

# Young People and Social Capital

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Discussions about social capital and its impact on people's lives and communities are having a growing influence on government policy in regeneration programmes, youth and community development, health promotion and the probation service.

Whilst this is important it quite often creates a huge burden upon practitioners which is about how to apply this theoretical concept and establish whether it has any relevance or use in practice and for the people you work with.

Within an ESRC funded study we investigated how young people manage risk decisions and the resources they draw upon to manage the uncertainty of their lives. We argue that one of these resources is social capital. In this leaflet we aim to throw some light on the links between social capital and risk with a special focus on practice. All the quotes in this leaflet are from interviews with young people as part of this project.

**'Social Capital can be defined as the bulk of social interactions, networks and network opportunities that either people or communities have within a specific environment. This environment is characterised by a commonality of mutual trust and reciprocity and informed by specific norms and values.'**

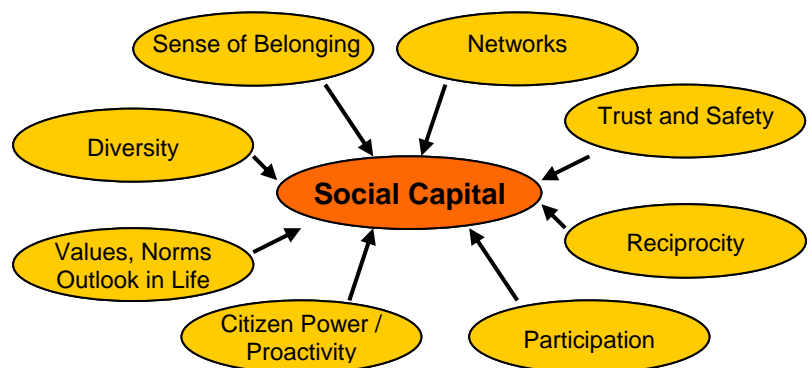
There are different types of social capital which are important in different situations, or moments in our life. These types are shaped through:

- The types of networks (similar or diverse, outward or inward looking)
- Specific and shared norms and values
- The type of community (location, interest, identity, faith, etc.)
- Power and economic resources

Young people engage with others through a variety of associations forming many different types of networks. Sometimes each of these networks have different sets of norms, trust and reciprocity. Social networks are not only important in terms of emotional support but also crucial in giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.

With practitioners and through research we have developed a social capital framework for research, evaluation and practice. This framework contains elements that are used to explore social capital and aspects that are seen as related to social capital or that might influence the enhancement and development of social capital.

