of adult learners. Barry has concentrated particularly on mixed method research (involving both surveys and interviews) across multiple sites, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. He has deliberately 'grazed' from researching formal vocational education to informal, community-based learn`ing. His current focus is on informal men's learning, typified by his recent ground breaking research into learning through participation in community-based men's sheds in Australia.

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A very peculiar practice?
Promulgating social partnerships with small business – but what have we learnt from research and practice?

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The ideologies underpinning public / private partnerships (PPPs) have been much contested in theory, but what does promulgating a social partnership mean in practice? This qualitative research study has been 'critiquing' a construct of 'ecologies of learning' or 'capacities of capital' for social partnerships between industry, vocational education and training (VET) and a regional community.

This paper critiques one of these ecologies by exploring the discourses of social capital which present challenges for small business/ community partnerships in practice. It argues that there is a need to question the impact of neoliberalism on social partnerships with VET and how the entities of industry: 'fortress enterprise', the

community: 'fortress Australia', and governance: 'terra publica' are positioned within this predominant economic rationalist discourse. It concludes that policies for 'globalising neoliberalism' can be capacity reducing for promulgating social partnerships with VET at the local level.

Introduction: global policies for promulgating public / private partnerships in vet

There is pressure in a growing, resource-intensive sector of VET for research and practice to come to grips with policy convergence for enabling and encouraging social partnerships with industry to support strategies for the future. Supranational policy statements such as the United Nations/ UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), the World Business Council on Sustainable Development Global Compact (Birch 2004) and the World Bank Development Report (2006) call for public / private partnerships to resource the needs of an international, expanding TVET (technical and vocational education and training) system (UNESCO 2006, 2005 a, b; UNESCO and UNEP 2005; Kronner 2005). The key goals are to enculture private sector social responsibility for VET and TVET through greater contribution to workforce and community development, and local governance at the regional level. Social partnerships may offer a resourceful, devolved approach to governance and are a positive, proactive way in which communities can build capacity and annex the resources for growth, infrastructure and regional sustainability (Caldwell & Keating 2004; Dixon & Barnett 2002; Kenyon & Black 2001: Kretzmann & Mcknight 1993; Centre for Corporate Public Affairs and the Business Council of Australia 2000: Cheers *et al.* 2002: Allison, Gorringe & Lacey 2006; Seddon & Billett 2004). Proponents of public / private alliances contend that the resulting 'social capital' from these positive synergies

is a vital resource for industry, reducing the cost of transactions and of doing business. In seeking social partners, local communities too are better skilled and prepared to weather the shrill winds of globalisation, increased competition from other regions, and the impact of unpredictable market change (Fukuyama 2001, 1995; Spence, Schmidpeter & Habisch 2003; Spence 1999; Kilpatrick & Bell 2000; Kearns 2004; Cavaye 2000).

Background

Tackling the 'undiscussables' in social capital discourses

There have been many studies of social capital and of the benefits of measuring this 'capital' as a social resource for group or collective capability (Productivity Commission 2003; Woolcock & Narayen 2000; Onyx & Bullen 2000; Onyx 1996; Lyons 1998; Putnam 2000). In defining social capital, Woolcock (cited in Field 2004:42) prefers to distinguish between:

- bonding social capital, which denotes ties between like people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours;
- bridging social capital, which encompasses more distant ties of like persons such as loose friendships and workmates; and
- linking social capital, which reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those entirely outside the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available in the community.

There are unanswered questions for social researchers, though, about enculturing partnerships across sectors of the economy and society with unequal resources of 'capitals', power and political hegemony. Gettler (2005:51) states that real change in policy and practice will not be realised unless society is prepared to come to grips with what Argyris has called the 'socially undiscussables' within the discourses.

