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Persuading Politicians: Researching the Value of Social Capital in South Australia ***Persuadindo Políticos: Pesquisa sobre o Valor do Capital Social no Sul da Austrália***

Peter Mayer* e Lou Wilson**

Abstract Politicians of both the Left and the Right perceive enhanced levels of social capital as consistent with their core philosophical beliefs. But applied research findings about social capital are received into bureaucratic and political contexts and their fate depends more on those contexts than on scholarly merit. In South Australia two government departments commissioned research on aspects of social capital. The Office for Volunteers sought to quantify the economic value of aspects of volunteering. This chapter spells out the assumptions and methods used to produce the reported values. When the report reached the politicians, its modest findings were increased tenfold to enhance their media impact. The Department of Human Services commissioned an assessment tool that might measure the impact of social capital on social inclusion in northern Adelaide. The study found high levels of bonding social capital in working class areas of northern Adelaide. Subsequent reorganisation of departments and changes in government priorities meant that when the report was presented, the original sponsors had been transferred elsewhere and the report was quietly buried.

Keywords Social capital, social inclusion, volunteering, public policy

Resumo Os políticos, tanto de esquerda como de direita, vêem o aumento dos níveis do capital social como consistentes com as suas principais crenças filosóficas. Mas os resultados da investigação aplicada sobre o capital social serão recebidos nos contextos burocráticos e políticos e o seu destino depende mais destes contextos do que do mérito académico. No sul da Austrália, dois departamentos do governo encomendaram uma pesquisa sobre

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aspectos do capital social. O Office for Volunteers procurou quantificar o valor económico de aspectos do voluntariado. Este artigo enuncia os pressupostos e os métodos utilizados para produzir os valores reportados. Quando o relatório chegou aos políticos, os seus resultados modestos foram aumentados dez vezes, para reforçar o seu impacto nos média. O Departamento de Serviços Humanos encomendou uma ferramenta de avaliação que pode medir o impacto do capital social na inclusão social, no norte de Adelaide. O estudo encontrou altos níveis de capital social vinculador em áreas de classes trabalhadoras no norte de Adelaide. As subseqüentes reorganizações dos departamentos e mudanças nas prioridades do governo significaram que quando o relatório foi apresentado, os patrocinadores originais tinham sido transferidos para outro lugar, e o relatório foi discretamente silenciado.

Palavras-chave Capital social, inclusão social, voluntariado, políticas públicas

■ **Persuading Politicians: Researching the Value of Social Capital in South Australia**

Peter Mayer e Lou Wilson

F. M. Cornford observed in *Microcosmographia Academica* his perennially pertinent guide to academic politics, that “*There is only one argument for doing something; the rest are arguments for doing nothing. The argument for doing something is that it is the right thing to do.*” (Cornford, 1908: 14). Although that observation is equally valid for society at large, the correctness of a policy no longer appears to be sufficient. The contemporary argument for why something should be done must include evidence that it is also economically beneficial or politically advantageous to do so.

In the early years of the new millennium, two agencies of the government of South Australia each commissioned academic studies to place their policy-making on a firmer base of evidence and to assist them in their incessant struggles for recurrent funding.

The Wider Economic Value of Social Capital and Volunteering in South Australia

The first of the research projects was commissioned by the Office for Volunteers (OfV) which hoped that the findings would assist the OfV in persuading their political masters of the importance of community volunteering and its role in sustaining social capital, as well as, ideally, providing something newsworthy which the Premier (the head of government at the state level in Australia) could announce at an appropriate moment.

The Office for Volunteers (OfV) was formed during the United Nation’s International Year of the Volunteer in 2001. Originally located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, it has subsequently been placed in the portfolio of the Minister of Justice.

The role of the OFV is to develop policies and to manage a range of programmes which promote, support and encourage the activities of the many different voluntary groups in South Australia. The Office was set a specific strategic target to raise levels of volunteering in the state to 50% by 2010; that target was surpassed in 2006.

In 2002 Soupourmas and Ironmonger published an innovative study which estimated the monetary value of the hours given by volunteers in the Australian state of Victoria (Soupourmas, 2002:524). On the basis of that work, Ironmonger was requested by OfV to replicate the study for South Australia. Using Australian Bureau of Statistics data, which showed that South Australian volunteers had donated 229 million hours in 2000, Ironmonger estimated that the volunteer labour of each South Australian

was worth \$4,352. In total, the value of South Australian volunteer contributions in 2000 was estimated to be \$4.98 billion equivalent to 11.5% of gross state domestic product (Ironmonger, 2002: 531). This was persuasive and powerful evidence for politicians and the public that volunteering makes a major economic as well as social contribution to society.