## Social Capital Framework



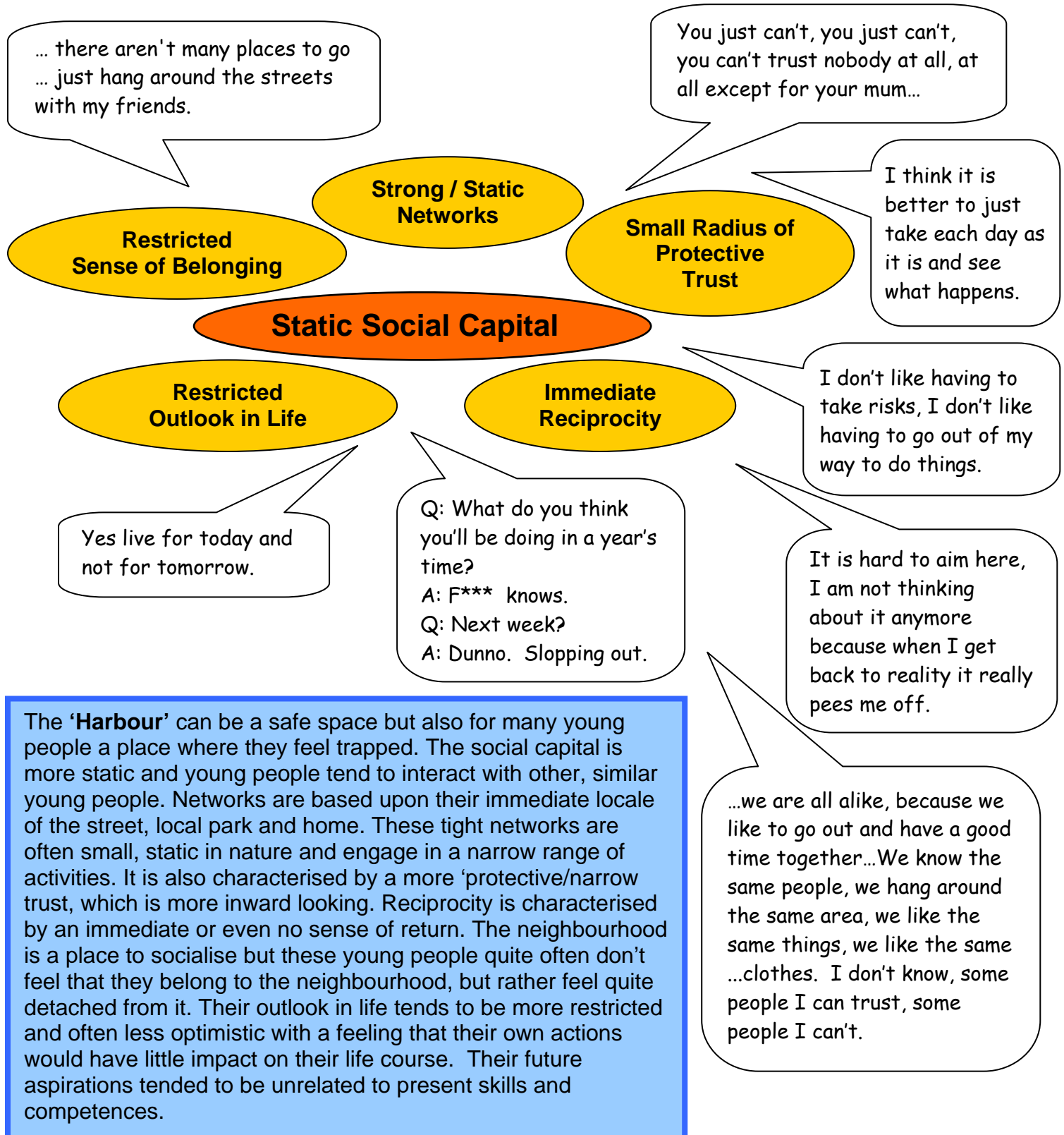
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Current youth policy and practice is infused by the association between youth and risk. There is a “moral panic” about young people either presenting a “risk” or being “at risk”. Young people are often characterised as imprudent and irrational, failing to calculate risks properly or to act wisely by taking on board the array of risk information (for example in respect of drug risks).

Policy mainly focuses on:

- Education campaigns to encourage young people away from risky behaviours
- Corrective programmes using cognitive behavioural methods
- Prevention targeting “at risk” youth for interventions, and “dysfunctional” families for parenting programmes

