

13 ■ *Families and social networks*

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The ways in which people relate to those around them is vitally important to the quality of their lives. If we are to make a positive difference to the circumstances of South Africans, it is essential that we understand the ways in which they relate to, and are inter-dependent with, the significant people in their social networks. These people include direct and extended family members, work colleagues, neighbours, friends, as well as people that make use of the same community institutions and services such as churches, and schools.

Various theoretical understandings of social networks exist. Many of these are somewhat discipline specific. For example, the concept of social support is fundamental to psychology, while social identity theory is of crucial importance in the fields of social psychology and sociology. Perhaps the most widely applicable of recent theoretical approaches to social networks is the concept of social capital.

The economist Glenn Loury (1977, cited in Coleman 1988) introduced the concept of social capital to designate a set of intangible resources in families and communities that help to promote the social development of young people. However, the concept has been broadened and diversified in such a way that today it is applied very broadly to virtually all aspects of social functioning. Putnam (1992:167) defines social capital as those 'features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'. Social capital theory suggests that contained within the complex web of human relationships is a potential to generate material resources as well as opportunities for personal development. In this way, all those who enjoy membership of a social network have increased possibilities for building better lives. Any job seeker who has been told by a friend that a particular workplace is looking for staff, or anyone who has asked a relative to baby-sit for them, has an intrinsic understanding of the power of social capital.

Social capital theory has found application in virtually every area of the human sciences. This broad range of application is illustrated in several examples of recently published research. Felmler (2001) demonstrates how measures of social capital are predictive of the stability of intimate relationships, while Morrow (1999) and Yabiku, Axinn and Thornton (1999) show how a family's social capital is positively related to the emotional health and self-esteem of children. When those children progress into high school, social capital is also linked to better performance and lower drop-out levels (Coleman, 1988). After school, Lin (1999) has shown that social capital is closely connected with advancement within the workplace and within a wider community. Palloni et al. (2001) explores the complex interactions between social capital and international migration patterns, showing how the decision to move from one country to another is closely linked to the network of relationships that a person maintains. Similarly, the capacity of immigrants to integrate into a new society is partly dependent upon the social capital they are able to build in their new environment. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the developing world, is Grootaert's (1998) work on the importance of social capital for sustainable development.

This chapter describes in detail the social networks as reported by a variety of South Africans. This information is useful as it enables us better to understand the different types and levels of social capital that exist within the country.

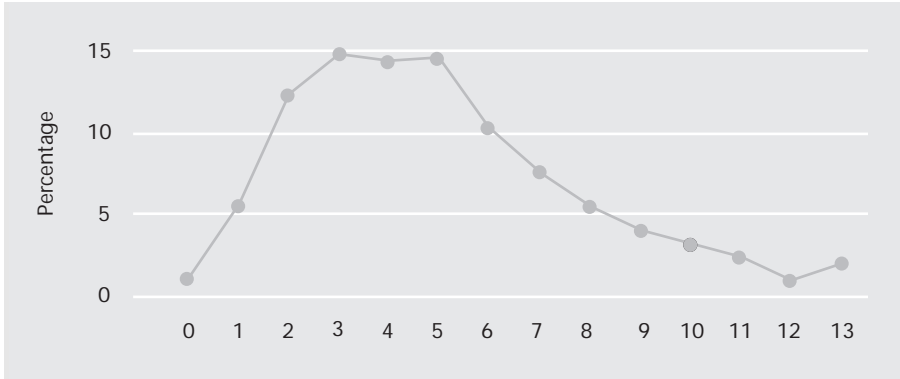
Size of social networks

People's social networks comprise members of their immediate and extended families as well as friends in the community and in the workplace. Although the number of people in the social network is at most a coarse approximation of social capital, it does provide a starting point for analysis.

Immediate family members

Immediate family members are a very important part of most people's social networks. We can expect that social capital will be greater in larger families (particularly when those families are not estranged). The following chart shows the relative frequency of contact between various immediate family members in South Africa. Parents, adult children, siblings and life partners were included in this measure of immediate family.