While Ironmonger had put a money value on the donated hours — the direct contribution made by volunteers — it seemed likely that there were also indirect contributions, which if they could be identified and specified, would demonstrate that voluntary work makes a significant indirect economic contribution as well. To explore this possibility, the Office for Volunteers commissioned one of us (Mayer) to prepare a brief report on the value of some of the more readily determined social impacts of volunteers.¹

A question of methods

As is often the case with applied research commissioned by small government departments, the report had to be prepared in a very short time and for a rather modest sum. That ruled out the possibility of undertaking a significant scoping exercise or extensive original research.

There were two practical problems of method which these constraints imposed. First, the research would have to rely primarily on existing official data and utilise published estimations of costs. Fortunately, as a result of the almost universal requirement for economic valuations of policy, cost estimations were available for several important policy areas. For some important illnesses, including coronary heart disease, malignant neoplasms, cerebrovascular disease, unintentional injury and infant mortality, however, we were not able to locate cost estimations and thus they were not included in the report.

Second, the report would have to rely on a familiar approach in econometrics to estimate the impact of changes in levels of volunteering: the slope coefficients of Ordinary Least Squares regression lines for relevant sets of data. However, because there were no available results for South Australia or for the Australian states, a pragmatic decision was made to rely upon slope coefficients for data from the USA. Thus a critical and fundamental assumption was made that the relationships underlying behaviour in South Australia would not be very different from those observed between the 50 states in America. This assumption was accepted by the OfV. Because US data relating crime and health to social capital were available for only some crimes and causes of illness, only those could be included in our estimates. In addition, because of contradictory published evidence about the relationship between aspects of social capital and rape, assault and motor-vehicle theft, it was decided to report the estimates for those crimes separately.

Both methodological issues are explored in greater depth in the following section.

Arriving at the costs

The costs of crime

To estimate the costs of crime, we relied on evidence from Mayhew's estimate, based on survey research, of the extent to which official figures under-report different categories of crime (Mayhew, 2003). While virtually all murders are reported, for example, the survey results indicate that only one robbery in six is reported to the police. Accordingly we applied Mayhew's multipliers to official data for South Australia to arrive at estimates for the actual incidence of different crimes in the state. For example, in 2001 there were 1,681 reported robberies; we estimated the actual number to be 10,590. We also adopted Mayhew's estimates for the direct — mainly medical — costs of most of the different categories of crimes as well as the indirect crime-related costs of the criminal justice system, private provision of security, household precautions, provision of victims' compensation and insurance administrative costs.

The exception to our use of Mayhew was for homicides. For these we relied upon what we considered to be the more detailed estimates of Watson and Ozanne-Smith (1997) of the Monash University Accident Research Unit. Watson and Ozanne-Smith used an 'incidence approach' to estimate costs of a death or injury in the year in which it occurs. They distinguish between direct medical costs such as those incurred in a hospital or in rehabilitation and indirect costs which are attributable to lost output. Our adjusted figures estimated these costs at \$7,600 per death. Watson and Ozanne-Smith estimated lost output on the basis of the number of years a person who died might, on average, have lived and the value of their earnings had they worked for the rest of a normal working lifetime as well as the monetary value of their services to family and community. When adjusted for changes in the cost of living, our study estimated those costs to be \$1,190,000 for each homicide. In total, we estimated the average cost of per homicide in 2001 as \$1.6m, making it by far the single most costly crime.

Our overall estimates of the cost of homicide in South Australia were \$46 million; for assault the cost was \$115 million; robbery and burglary cost society \$172 million and criminal damage cost the community \$108 million. The total for just these crimes was \$482 million.

In a similar way, published estimates of costs for sexual assault, motor vehicle theft and theft of articles within a vehicle were applied to estimated incidences in South Australia. The total social cost of these crimes was estimated to be \$153,207,600.

In the methodological discussion, we had indicated that the evidence for a clear relationship between levels of social capital and these particular crimes was contradictory. Nevertheless, these scholarly caveats were not repeated when we presented the estimated costs in the main body of the report.

The value of better health and reduced mortality

Our estimate of the value of better health involved a single, extended estimate for reduced mortality. This relied primarily on the work of Kawachi and his colleagues (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000; Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997). Although it wasn't perfectly clear that the same measures of volunteering found in the USA were applicable locally, we boldly estimated that a one unit increase in volunteering would result in savings of \$45 million each year. We also noted that there were severe gender inequalities in these figures (\$36.6 million for men; only \$9.6 for women) reflecting large differences in earnings in the middle years of life.