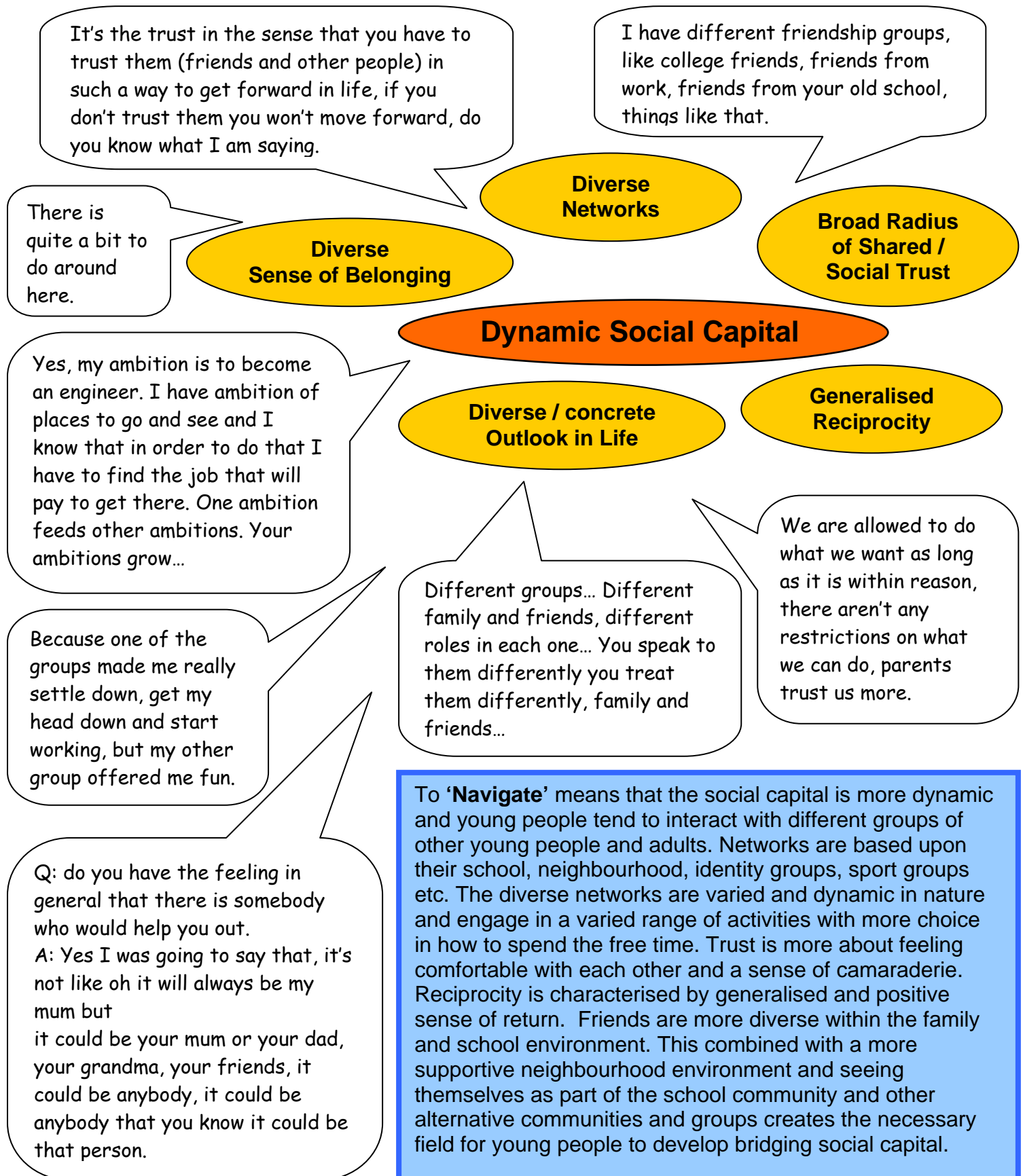
## The Harbour



However this fails to explore how such decisions are made over time, the pathways young people take into and out of risk and the social and structural contexts in which these happen. We encourage practitioners to consider that:

- Risks are not only a matter of personal assessment, adequate reflection and choice, but also a matter of social position or structural inequalities
- Failure to adequately negotiate a risk is not an individual failure but a result of social processes, often outside of the individual's control.