Figure 13.1 Number of immediate family members with whom the person has contact



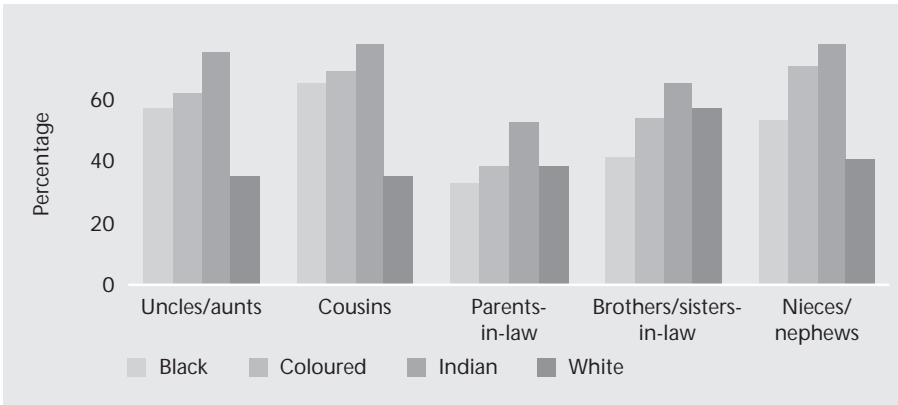
Although the number of immediate family members ranges from 0 to 28, the most common responses were between 3 and 5 (mean score is 5.2, $sd = 3.3$). Although racial differences are significant (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 19.75$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$),¹ the differences in mode are only one point, with African people being in contact with the least number of immediate family members. Analysis by language reveals that Afrikaans, Siswati and Isindebele speakers have the largest numbers of immediate family members (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 64.41$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.000$).

Extended family members

Respondents were asked to provide information about whether they had contact with members of their extended families, including uncles and aunts, cousins, parents-in-law, brothers- and sisters-in-law, and nieces and nephews. Figure 13.2 illustrates the percentage of respondents who count these members of their extended family amongst their social networks. The racial differences depicted are statistically significant, with Indian respondents consistently reporting the most contacts with extended family members. White respondents reported having the least. (Kruskall-Wallis χ^2 range from 18 to 129, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$).

¹ Virtually all the distributions in this study show a strong positive skew. For this reason non-parametric statistical methods have been used in most cases.

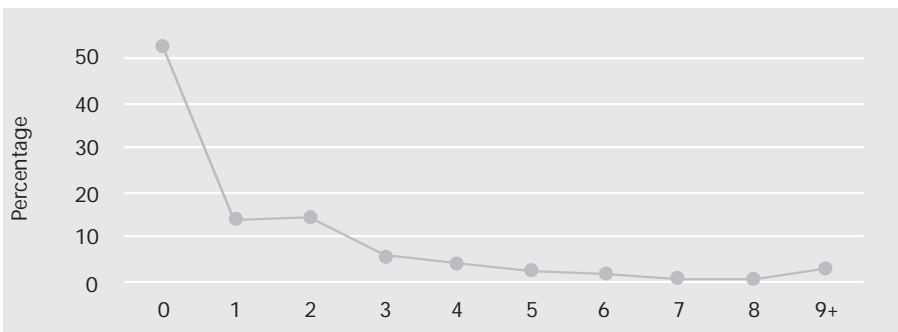
Figure 13.2 Contact with extended family



Workplace friendships

Respondents who were employed at the time of the survey were asked to estimate how many close friends they had at their places of work. This is important for understanding the social networks of working people, particularly because such a large proportion of one's life is spent in the workplace. However, although work is the most important determinant of income and economic advancement, it does not seem to be as important as a source of social support for most people. Figure 13.3 shows that more than half of working people reported not having any close friends at work.

