Glasgow Centre for Population Health

BRIEFING PAPER 3 FINDINGS SERIES

New Forms of Spiritual Participation and Social Capital Generation in Glasgow

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KEY FINDINGS

- New forms of spiritual practice, whilst promoting health and wellbeing for individuals involved, are not yet at a stage at which they generate community level benefits.

- New forms of spiritual practice are successful in simultaneously satisfying a need for deeper engagement with spiritual issues alongside a desire to maintain personal autonomy and be an author of one's own belief.

- Existing successful forms of informal voluntary activity should be recognised rather than seeking to create new structures for participation

INTRODUCTION

Research findings point to a decline in civic participation and social capital in contemporary society. It has been both suggested and demonstrated that the rise of an individualised, consumer-orientated culture has produced a situation where people have less time and inclination to get involved with activities beyond their work, immediate families and leisure pursuits. This suggested decline in social capital is reinforced by widespread perceptions of a decline in neighbourliness, a heightened awareness of risk and a lack of trust in institutions and in the political process in particular.

In the Glasgow context, research undertaken by Scottish Enterprise Glasgow[1] shows that whereas the city has a high level of bonding capital (links between people similar to each other), it has less bridging capital (links between different types of people). The research paints a more complex picture of social capital generation/decline that may have particular consequences for the city's health, levels of integration, economy and civic life.

AIMS AND PURPOSE

To explore emergent forms of participation in relation to spiritual and related activity in order to assess the similarities and differences between traditional spiritual activity. Also to investigate whether contemporary adaptations of spiritual collective practice can point to how successful participation should look in other realms.

APPROACH AND METHODS

This exploratory research project was developed alongside the Scottish Enterprise research described above, and sought to investigate whether, rather than a decline in social capital generation per se, there may be a change occurring in the places and activities that generate social capital and, if so, whether these new forms of social capital generation are better suited to the climate of post-industrial society than more traditional forms. The decline of 'classic' generators of community social capital in modern Western economies – the traditional churches, the nuclear family and communities based around large industrial workplaces – and the continued search for a type of social capital that stems from these specific forms, may have produced a perception of decline in participation rather than a decline in and of itself. Discovering new generators of social capital will assist in understanding how organisations and service delivery organisations could best engage and involve the public in governance through using existing pockets of participation rather than seeking to create it. It may also help explain why in Glasgow at least, the existence of bonding capital appears at the expense of the bridging variety.

As this study was an exploratory pilot, a small number of focus groups were carried out to provide rapid feedback on potential avenues of further inquiry. The fieldwork consisted of group-based data collection, participants being recruited through existing voluntary groups which met around a form of spiritual or related activity. Eight focus groups were conducted, covering six varieties of spiritual or spiritual related activity. Of these six forms, four represented new trends in spiritual related activity: Paganism, Tai-Chi, Buddhism and Brahma Kumari. Two of the forms represented 'traditional' forms of spiritual activity, Judaism and the Church of Scotland (the Iona Community). Two focus groups were conducted with both the Jewish groups and the Buddhists. With the Jewish groups this was on account of there being an older, retired group and a younger, working-age group who both wanted to be included and met separately. In the case of the Buddhists they asked for their participation to be spread over two groups to enable more people to take part. Groups lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. Groups varied in size from three people to 15 with approximately 45 people being consulted across the fieldwork. Focus groups were recorded and detailed notes taken from the recording afterwards.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The following themes emerged from the data that was collected and analysed.

The importance of personalisation

The ability to develop a personalised orientation toward belief and the reduced power of an authority (spiritual or non spiritual) were key attractions for individuals involved. This was often in perceived stark contrast to formative, childhood experiences of traditional religion. The newer spiritual practices proved adept at managing the need for sociability and support and also allowing individuals the space for the development of the expertise necessity to privatise their practice.

"I don't like to be told, I have rules to live by but it's up to individuals to know were the limits are."
Female Pagan practitioner

Support and sociability was another key motivation for spiritual participation. Many spoke of their pre-spiritual life with reference to a crisis. The support they gained from practising with others had often aided their recovering perspective and a personal sense of direction and worth. Their practice therefore had important benefits related to wellbeing and sense of self. Also, physical health and health awareness were said by many to have improved as a consequence of spiritual reflection.