There are those who dispute whether social capital can be accurately measured as evidence for effective policy purposes. Mowbray and Bryson (2005:92) find that, rather than research supporting evidence-based policy, the lack of rigour and contestation in much of the social capital literature is resulting in an unquestioned 'policy-based evidence' approach to governance. Mowbray (2004b: 43) argues too that the notion of 'community' is usually partnered with a positive impression of wholesomeness and caring; much of the social capital discourse is presented in the same golden radiance. These populist versions of community capacity building negate the darker side of human nature and what can be the destructive impact of strong bonds of social capital and alignment within groups (Considine 2005; Field 2004; Edgar 2001). This debate also downplays the impact of competition in communities, exclusion and the unequal socio-economic status or empowerment of its citizens. McKenzie (2004) has stated that what should be equally debated is the meaning of social sustainability.

Shrinking governance and 'terra publica'?

> Terra publica is breaking apart (Gleeson 2006:102)

The second concern is that governance and the state have a crucial role in promulgating democracy, equity and equality through policy reform. Putnam (2000) and Kearns (2004) have contended that we are witnessing a decline in social capital, trust and engagement in civic society in the most economically developed countries. The Productivity Commission (2003:viii) argues that governments can either build or diminish stocks of social capital by intervening with effective, or conversely, ineffective policies. There are those who postulate a stronger role for governments for ensuring fair play, the democratic process, and integrity of partnerships and devolved governance at the local level (Buchholz & Rosenthal 2004; Miraftab 2004; Das Gupta, Grandvoinnet & Romani 2003; Spoehr *et al.* 2002; Diamond 2004). Others contend, however, that regionalisation

and decentralisation policies do not result in a greater stakehold for communities in locally devolved governance, but only increased accountability through positioning government more visibly in the regions, albeit cloaked within a discourse of collaboration and social partnership (Cardini 2006; Diamond 2004; Brown *et al.* 2003; Coulsen 2005).

Unsettled communities and 'fortress Australia'?

> It will now be argued that no new settlement has been forged and that Australia is very much uncertain of its future – 'unsettled' (Woodward 2005:15)

The next 'undiscussable' is overcoming the dislocation and disenfranchisement in civic society brought about by three waves of reductionist policy reform (Gleeson 2006; Stretton 2005; Pusey 2003). There has been much critique about the benefits, and conversely, the failure of public / private partnerships to fill the vacant space in governance in the areas of education, health, housing and social welfare that researchers have argued has been left by three waves of economic rationalist reform in Australia (Pusey 2003; Stretton 2005; Gleeson 2006; Argy 2004; Spoehr 2005; Spoehr *et al.* 2002; Mowbray 2005, 2004 a,b). Overlooked in the social capital discourse is the capacity reducing impact of functionalist policies on governance, social stability and the increased fragmentation of urban, peri-urban and rural Australia in the face of discontinuous policy changes. Disregarded are the sobering questions about equity and income disparity and the resilience of personal support networks, personal capacity and 'identity capital'. Mowbray and Bryson (2005) and Mowbray (2004 a,b) have argued that the notion of 'community' has become depoliticised, evading unease about inequality and individual difference in access to networks and personal alliances. A quantitative study of social capital ties and civic engagement in the United Kingdom (Li, Pickles & Savage 2005) found that socio-economic status correlated with stronger personal alliances and

networking, with less advantaged groups using more insular, weaker personal networks. Woolcock and Narayan (2000:233) have stated that: "Crudely put, the networks of the poor play defense whilst those of the non-poor play offense".

Industry protectively guarding 'fortress enterprise'?

On the taboo subject of threat, eroded trust and vulnerability in business, Culkin and Smith (2000:149–155) provide an interesting typology of small firm management style stating that small business often exhibits 'The Alamo Syndrome' and is 'labouring under the illusion they are running ICI'. Yet in an aggressive marketplace, guarding the fort from competition from corporate bodies, bureaucracies and institutions is necessary practice for small firms' continued existence. Spence (1999) writes that, within this 'fortress enterprise' culture, small firms distance themselves from responsibility for their surroundings. Curran and Blackburn (in Spence 1999:164) suggest that small businesses see themselves as largely independent of their environment. Goldsmith and Samson (2005:12) state there is pressure for all small businesses to become active stakeholders in corporate citizenship and capacity building. It may be, however, that the same individualistic policies that drive 'do it yourself and self-help' have a sting in their tail, and consumers are being encouraged to become a more affluent, litigious happy society. Enculturing an ethos of deepened corporate philanthropy may not partner well with a culture of increasing risk of litigation. The social partnerships research around the world is rich with debate about the ethics for industry and a corporate socially responsible organisation; there is a dearth of research that raises the somewhat contentious question of what qualities does society also expect of a socially responsible, civic community?

