

Social capital interventions

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research

How can social care workers help young people recovering from psychosis to generate and mobilise social capital?

There is evidence that social capital is important for recovery from mental health problems and that it can also enhance quality of life. Through establishing stronger social networks, people can benefit from the power, prestige, wealth or abilities of other people and these connections can often help an individual find work and help them move on in their lives after experiencing an episode of psychosis. However, people with mental health problems generally have access to less social capital than others in society.

Social care workers can help people make new friends and acquaintances, which may improve their access to social capital, but little is known about how effective staff are in this role. Nor is it understood how social care workers can best help people feel more secure in their relationships with others so that they make use of what social capital they have. The personalisation agenda for care services means it is increasingly important that users are skilfully assisted to develop these stronger social networks. Social capital can provide the resources that are potentially important for the success of service innovations such as personal budgets and self-directed support.

The *Connecting People* study

- will identify how social care workers can most effectively enable young people recovering from psychosis to generate and mobilise social capital in order to develop a new social capital intervention.

It aims to

- understand the ways in which social care workers are currently helping young people recovering from psychosis to generate and mobilise social capital
- investigate how social care staff develop effective working relationships and secure attachments with service users, and thereby promote their social engagement
- develop an applied social capital theory for mental health social care practice in the UK and beyond
- develop social capital interventions that can be used by social care workers in their everyday practice.



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

The idea of 'social capital' refers to the ability of individuals to use the power, prestige, wealth or abilities of people that they know in order to help them get ahead and to provide new opportunities ("it is not what you know, but who you know"). In recent years, the concept has emerged as a way of explaining why some people are more successful in their lives than others. Research indicates, for instance, that people with access to greater social capital can more easily find work or get a promotion. Similarly, membership of a social network can bring access to other network members' resources, such as expert information and financial support, as well as promoting mental well-being by reinforcing an individual's identification with a group.

However, people with mental health problems, especially those with experience of psychosis, generally have less access to social capital than other individuals. Typically, they are marginalised by society, have fewer friends, less contact with family members, and find it difficult to sustain a job or stable housing. As a result, their opportunities to establish new social connections are limited.

This low social capital may hold back people recovering from psychosis from making progress in their lives. UK government policy already recognises the particularly disadvantaged position and income-related inequality of people with mental health problems. But part of the answer to these issues is to consider how low social capital can best be addressed through various interventions provided by professional social care workers.

At present, social capital interventions at an individual level remain undeveloped, although it is possible that social care workers are already delivering aspects of these which are neither defined nor evaluated as such.

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Effective interventions need to:

- engage with wider social structures that constrain opportunities for enhancing social capital
- enhance an individual's capacity for building relationships
- foster resourceful network contacts
- challenge social structures which discriminate against people with mental health problems
- consider how relationship insecurity acts as a barrier to accessing social capital.

aspect of their work. Research suggests that skilled social care workers need to help people feel secure in their relationships with others in order to help them make use of their social capital. A better understanding is needed of the most effective ways for care professionals to do this.

This study will be the first stage of the development for people with psychosis of social capital interventions in the *MRC Framework for the Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions to Improve Health*.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

This study will investigate apparent social capital interventions that are currently part of social care practice. The work has two stages.

STAGE 1: Ethnography

The project will conduct an ethnographic study of social care in contexts where workers have the opportunity to enhance service users' access to social capital. A researcher will talk to and observe social care workers helping young people (aged under 35) to develop new social relationships and to feel secure in these relationships. The researcher will also investigate how the workers help people to make use of the power, prestige, wealth or abilities of the other people that they know in

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order to help them progress in their lives. To minimise bias, the analysis will triangulate care workers' interview responses with the perspectives of service users and the project researcher's observations.

The fieldwork will take place in three different types of settings:

- NHS community mental health services including an early intervention in psychosis service, and teams supporting the recovery of people with psychosis.
- a voluntary sector agency that provides housing support to people with psychosis.
- three small innovative social inclusion projects that work with people with mental health problems and that are embedded in their local neighbourhoods.