Figure 13.3 Number of close friends in the workplace

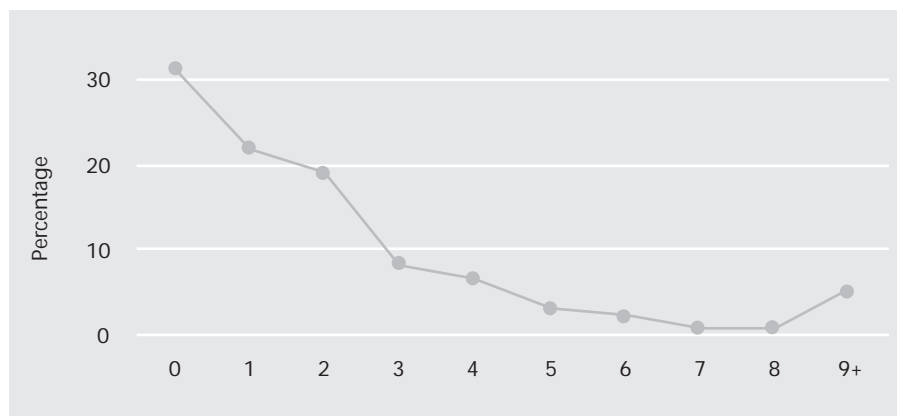


Of people who are working, men tended to have slightly more close friends at work than women (Mann-Whitney $U = 134\ 840$, $Z = -2.1$, $p = 0.035$). Older adults in the age range 35 to 49 years tended to have more close friends at work than other age groups (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 113.9$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.00$). Finally, Indian and white people indicated having twice as many friends at work than African or coloured people (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 9.79$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.02$).

Community friendships

Respondents were also asked to estimate how many close friends they had in their community or neighbourhood. The responses to this question are summarised in Figure 13.4.

Figure 13.4 Number of close friends in the community

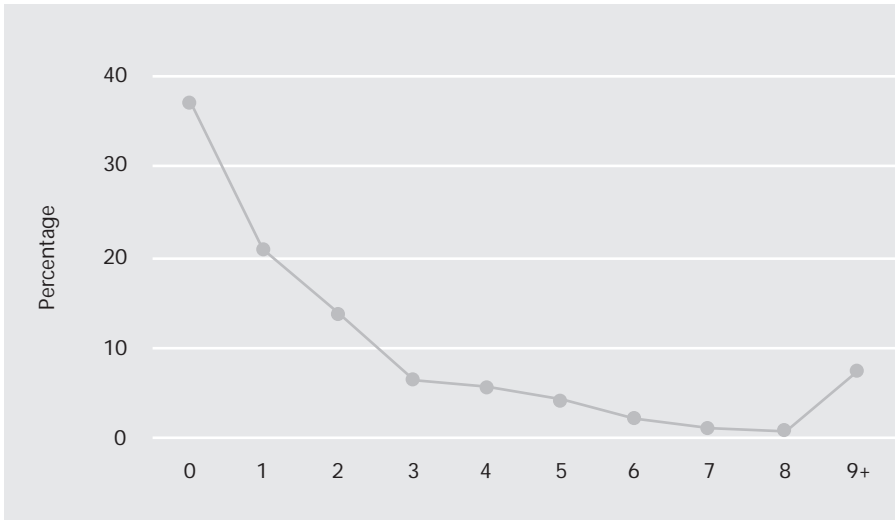


People who live in metropolitan or urban communities indicated having more close friends in their neighbourhood than people in rural communities (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 17.5$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). Black people tended to have fewer close friends in their own neighbourhoods than people from other groups (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 82.9$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, adults in the age group 25 to 34 years reported having fewer friends in their neighbourhood than younger or older respondents did (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 8.06$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.045$). Finally, women seem to have slightly fewer friends in their neighbourhood than men do (Mann-Whitney $U = 675\ 408$, $Z = -5.5$, $p = 0.000$).

Other friendships

When respondents were asked to estimate how many other close friends they had, in addition to those in the community and workplace, the following data emerged. This is an important variable in that it points to the number of relationships between (rather than within) communities, which are not formed within the context of work. Such 'cross-cutting' or 'bridging' relationships are an extremely important part of social capital in that they are predictive of the flow of resources into and out of communities, as well as the extent to which communities are integrated into the broader society.

Figure 13.5 Number of other friends



Generally, the better resourced a respondent's community, the more friends they reported having in other communities. Thus, people living in metropolitan areas scored highest on this variable, followed by those from urban communities. Rural communities scored lowest in this regard (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 61.5$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). Indian and white respondents had the greatest number of close friends in other communities, measuring more than three times the number of black respondents. Coloured respondents also had substantially more close friends in other communities than Black people, but less so than the other

groups (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 189.3$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). Finally, men reported having significantly more close friends in other communities than women did (Mann-Whitney $U = 690\ 209$, $Z = -4.6$, $p = 0.000$).

Total number of friends

A simple calculation from these figures allows us to estimate the number of close friends that respondents said they have. Disturbingly, 18% of respondents felt that they had no close friends at all, while the majority of people participating in this research reported having between one and ten close friends. As before, people who live in metropolitan areas indicated having almost twice as many close friends as those living in rural communities (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 70.2$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). Indian and white people appear to have the greatest number of friends, nearly twice the number indicated by black people (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 195.5$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). Finally, male respondents reported having significantly more close friends than female respondents (Mann-Whitney $U = 636\ 844$, $Z = -7.2$, $p = 0.000$).