Bonding and links with others in the group

Examples of bonding capital were evident, but not as strong as within more traditional religions. In the Tai-Chi group, exchanges of technical/ occupational skills were displayed in return for tuition, but there was a tendency for personal meetings to be restricted to spiritual practice in most of the groups. The noticeable exceptions to this were the Pagan groups who displayed an enthusiasm to meet outside of their practice and discussion groups. These primarily social meetings would often include a small element of ritual, but it would not be the central focus for their meeting.

A possible reason that the newer spiritual groups do not display the same degree of sociability outside of practice as do the more traditional forms, may be related to the fact that newer spiritual communities are not geographically rooted. This means they do not have the same sense of neighbourhood and familiarity with each other as those groups that share a parish or another religiously defined geographic area (such as the traditional Jewish community heartlands of the city).

Bridging and links beyond the group

All of the religious groups, new and old, were composed of socio-economically similar individuals. For example, the Tai Chi group was comprised of those in technical occupations such as IT, whereas the Jewish group was comprised of people in traditional professional occupations. The Brahama Kumari group was composed entirely of women. All spoke of the limited socio-economic or cultural range that practitioners came from but did not see it as their task to increase the diversity of the group. The Buddhist group had the most culturally diverse membership but was characteristically younger, mobile and middle-class.

Social action stemming from religious participation

There was a "deal with oneself first" ethos that pervaded much of the understanding of the relationship between practice and wider society in the newer forms of spiritual participation. This was in stark contrast to the traditional Jewish and Church of Scotland groups who saw engaging with issues of inequality and injustice as a central part of their religious engagement.

"First of all meditation helps with the self and automatically that goes into others. My experience of having practised is that I was very into environmentalism before I started but I soon withdrew from all that to concentrate on my practice. Realised that I had to concentrate on myself and sort a few things out."
Female Buddhist practitioner

The traditional spiritual communities had successfully transferred their desire to engage into action. The Jewish Community for example organised a school bus and an older persons' housing association, both for people of all faiths, and the Iona Community was involved in work tackling poverty. That the traditional religions had specific geographical roots in the city (such as a Parish or the Jewish community) made them better placed to identify actions that were needed and offer their resources to help. The newer religions did not have specific geographical roots in the city and were illustrative of new forms of community based around shared values rather than spatial proximity.

Some of the newer groups recognised they had skills and abilities to offer the wider community in a non-spiritual context. For example the Pagans and Buddhists both expressed an interest in raising environmental awareness and the Brahama Kumari and Buddhist expertise in meditative practice was seen as being able to make a vital contribution to health and wellbeing resources for the city. A barrier to the newer groups was concern that they would not be taken seriously and that traditional religions would resist their inclusion in bodies such as the Inter–Faith council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encouraging engagement and the transfer of social capital to the wider community

Although nowhere near as strong as the traditional form of religious practice the new forms of spiritual participation represent emergent forms of social capital capacity in the city and offer hope against the widespread view that participation is in decline. These new groups are well adapted to the current cultural climate in which individuals desire personalised solutions to issues whilst still allowing a substantial degree of collective activity and sociability. Currently such newer forms of participation offer greater individual benefits than societal or community ones and more traditional forms of spiritual organisation are more adept at reaching out and engaging in community minded action. This reinforces the findings of the social capital assessment for Glasgow[1] that suggests bonding capital is easier to maintain than bridging.

New groups may however provide a solution to the current crisis of participation and provide avenues for engagement with service users by planners and service providers if:

- There is recognition of the personal motivations for participation in an individualised society.
- Planners and policy-makers think less in terms of traditional geographically located communities and recognise communities of interest as sources of social capital generation.
- In developing participation strategies we start 'where people are at' and seek capacity for participation in governance in the places it already exists, even if it takes a form we do not traditionally recognise.
- There is recognition that such groups may not naturally reach out to the wider community on account of their lack of a definite geographical base (defining the community they reach out to) and, given the relative early stage of their development, may initially appear inward looking.

REFERENCES

1. Social Capital Framework and Assessment for Glasgow (2006) FMR research/ Glasgow Centre for Population Health http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/documents/FMRSocialCapitalFinal%20Report.pdf

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