In phase one of the ethnographic study, the researcher will spend two months in each of the three types of settings, conducting interviews and making observations. After analysis of the findings, phase two will repeat the same fieldwork process in the same settings but with predominantly new care workers and service users.

It is envisaged that, for each phase, up to 35 social care workers and around 70 service users and carers will participate in the study.

Focus group discussions will be held at the end of each phase with sub-groups of existing study participants. This will help check the validity of the data, explore possible assumptions made during the analysis, and discuss emerging findings about intervention models.

STAGE 2: Delphi consultation

The analysis will compare the findings of the ethnographic study with existing empirical and theoretical work on social capital. In consultation with the project's advisory group, the project team will develop a new social capital intervention for workers to use with people recovering from psychosis. This will articulate the underlying theory of change; detail the training that should be delivered to

workers and provide clear guidance to workers about the content and delivery of the intervention.

A Delphi consultation (using email and postal questionnaires) with up to 30 participants will be used to amend and refine the intervention to ensure that it is feasible in practice and faithful to social capital theory. Two rounds of consultation will take place, with participants each time asked to rate the intervention against criteria such as clarity, comprehensiveness, feasibility and acceptability. Those involved in this consensus building process will be users, carers, practitioners, and international experts on social work, attachment theory, and social capital.

The synergy of using ethnography within the context of existing theory may be a novel approach to developing complex interventions in social care. Any methodological innovations that arise during the project will be shared with other social care researchers.

Post-project piloting

Following completion of the project, future experimental studies will test the effectiveness of the social capital intervention in improving an individual's access to social capital. Randomised controlled trials will produce evidence that will potentially influence NICE and SCIE guidelines.

Project publications

This project is primarily trying to influence social care workers, their managers and their employers, and a high impact project website will publish full and accessible information about progress and outcomes. A range of self-help materials will also be published for use by service users and carers, and will be particularly useful for people with personal budgets.

The research findings will be published in relevant peer-reviewed journals, and possibly a monograph, as it is the project's ambition that the results of applying a theoretical framework to real-world social care practice will influence international social capital scholarship.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This research project will provide accessible and structured guidance about social capital interventions that is currently unavailable elsewhere. Best practice will be identified and systemised. The diversity of settings involved in the study will help to ensure that the interventions described will be feasible in a variety of environments with the minimum of local adaptation. Although the project will focus on social care practice with people recovering from psychosis, the interventions will also have wider relevance.

The findings will help optimise the care provided by social care workers and will have direct relevance to the personalisation agenda. Helping people with personal budgets to develop resourceful contacts within their own social networks will promote inter-dependence and their ability to purchase the care and support that will best meet their needs. Overall, increasing the access of social care service users to social capital will enhance their quality of life, promote inclusion in their local communities and promote recovery.

The NIHR School for Social Care Research

The School for Social Care Research was set up by the National Institute for Health Research to develop and improve the evidence base for adult social care practice in England. It officially launched on 1 May 2009 with funding of £15 million over five years.

The School conducts and commissions high-quality research across five overlapping programme areas:

Prevention and reduction – How can we best prevent or reduce the development or exacerbation of the circumstances that lead to the need for social care?

Empowerment and safeguarding – How can we best empower and safeguard people who use social care services?

Care and work – How can we best equip and support people – practitioners, volunteers, informal carers – to provide optimum social care? How can we ensure that people who use social care and their carers are enabled and supported in paid work and other types of meaningful activity?

Service interventions, commissioning and change – What interventions, commissioning and delivery arrangements best achieve social care outcomes?

Resources and interfaces – How can social care and other public resources best be deployed and combined to achieve social care outcomes?

Further information about the NIHR School for Social Care Research is available at www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk

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Connecting People:
An exploratory study of how health and social care workers help people to develop and maintain relationships

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