Accurately measuring social investment in regions and vet by industry?

The last impolite 'undiscussable', much downplayed in social capital debate, is that sustainable public / private partnerships need hard

cash to drive them. A difficulty for evidence-based policy is accurately determining industry contribution to VET, the community, and social sustainability from partnerships with industry. Lyons (1998:5) argued that measuring corporate philanthropy in communities is problematic, but cited 1991 data which estimated $1.8 billion in combined contribution from large and small business. More recently, the ABS Generosity of Australian Business study (2002) found that in the 2000–2001 calendar year businesses gave $1,447 million dollars to the Australian community for sponsorship for sports, associations and events. Another study has estimated that the contribution by small business to be one billion, five hundred million dollars (Madden, Scaife & Crissman 2006:50). There is also complexity in measuring industry contribution to the economy through VET (Richardson 2004). Dumbrell (2004:5) has cited 1998 figures estimating enterprise support at 45% of a total $8.5 billion expenditure on formal VET training, or approximately $4 billion. Richardson (2004) contends employee time in structured training is not counted in these 1996 statistics and this would present a different picture, estimated at $16 billion input to the economy. Whether or not this is enough to resource an expanding VET sector is questionable. Dumbrell (2004:28) writes, however, that there is still a need for better integration between public and private expenditure on VET. There are few studies though which attempt to aggregate this data to show a clearer picture of industry contribution to VET, communities and the Gross Domestic Product in Australia.

Research methodology

The practical aspect of the study has involved four years of qualitative fieldwork and 'lived in' observation, gathering data from practitioners in the 'institution' of adult learning and VET *and* practitioners in the 'institution' of enterprise management in small business. The research has adopted qualitative techniques of semi-structured interviews, with both groups of people (Piantinida & Garman 1999;

Guba & Lincoln 1989, Rubin & Rubin 1995). 'Small business' is defined as the owner-managed small firm (6–19 employees) and the micro-firm workplace (1–5 employees) respectively, across a range of industry sectors. 'Practitioners' include those people working with small firms in VET, adult and community education, community and regional development, business incubation and support, library and information services, and local government. One hundred and twenty interviews have been undertaken with people from both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. All interviews have been transcribed and returned to the interviewee for correction and comment. A regional case study analysis has limitations and is restricted in its transferability by its scope, but may offer new interpretations and grounded theory about the meaning of social partnerships with VET.

Findings

The research has found active, high profile partnerships/alliances in the region driven by Federal, State or Local Government, which are formalised, often with and between, levels of government and larger industry organisations and small business clusters. Many of these alliances have been instigated by direct intervention through funding initiatives promulgating collaboration with industry. They vary in levels of formality from the regulated industry partnership, business cluster or network to the casual informal relationship. Formal partnerships and clusters tend to be in 'like sectors' where there is already evidence of existing networks and bonding social capital and perhaps where it is easier to forge relationships, as opposed to across sectors of industry and the community where bridging and linking social capital might be more difficult to enculture. Participants for the study occupied 'space' in a complex array of roles, relationships and responsibilities across the public / private dichotomy and for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. This offered interesting responses on the tensions and paradoxes of occupying cross-sectoral roles and the difference between not easily articulated 'lived practice' and

formalised, 'known theory'. Participants in both industry and the community were often positioned across two key contradictory but mutually enforcing roles. The first was a workplace practitioning role with its capacity-building focus on promoting relationships and learning. The second was a custodian role and maintaining the survival of the organisation in a competitive economy. These are not mutually exclusive groups and, in this context, both oscillated between the anode and cathode pull of community development and social sustainability and/or towards industry and the marketplace.