The Value of Higher Economic Growth

We also found evidence in the published literature which indicates that there is a positive relationship between levels of social capital and rates of economic growth. Two factors appear to be involved. There is considerable evidence which shows that higher levels of social capital are associated with higher levels of achievement in education, which economists often term as 'human capital'. Higher student scores on standardised tests for educational attainment appear to be reliably correlated with higher rates of growth of Gross National Product (GNP). The second contribution from social capital arises from higher levels of trust in society. Where levels of trust are higher, social costs (e.g. crime, insurance) are lower, credit may be more readily available, etc. We utilised an estimate which suggested that each unit increase in social capital results in a 63% increase in the rate of economic growth.

Estimated the value of an increase in Social Capital

Assembling the data on the incidence of various crimes and health outcomes as well as soundly-based estimates of costs was time-consuming. It was also only the necessary first step. What we also needed to do was be able to estimate for the Office for Volunteers what the value might be of an increase in levels of volunteering, because *that* might carry weight with the minister and justify an increased budget allocation.

As we have already noted, this can be done using the slopes of regression lines. The problem we faced was that most of the studies on which we relied did not include the equations for the regressions they reported. To derive this crucial number we retur-

ned to the elementary lessons in analytical geometry. Using enlarged copies of the published scatter grams, we carefully measured the horizontal 'run' (the distance between two values on the 'x' axis) and the 'fall' (the difference between those values on the 'y' axis, which had a negative slope in the cases we used). The ratio of the 'fall' divided by the 'run' gave us the value of the slope. The result was less precise than the use of the exact regression equation would have been, but was sufficiently accurate for the broad brush estimate which we were making.

Once we had derived the slope we would use, we applied it to each of the cost figures we had derived. We modestly — and naively, no doubt — reported our estimate for what a 1% *increase* in social capital might be worth to the state of South Australia. For homicide, assault and various forms of theft, the savings came to \$434,000. Sexual assault and crimes associated with motor vehicles added a further \$138,000. Reduced mortality was worth a great deal more: about \$46 million each year. The increase in economic growth was estimated to be worth \$278 million. Our estimated total savings from the 1% increase was \$325 million, a tidy and worthwhile gain, we felt.

When our report was eventually incorporated into the Premier's speech, the spin doctors had done their work: our modest 1% increase was puffed up to mighty 10% and the potential savings accruing from increased levels of volunteering were thus reported to the public as being worth a whopping \$3.25 billion!

The other side of the coin

While the spin doctors made capital out our findings on the economic value of volunteering in South Australia, we had a quite different experience in a similar project that sought to assess the value of social inclusion and social capital in northern Adelaide.

Northern Adelaide incorporates the cities of Gawler, Playford and Salisbury and surrounding districts. The region is challenged by high socio-economic disadvantage and a significant proportion of the population receives income transfers and other forms of welfare from the Australian Government. Northern Adelaide has also received funding for many years from the Australian and South Australian Government for regional development initiatives that are designed to address poverty and unemployment (Wilson, 2006). A number of these initiatives have been intended to increase social capital in the region. Social capital programs were favoured in the early 2000s by both conservative and the centre left Australian political parties as a way of alleviating social disadvantage. The conservative Coalition of Liberal and National parties and the centre-left Labor party dominate Australian politics and alternate between government and opposition in most Australian states and territories. South Australia elected a centre-left Labor government to power in 2002 and conservative governments were in power in Canberra from 1996 to 2007.

At the time the national Labor Party was under the leadership of Mark Latham, an unusual politician who projected an aggressive working class persona in public while privately writing books and journal articles about social capital for largely academic audiences. Latham argued that social capital was a non-commodifiable social good that occupied a space between markets and government. His idea was that social capital was a space where people could come together and help each other, become self-reliant and therefore have no need for government welfare. Hence governments that encouraged social capital to develop could save money on income transfers to the poor. Latham worked from an assumption that the poor were poor because they lacked social capital. He articulated this argument most clearly in his book *Civilising Global Capital* (Latham, 1998), which oddly did not have a lot to say about global capital but contained six chapters on social capital. Latham argued that there are cost savings for all levels of government in fostering grass roots social capital and supporting voluntary organisations to improve their potential for community service. Latham drew inspiration from Robert Putnam's (1993) thesis that social capital was good for the economy. Liberal opponents of Latham such as Peter Costello and the current national leader of the Liberal Party of Australia, Tony Abbott also gave speeches at the time in favour of building social capital in disadvantaged communities. It was difficult for politicians from the left or the right to argue over a discourse that in essence said if individuals knew each other, trusted each other, and engaged in volunteering and similar activities, the social capital of their community would be higher than if those things were not there and the local economy would be stronger. Moreover social capital was also claimed to reduce the need for government spending on welfare, which could only be good. Similar sentiments existed among ministers in the South Australian Labor Government elected in 2002, notably by the new Minister for Volunteering, Jennifer Rankine and Premier Mike Rann.