## Navigation

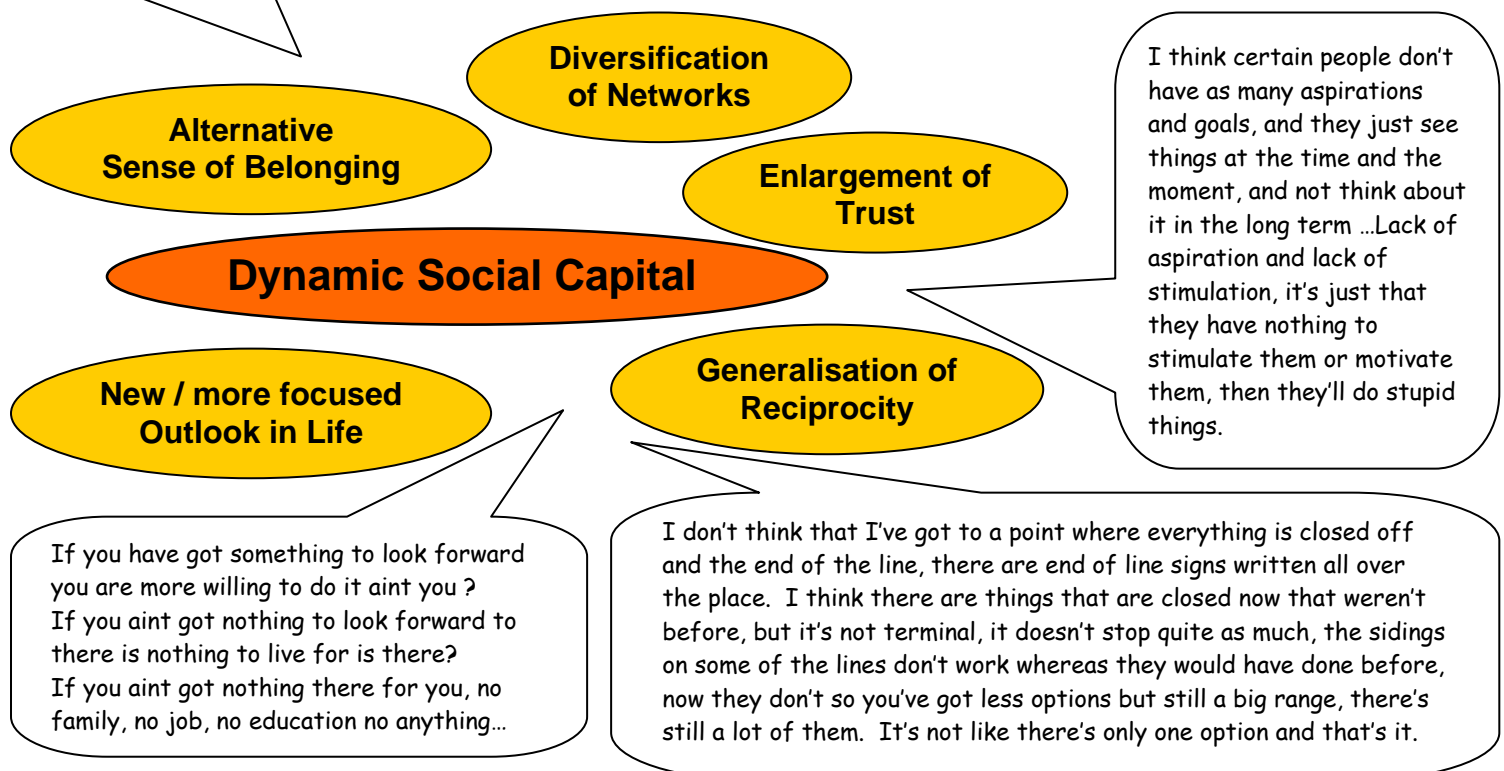


# How to Enhance Social Capital:

## Setting Sail

Because it's different, you get sick of the same place. If I was to stay round my house, because I've been round mine all my life you just say oh God, I want to get away, I want a change, I want to get away from this, I want to meet new people so you just go away. See new people, meet them, say hello, get their numbers and meet up again sometime.

'Setting sail' is about **enhancing dynamic social capital**. This is one of the factors (amongst economic, political etc.) which will support young people's ability to navigate the challenges everyday life presents them. This is not about 'avoiding' risks but about having the resources to cope, manage and make informed choices in their lives. **It is about working with young people and not for them** so they can set sail and have **more power and opportunities** in their lives.



### What can you do? Five interconnected areas in which this might happen:

- 1) **Diversification of Networks:** Enhance networks of support and interaction. Discuss with young people, who is supporting them? Who is important to them? Explore ways for young people to meet and interact with new people and groups, different from their immediate locale of street, school and family.
- 2) **Enlargement of Trust:** Explore with young people who they trust and the meaning of trust. Work towards establishing strong trusting relationships within safe environments. Do they only trust a small number of people? How will they be able to take the risk to trust new people?
- 3) **New, more focused Outlook in Life:** How do they see their future? Do they think they can influence their future? This is about working with them in building their self confidence, relating it to new networks and new trusting relationships. Work with young people to discover their unique skills and thus enhance their aspirations by encouraging them to take the risk of change.
- 4) **Alternative Self and Sense of Belonging:** How do they see themselves? As active or passive? If they feel trapped, work in building up resilience, setting positive goals with a sense of achievement. Can they see themselves differently from how they are now?
- 5) **Generalisation of Reciprocity:** Do they feel that they give and never get anything back? Do they always expect an immediate return? Do they feel that it is worth contributing to their groups, communities, society? Work with young people in participative ways to engage with others, work towards change in their neighbourhoods, communities or other groups. Encourage them to do things with other people.