Practitioners as capacity builders

These participants are working in the context of community development and regional infrastructure support with a mandate for developing local partnerships, and they spoke of their experiences with industry and the community and the qualities needed by the partners for them to be successful. Healthy alliances were often indigenous, formed from within their sector, and useful for information-sharing and combating isolation in their work. There are vibrant business clusters in the region, built on the willingness of small businesses to share information and work collectively towards a common goal. There are also flourishing, high profile, showcase industry developments, active export clusters in food and primary industry, and alliances in ecotourism, tourism, natural resource management and land management practices. However, these networks cannot be 'forced on an industry', they said, and a financial contribution from the small businesses may create a stronger commitment to an industry cluster. Also, sustainable alliances have been built with small holdings in horse industry education, through VET and community education, safe chemical use and water catchment protection. There are those practitioners who may be actively operating a small business/hobby business themselves outside of their core work. They were very enterprising, and worked as boundary crossers between two worlds – small business and VET – but they were often more suspicious of bureaucracies and

their effectiveness for working with small firms. They were very politically aware of the constraints of the policy climate they were working within and the need to be vigilant. But of small business, one practitioner said: "They need to be more responsive".

Practitioners as custodians of the organisation

For other community-focused organisations, few were looking outside the organisation or their sector in reality. In cases, there was little awareness about whom they might partner in industry, but talk about needed corporate sponsorship from industry for events and community initiatives. For others, there was skepticism of partnerships and concerns about ethics and values, and integrity and the 'genuineness' of social conscience in industry. Some spoke of their 'lifeworld' and reality: little communication between large and small providers of VET; all were competing for the same pool of funds; and a climate not conducive to networking or information sharing. Another demonstrated conscious attempts to collaborate over contracts, but had been burnt by the unscrupulous behaviour of the partners. Some spoke of protectionism of turf and information and of a policy culture which expected a community sector organisation to operate as if it were a small business. And interestingly of small businesses they thought: "... most are just focussed on survival".

There are those who described a sense of frustration and disempowerment in their work which evolved from political hegemonies above them. This is evidenced by the comments from one practitioner, capacity reduced by the information blockages in the system:

> Once we can access that information about training needs and regional growth, we have then got to get ... [regional stakeholders] to a realisation that schools can meet their training needs, along with the local TAFE college and registered training organisations – if they let us know what they are on a fairly short-term and long-term basis.

And of governance, some said:

> It's feudal – the peasants are revolting!
> Changes in local government have meant we have had to start building the networks all over again.
> We don't have the resources to reach them all; only about ten percent of them.

> It's not a case of not being able to get us all together. There is vacuum at the policy level.

Small business as capacity builders

These were the established small businesses with a key focus on entrepreneurship, growth, success and the firm. These owner-operators were strongly embedded within their organisation and, over time, had developed resilient social networks within their industries. 'Partnerships' to these small businesses often meant writing the cheques, work in kind, associational membership and community contribution: 'We support everything in the region that's going', they said. 'But it's not something we talk about'. In this context, the notion of small business as social partner in supporting the community is a very successful one. They provided ongoing monetary support for the local townships through community sponsorship of sports and events, and corporate sponsorship either directly through the firm or indirectly through clubs like Rotary and Lions or community associations. Capacity building and corporate responsibility was seen as something to be quietly done, and they were reluctant to discuss it at first with people they believed had no experience of small business. Within this culture, it is not considered polite to inquire about or discuss such things outside their business, personal and social group, and they provided evidence of strong protective ties and closure within their own business clusters and networks. Some had strong bonding and bridging social capital built through years of industry networking and information sharing. This was a valuable resource for collaborative marketing, and learning about change within the industry workplace:

> We have very good industry clusters and social networks. We get everything we need through the industry.

And they valued the capacity builders who worked with them to advocate for change: 'We have our own industry spokespeople'.