Interest in social capital by politicians on all sides of politics influenced the national government to fund a series of initiatives in northern Adelaide to foster social capital in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The new SA Labor government that came to power in 2002 had an interest in finding out whether these initiatives would deliver the touted benefits of social capital to communities in northern Adelaide,

A survey to measure social capital

In 2005 the South Australian Department of Human Services offered a large grant to develop an assessment tool that might measure the impact of social capital on social inclusion in northern Adelaide. The SA Labor Government had established a Social Inclusion Unit (SIU) in 2002 modelled on the Blair Government's Social Exclusion Unit in the UK and was keen to develop measuring tools to assess the effectiveness of its social programs, many of which were directed at addressing social disadvantage in northern Adelaide. Social inclusion was left undefined when the SIU was established but the mission of the unit was to find 'joined up' solutions to social

problems. While social inclusion was left undefined the new Social Inclusion Commissioner, Monsignor David Cappo (2002) defined social exclusion as "*the process of being shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which contribute to the integration of a person into the community*". Policy officers appointed to the new unit were influenced by the debate over social capital and were keen to see if policies fostering social capital would have an impact on social exclusion in northern Adelaide. The SIU became a partner on the project and offered the services of one of its policy officers to the University of Adelaide research team. An Office for the North had also been established by the Rann Government to administer resources directed to addressing social and economic problems in northern Adelaide. The leadership of the Office was keenly interested in social capital and likewise offered a policy officer to the project as in-kind support.

The grant was to fund a general population survey of social capital and social inclusion in northern Adelaide and a series of community interviews with people who had responded to the survey. The objectives were to provide perceptual measures of social capital and its impact on social inclusion provide data along a single dimension like 'trust in others' and facilitate the identification of problems that might require social action in regard to both particular aspects of life and particular sub-groups of the population (Wilson, 2006). The project was funded for eighteen months for more than \$200,000. With the in-kind support of two policy officers it represented a well resourced project relative to the resources that are generally available for social science research in Australia.

Changing agendas

However it quickly became apparent that the research agendas of the project partners were changing. The SA Department of Human Services had been formed from an amalgamation of the former Departments of Health and Family and Community Services. The latter department had formerly been responsible for the administration of social work and child protection services, and many of its social workers felt at a disadvantage in the new department. Social workers and senior managers felt that the interests of families and communities had been subsumed in the new department into a health discourse by medical professionals and argued for the return of a Department of Families and Communities. Shortly after coming to power the Rann Government received a report into child protection by the eminent legal expert and later Supreme Court Justice, Robyn Layton. Her report *Our best investment: a state plan to protect and advance the interests of children* triggered moves to re-establish a separate Department of Families and Communities to enhance child protection services (Layton, 2003). Shortly after our project commenced the Department of Human Services was split back into a Department of Health and a Department of Families and Community Services. Our project was placed under the

auspices of the Department of Health but some of the principal policy officers that had worked with the university team in the early stages of the project were assigned to the Department of Families and Communities. Communications with the new Department of Health tended to be limited thereafter to their demography unit, which was to manage the delivery of the survey.

Further tensions emerged over the development of the survey instrument when it became evident that the SIU wished the survey to focus on assessing perceptions of homelessness and school retention in line with new priorities assigned to it by the State Government rather than concepts associated with social capital. The SIU was also undergoing an orientation toward finding rapid 'solutions' to social problems. The Social Inclusion Commissioner, Monsignor David Cappo made statements demanding that public sector officers engage in 'action-focused thinking and planning' with 'a single-minded emphasis on implementation' and made clear his disinterest in academic research that produced 'weighty tomes filled with passive language about what might be done' after investigation and research (Cappo, 2005: 3). The SIU policy officer assigned to the project and her manager engaged in a long debate with the university team over the topics to be addressed in the survey instrument. Further pressure was placed on the university team by another senior manager from the SIU who stated that unless the survey included questions about homelessness it was not worth doing from the perspective of his department. The survey instrument was to be delivered by telephone to respondents drawn from the electronic White Pages. It was unlikely that a telephone survey drawn from the White Pages would pick up homeless respondents but such arguments were seemingly in tension with the SIU's emphasis on 'action focused thinking'. The SIU's position was also somewhat in tension with the Office for the North whose interest was in assessing social capital. The officers from the Department of Health were focused on simply delivering the survey. Eventually a compromise was arrived at, the social capital questions were retained and a question was included in the telephone survey instrument on whether respondents had been homeless in the past twelve months.