Frequency of contact

An understanding of the frequency of contact with members of a person's social network is necessary in order to develop a more meaningful understanding of their social capital. A person who has an enormous social network might have very low capital if they are geographically or socially isolated from members of that network. Respondents were therefore asked how often they had personal contact with particular members of their social networks.

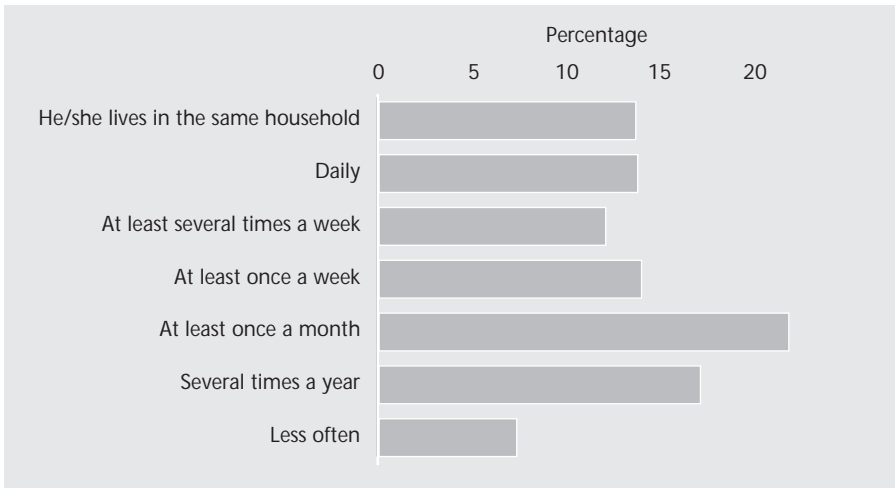
Frequency of contact with favourite sibling

All respondents with living brothers and/or sisters were asked to estimate how often they have contact with the person they consider to be their favourite sibling. Figure 13.6 summarises the responses to this question.

Using this data it is possible to estimate the number of days each respondent spends with his/her favourite sibling in a typical month. These calculations show that, on average, respondents have face-to-face contact with their favourite sibling approximately 13.8 times per month. White South Africans spend the least time with their favourite sibling, earning a mean score of 5.8 visits per

month. This is less than half the score for Indians (14.5) and Blacks (14.7), and less than a third of the score for coloureds (17.9) (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 87.79$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0000$).

Figure 13.6 Contact with favourite sibling



Younger people tend to spend more time with their favourite sibling than do older people. The mean number of visits per month for the 18-24 year old age group was 25.7, while that of the 25-34 year old group was 16.6. The 35-49 year olds scored 9.7, and the respondents older than 50 produced the lowest score of 8.3 (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 163.48$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0000$).

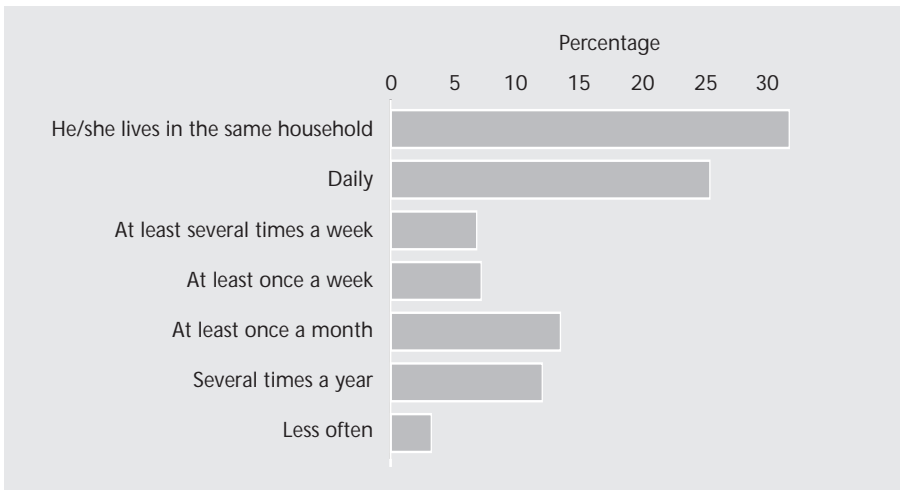
Frequency of contact with child over the age of 18 years

Respondents were also asked which of their children (over the age of 18 years) they saw most frequently, and how often they had face-to-face contact with that child. Figure 13.7 summarises the results.

