaver, 2013; Weaver and Weaver, 2016).

### The structural relational context

#### Benefits of social capital supporting desistance identified in:

- engagement with wider decision-making/influencing forums within the democratic, civic context (Farrall et al., 2014)
- realising full democratic citizenship status (Uggen et al., 2006).

Source: Albertson and Albertson (forthcoming)

Our explicit intention here is to illustrate that analysts have identified social capital building resources supporting desistance across a range of social and relational contexts which directly mirror the levels and dimensions of social capital outlined in the previous section. These inform the social capital building process model set out in the next section.

## 2.3 A social capital building process model — linked to the desistance process

The social capital building process model presented below is drawn from an evaluation of a social capital building focussed initiative (Albertson et al., 2015). The project works with ex-service personnel with a history of criminal justice and substance misuse service contact.

The Albertson et al. evaluation used repeat quantitative wellbeing measures and qualitative longitudinal data collection methods. Findings identified a range of positive impacts arising from improved social capital, including:

- an increase in the making of wider relational connections and networks
- no further contact with the criminal justice system
- the achievement or sustaining of recovery and desistance from crime status (see Albertson et al., 2017).

Importantly, the project's success was prefaced on two key principles established to increase desistors' agency. First, participation was voluntary, not mandated. Second, the activities in which participants engaged as group members were both determined and

organised by the group members. This reduced the reliance on agency staff over time as the group's capacity and confidence gradually increased. In other words, engaging agency is key to the project's success.

An inductive analysis of the qualitative longitudinal data isolated the mechanisms underpinning the social capital building process. This was developed into a typology of six stages on a continuum of opportunities to build social capital (for more details, see Albertson and Hall, 2019). For our purposes here, the original social capital building process model has been expanded to include:

- the key distinctions between bonding, building, and linking social capital
- more explicit links to key features of the desistance process
- illustrative examples of social capital building opportunities at each stage.

This theoretically informed process model represents a continuum – or catalogue – of social capital building opportunities. It is not our intention to suggest that a probationer must go through all these six stages to desist from crime. Neither are these stages linear or sequential; they serve to distinguish between the kinds of social capital building opportunities available.

Not all desistors required the same social capital building. Some reflected that their only aim of engagement with the social capital project was to form a new intimate friendship group; as they utilised the bonding relational opportunities described above to meet their own individual relational concerns (c.f. Weaver, 2015). Others had more complex relational goals. For example, recognition of expertise (stage 6) led to achieving external involvement (stage 4) by engaging in acts of reciprocity and generativity towards those subsequent cohorts accessing the project.

What is key is that utilising opportunities to build social capital (to achieve alternative pro-social and relational aspirations that may support desistance efforts) must be led by engaging individual agency, as opposed to focussing on outcomes mandated outside of that relationship (see Koetzle and Matthews, 2020).



Types of social capital	Desistance process link	6 stage social capital building process model	Identifying social capital building opportunities, as providing:
<b>Relational and bonding social capital</b>	Pro-social alternatives to offender-identity association (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009)	<b>Stage 1:</b> "Regular association disassociated with stigmatised identity"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>alternative voluntary social activities that distance probationers from distractors?</li> <li>the potential for formation of friendships/group membership outside of the offending peer group, that address social isolation issues?</li> </ul>
	Capacity building pro-social group context (McCulloch, 2005)	<b>Stage 2:</b> "Active participation in enabling peer group activity-based context"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>pro-social peer group interaction focussed on capacity building tasks and activities to meet alternative pro-social community belonging needs? e.g., problem solving local issues together</li> <li>pro-social group identity formation, addressing alternative recognition needs?</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive and bridging social capital</b>	Envisioning of alternative selves (Graham and McNeill, 2017; Hunter and Farrall, 2018), projective future orientation (King, 2013), and realistic intention pathways	<b>Stage 3:</b> "Variations in wider reciprocal community connections"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>activities in which reflective and evaluative agentic decisions can occur? e.g., the induction of new members</li> <li>pro-social alternative community roles, including associated rights and responsibilities?</li> </ul>
	Engagement in reciprocity (Weaver, 2012) and generative activities (McNeil and	<b>Stage 4:</b> "Involvement in local externally-facing social events/activities"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>realistic and achievable alternative pro-social identities and goals setting?</li> <li>activities which foster/enable acts of reciprocity and generativity?</li> </ul>
<b>Structural and linking social capital</b>	External recognition (Gadd, 2006) of change in civic realm (Maruna, 2012; Fox, 2016)	<b>Stage 5:</b> "Representing the group as expert at national externally-facing events/ activities"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>opportunities to represent one's pro-social peer group as an expert at external national level? e.g., staffing an external event stand or speaking at a conference.</li> </ul>
	External recognition (Barry, 2016) of change in democratic engagement realm (Uggen et al., 2006)	<b>Stage 6:</b> "Recognition of expertise in formal decision-influencing settings"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engagement in civic and democratic activities on behalf of peer group at strategy, planning and decision-making level? e.g., service user forums/ representation at steering group level.</li> </ul>

### 3. Conclusion

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The current popularity of the social capital building narrative in criminology demonstrates the necessity of drawing attention to the potential benefits of wider social and relational contexts. This is a point of which we are all keenly aware, given the interruption to patterns of social engagement due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The response to this pandemic has brought groups-based community initiatives to a standstill, and at the time of writing it seems the disruptions of Covid-19 may be felt for some time to come. Nevertheless, opportunities to build social capital are anticipated to become of increasing interest to probation practice, given the emerging links to supporting the desistance process. Such opportunities clearly have an important place for consideration within the rehabilitative framework (Farrall, 2004; Farrall, 2010; Weaver, 2015).

While individual criminal justice practitioners can conduct (and share) a mapping of where in their locality opportunities to form new pro-social relationships may be available (Weaver, 2012; Gålnander, 2020), the broader implication is that probation practitioners must think of themselves as operating in the role of 'meso-broker' (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016: 580). That is, a practitioner may assist probationers by signposting them to opportunities to build their social capital in the wider community context, which largely sit outside of the criminal justice system (Weaver, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Albertson et al. 2020).

There is real potential to augment social capital building opportunities through criminal justice policy makers working in closer partnerships with local communities, where access to the agency-actualising social and relational networks and the resources described to support desistance 'exist before, behind and beyond interventions' (McNeill, et al., 2012: 47). However, more strategic backing is also required from criminal justice policy makers and commissioners to provide support for and investment in wider community-based social capital building opportunities within the communities in which probationers reside (see Albertson et al., 2020).

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ISBN: 978-1-914478-10-9

Published by:

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