Further delays occurred when the leader of the university team became ill and required extended leave and other staff movements at the university delayed the implementation of the project. Moreover it became apparent that the Office for the North might soon be disbanded. The Rann Government had come to power in 2002 as a minority government dependent on independent members of Parliament to provide it with a majority in the SA lower house. The Office for the North and a similar Office for the South were established in part to help deliver policy outcomes in the northern and southern suburbs of Adelaide, areas where elections tend to be won or lost. Labor won the 2006 State election with a large majority and sought to make cost savings by restructuring the public sector. Office for the North workers became focused on winding up the department, albeit the officer assigned to the project and her manager continued to work with the university team.

By the time the project final report was released in 2007 two of the original three government departments that were partners on the project in 2005 no longer existed and the third department had other priorities (Spoehr *et al.*, 2007). Our report was released with little fanfare and seemingly minimal interest from State Government Ministers or their spin doctors. The survey of social capital and social inclusion and qualitative interviews with the northern Adelaide community had picked up indications of high levels of bonding social capital in working class areas of northern Adelaide. We also found that persons in middle income households were less likely to engage in informal social capital building activities than people in low income households. Persons from middle income households were also less likely to engage in formal volunteering than people from high income households. These findings were contrary to the assumptions of Mark Latham and other members of the political class, although this was unlikely to have influenced the lack of interest in the report by the South Australian government. A more plausible reason is a tension between the relevance of our research and the policy cycle of the government departments that were our partners on the project.

Conclusion

The policy cycle is meant to follow a process whereby a group of decision makers assemble at a particular time, review a problem, consider alternative courses of action, weigh the alternatives against their goals or preferences, and then select an alternative that seems well suited for achieving their purposes (Bridgman and Davis, 2003).

However as C. H. Weiss (1982) noted long ago: "*Given the fragmentation of authority across multiple bureaus, departments, and legislative committees, and the disjointed stages by which actions coalesce into decisions, the traditional model of decision making is a highly stylized rendition of reality...The goals of policy are often equally diffuse, except in terms of 'taking care of' some undesirable situation.*"

More recently Everett (2003) has argued that the policy making process is complex, value-laden and influenced by the role of political power in determining its direction, making rational decision making difficult. When academic researchers interface with public sector policymakers on collaborative research there is a tension between the process orientation of departmental officers and what might be called the 'reason orientation', for want of a better term, of academics who seek to understand why something happens the way it does. The latter is of interest to departmental officers when it addresses the objectives of the process they are implementing but the cases offered here suggest that this is less so when the public sector agenda moves on because of changing political imperatives or departmental restructuring.

It may seem frustrating for academics who wish to see more money allocated to research to influence 'good' policy outcomes - in this case in terms of social capital - but our experiences suggest that large, well resourced projects that unfold over several years in collaboration with multiple public sector organisations might be less likely to produce research of immediate interest to politicians and public sector agencies than shorter projects with compressed time frames that have a single partner organisation. In the latter case there might be insufficient resources to fully explore the issue at hand and the possibility that spin doctors might distort the outcomes but the research findings seem more likely to be picked up by policy makers, at least in the short term. Maintaining the relevance of longer term academic policy research to the needs of the public sector is challenging, particularly when multiple public sector partners are involved. In the case of the longer project discussed here, two of three departments that we worked with were simply restructured out of existence in the space of two years and the policy objectives of the remaining partner organisation no longer aligned closely with the purpose of the research. Academic researchers are often caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place when working with public sector departments. The time consuming academic research process is in tension with the short, fragmented policy making processes that are necessarily followed by public sector policy makers subject to political imperatives and mandarins who demand 'a single-minded emphasis on implementation'. To return to Cornford's observation that the argument for doing something is that it is the right thing to do, the right thing to do about something for a policy maker is to implement a process, however irrational, to meet an objective. For an academic the right thing to do is to understand phenomena, and in so much as research is meant to be systematic and evidence based, be rational about it. The tension between what is right for a policy maker and what is right for an academic researcher is a challenge that is not easily resolved.

Note

¹The report is available from the website of the Office for Volunteers at http://www.ofv.sa.gov.au/pdfs/mayer_report.pdf

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