On average, face-to-face contacts between parent and adult child numbered 24 per month. Mothers seem have more contact with their adult children (26.1 contacts per month) than fathers (20.4 contacts per month) (Mann-Whitney $U = 87505$, $Z = -3.705$, $p = 0.0000$). Once again, white South Africans had the least contact with their adult children (17.5 contacts per month), followed by

black South Africans with 24,6 contacts per month. The scores for Indian and coloured South Africans (29,8 and 29,9 respectively) indicate that they see their children more often than the other respondents (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 17,91$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0000$). Older people also see less of their children than younger parents; respondents in the 25-49 age category saw their children an average of 27,6 times per month, compared within only 21,6 contacts for the 50 years and older group (Mann-Whitney $U = 81\ 936$, $Z = -3.524$, $p = 0.0000$).

Figure 13.7 Contact with child over 18 years



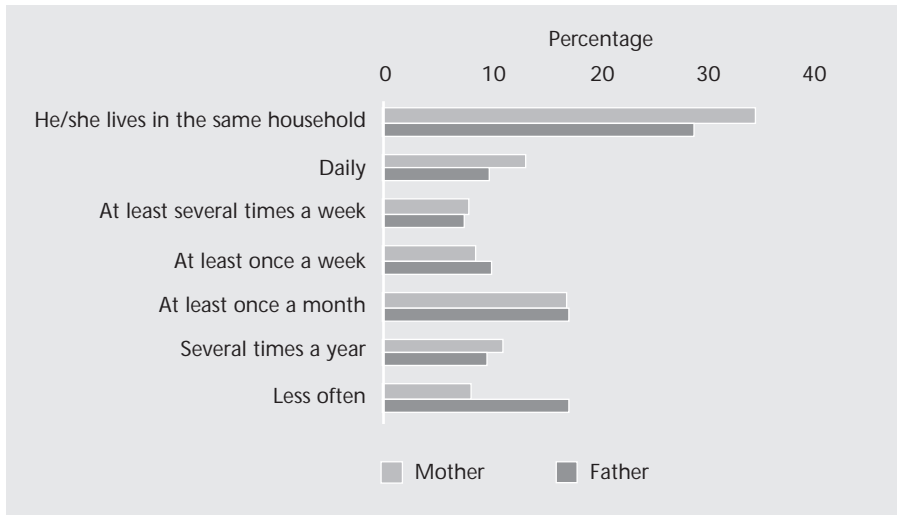
Frequency of contact with parents

Similarly, respondents were asked how often they had contact with their mothers and fathers. Figure 13.8 illustrates levels of contact between people and their surviving parents, and demonstrates that people have more frequent contact with their mothers than their fathers.

On average, the total sample size had 7,9 contacts per month with their mothers compared with only 5,4 contacts per month with fathers (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks: $Z = -6.17$, $p = 0.0000$). Coloured people seem to have the most frequent contact with their fathers (9.9 contacts per month), followed by Indians (7,2 contacts per month) and whites (6 contacts per month). Black South Africans have the least contact with their fathers, with only 5,2 contacts per

month (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 21.52$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0000$). Coloured people also indicated having the most frequent contact with their mothers (11,2 contacts per month), again followed by Indians (8.8 contacts per month), whites (7,4 contacts per month) and Blacks (7,4 contacts per month) (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 13.07$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.004$).