Another group, however, is much less high profile, the traditional small and micro-firms embedded at the 'Main Street', or home-based level. There is a hive of indiscernible activity within the informal and non-formal relationships between these small businesses and their specific locality as community members, participating in school associations, tourism associations, land care groups, volunteer associations, 'friends of' groups and Chambers of Commerce. These very small associations worked as lobby groups in their communities, fundraising for events, and as stakeholders for issues of concern at the local level. The extent to which they are truly empowered and politically engaged is debatable, but they were very active within their immediate localities. However:

> It's difficult to balance my social concerns with running the firm.
> You need to understand that anything you do outside the firm takes away from it.

Small business as custodians of the organisation

Other small firms however were just as politically disengaged and marginalised by the marketplace. For these the isolation, lack of profile and/or visibility and lack of networking was acute, suggesting that even in the 'egalitarian' small business sector that there are hidden cultural, status and 'very undiscussable' class-based structures in some sectors for small business to overcome:

> You are the first person we have seen about this!
> No one has ever asked us to share our experiences with them.

For these small businesses, their key focus was the day-to-day survival of the firm and maintaining and protecting its place in a competitive marketplace. This role was totally encompassing, leaving little time for anything outside these parameters. As in the wider community and populous, there are questions about socio-economic status and inclusion, representation and participation; there are similar questions for the small business sector. The social partnership role may not be one played out across all industries or be suitable for all small businesses. Many firms in this region are very small and micro businesses; some are very isolated and need external support in running the firm. Not all firms are established enough in their life stage to be philanthropic, or employ people and formally train them, or have the flexibility to participate in an industry network, or to learn outside the firm. There are also significant differences in levels of inclusion in networks between industries, with some industries clustering more than others. In defining a corporate sponsorship role for the small firm, they said:

> There is the general perception that there are more resources to be' had' than there actually are.

Barriers for promulgating social partnerships

Below, then, are some of the challenges for promulgating cross-sectoral social partnerships with the smaller organisation:

- not perceiving any benefit in a partnership arrangement, a reluctance to partner formally with anyone
- partnerships not seen as conducive to the organisational/firm policies, goals or culture; values differences are perceived as too great
- restricted human resources in small organisations to grow the alliances
- partnerships seen as predominantly corporate sponsorship by both sectors and not about building relationships or learning through other 'capitals'

- both sectors grappling with a preoccupied focus on the defensive and protecting the organisation/firm and its intellectual capital from threat
- increased disempowering accountability, measuring, auditing workload for the organisation/firm
- partnerships mean loss of managerial decision-making and independence
- partnerships not seen as 'core business' in their industry/sector
- skepticism around the notion of 'learning partnerships' and what they might entail
- perceived 'safeness' in autonomy: less risk and threat, more control
- lack of resourced capacity builders on the ground to form the alliances across sectors, to break down the silo divisiveness and defensiveness.

Enablers for social partnerships

In a time of devolution and decentralisation, at least in theory, social partnerships may have an integral role in filling a resources and leadership void in shrinking public sector governance. There is reconciliatory work to do, however, to build collaboration across sectors with often little meaningful contact on a day-to-day basis, and competing organisational goals and values. If the policy goals are to be met through social partnerships and fully realised in VET/TVET, there needs to be:

- better cross-sectoral collaboration, convergence and integration at the international, national and state policy level
- strategic, not ad hoc, funding arrangements for VET, local government, NGOs, regional development and community organisations for developing sustainable partnerships/alliances for the longer term at the regional level
- support for the capacity builders to work across the sectors to create the space within the discourses for alternative debate about realistic change management practices at the community level

- recognising and legitimising the integral role for VET and adult and community educators, local community leaders, volunteers and small business and their value in driving grassroots process.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the notion of social capital as one construct from a model for social partnerships in vocational education and training. It has found evidence of successful partnerships and alliances in the region, but contends the doctrine of neoclassical liberalism is ideologically antithetical and capacity reducing for promulgating cross-sectoral social partnerships in practice. There is a need for further research which critiques the impact of economic rationalist policies on social partnerships at the international, regional and sub-regional policy levels and explores alternative policies for capacity building and generating greater real collaboration across the sectors, and between communities and regions.

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