Figure 13.8 Contact with parents

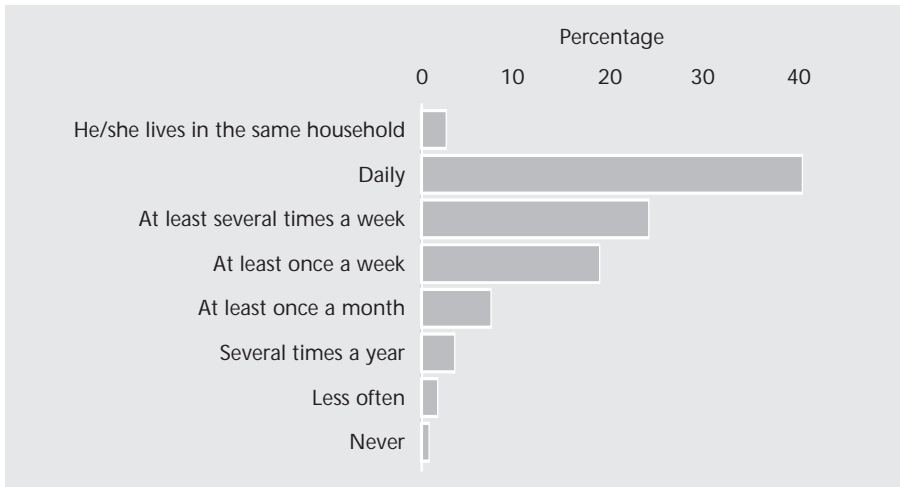


Frequency of contact with closest friend

Respondents were also asked about the frequency of their contact with the person that they considered their closest friend. The results demonstrate that more than 40% of adult South Africans see their closest friends on a daily basis, and a further 43% report having contact with their closest friend at least once per week.

Younger respondents (aged 18-24 years) tend to have more frequent contact with their closest friends than do older respondents (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 24.4$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). People in rural communities have the most frequent contact with close friends, while people living in metropolitan areas have the least frequent contact (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 17.6$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.00$). Black and coloured respondents have substantially more contact with friends than do white and Indian respondents (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 111.6$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$).

Figure 13.9 Contact with closest friend



Summary

A number of predictable yet important dynamics predict the strength of a person's social network. In this respect, the type of community in which respondents reside, as well as gender, age and racial background are all important variables.

Type of community

It is interesting to note that although the level of community development enhances social capital in some respects, it detracts from it in others. It was observed that people living in metropolitan areas have the most contact with their family members (mainly through living together), but the least contact with their friends. Comparatively, those living in rural communities often do not see their family members for long periods of time, most likely because the search for employment takes many rural people into the cities. Nevertheless, one advantage of living in a less developed community could be that one gets to see the people one is close to in the area on a more frequent basis. While those living in metropolitan areas are forced to make plans to meet their friends and to travel distances in order to do so, rural people meet their friends within the communities and neighbourhoods where they live.

At the same time, the data also speaks of the relative isolation of more rural communities. Rural people's social networks consist in large part of other rural people who also have limited resources. Conversely, people in urban and metropolitan areas have more contact with friends in other communities. This is probably due in part to the greater communication infrastructure of more developed communities, as well as the greater availability of financial resources necessary for travel to other communities.

Overall, the impact of urbanisation and migration on family life in rural communities is clear from this data. Although close to their friends, many rural people have little or no contact with their closest relatives and friends who live in other communities.

Gender

Gender variables show a clear pattern throughout the data. Although mothers tend to have more frequent contact with adult children than do fathers, women in general have fewer friends, both within and outside of their community, than men do. Working women also reported having fewer friends at their place of employment than men. As such, an important part of women's social networks are most likely other women who face similar challenges in life, and who themselves have limited social capital.

Race

The old apartheid classifications are still powerful predictors of differences in people's social networks and analysis of these networks by respondent's racial background revealed the most unexpected result of this research. It is widely assumed within South African society that black South Africans have the strongest social networks of people in the country. In fact, however, the data suggests that in many ways black people have weaker social networks, particularly in comparison to coloured and Indian people.

When a surprising result of this nature emerges, it is always a good idea to take a critical look at the methodology in view of the controversial finding. Certainly there is some Eurocentric bias in terms of the questions asked. Likewise, the emphasis placed on members of the extended family is much less than that placed on blood relatives, an emphasis that is much more Western than African. Furthermore, it is far from clear whether terms such as 'close friend' have the

same meanings in different cultures. Nevertheless, these arguments do not explain the unmistakable findings that black South Africans have fewer contacts with virtually all members of their immediate and extended families than do coloured and Indian people.

At the very least, this data suggests that social scientists must be extremely cautious in their assumptions that the social networks of black people in this country are well established. While the Zulu adage *umuntu umuntu ngabantu*² has been much touted in the rebuilding of South Africa's post-apartheid social fabric, one cannot simply assume that the values of communalism are equally reflected in the realities of black people's lives.

Age

For the most part, older adults have less developed social networks than younger adults. It seems that as people age, they tend to have less contact with siblings, parents and children. These results are not particularly surprising. As siblings and children grow older and start families of their own, they may move away from the community and have less time for other members of their families. And of course, the older respondents were much more likely to have lost one or both parents.

Other important factors include the level of education of different generations and, in a society as rapidly changing as South Africa's, younger people are also likely to be more mobile. They may therefore be constructing different kinds of social networks than those assumed by this survey.

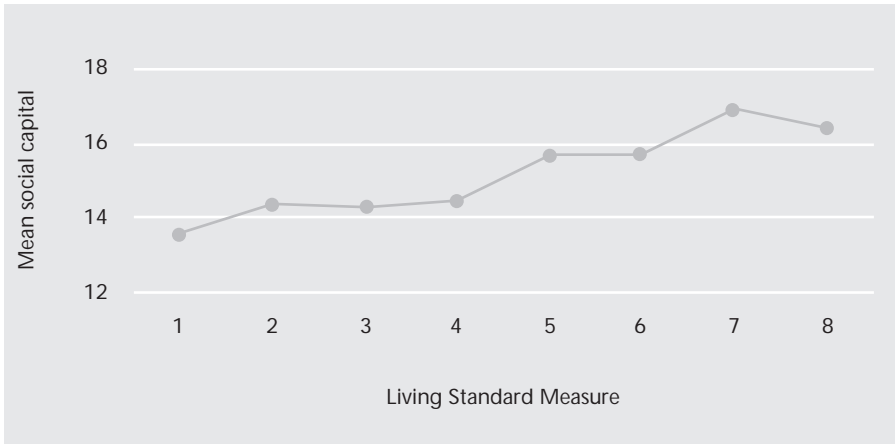
Only in terms of the number of friends within the community did younger adults score lower than their older counterparts. This is perhaps due to the fact that young adulthood is a time when many people are searching for work and those who are working are striving to advance. It is likely that the pressures of employment push many young adults to move between communities more often and thus they are unable to maintain the same network of friendships that more settled people are capable of.

² *Umuntu umuntu ngabantu* translated literally means 'a person is only a person with other people'. The more figurative meaning of this phrase is that it is only through contributing to one's community that one can become a real person; it is the community which makes people truly human.

Composite social capital score

Using the data for both the size of respondents' social networks as well as the frequency of contact within those networks, it was possible to construct a composite score that approximates a respondent's general social capital.³ As predicted by social capital theory, this score is significantly related to one's living standard measure (LSM)⁴ (ANOVA $F = 6.815$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.000$) and supports the fundamental principle that social capital can also be transformed into other kinds of capital. Figure 13.10 illustrates this relationship.

Figure 13.10 Social capital and living standard



The relationship between LSM and social capital is true for various race groups as well, although it is complex and should not be essentialised. As was discussed earlier, Indian and coloured respondents had the highest social capital scores, while white and black respondents had significantly less social capital (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2 = 94.5$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, even though whites score highest on the living standard measure, they do not necessarily have the greatest social capital.

³ This estimate of social capital is based on the square root of an additive model of contact with all immediate and extended family members, plus friends, weighted by the frequency of contact with each.

⁴ For an explanation of how LSM categories were calculated, refer to the Appendix.

In terms of age, people older than 50 years had significantly lower social capital than younger people (Kruskall-Wallis $\chi^2 = 16.89$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.001$). Finally, as was mentioned previously, male respondents had significantly greater social capital than females (Mann-Whitney $U = 472673$, $Z = -3.412$, $p = 0.001$).

It should be noted that a score of social capital generated in this manner does not allow for different kinds of social capital. By lumping a range of different kinds of relationships together, much of the detail is lost. For example, a person may have very limited relationships with family members, but a very strong network of contacts with friends in other communities. Such a person's social capital might be under-estimated using a conglomerate score such as this. Furthermore, this score does not take into account the resources available to the various members of a person's social network. This is clearly a very important variable to consider, since a wide social network is not of much use when those people in it have little to offer each other in terms of resources. However, for the most part, the addition of this information should enhance the patterns outlined above rather than change them.

Conclusion

A review of data on social networks clearly shows why developmental work so often feels like an uphill battle. It is precisely the targets of many developmental initiatives – people who are poor, people living in rural communities, and women – that have the least social capital. If, as Grootaert (1998) suggests, social capital is fundamental to sustainable developmental work, then it is essential that social activists put some energy into building this important resource. Furthermore, social activists who assume that the African value of communalism is in itself a strong enough foundation for building a person's social capital are at serious risk of underestimating the tremendous damage that generations of colonial and apartheid rule have done to many people's (particularly black South Africans) social networks.

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