

*Rhetoric versus the reality: the university as an anchor institution to facilitate the social bridging capital of a worker co-operative.*

**Key words**

**Anchor institution, Bridging and Linking social capital, Marginalised communities, Participatory Based Research, Worker-cooperative.**

Susan Barry, Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Helen Collins, Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Patricia Jolliffe, Liverpool John Moores University

Paul Lees, Liverpool John Moores University

**Abstract**

This ongoing study employs community-based participatory action research to examine how universities, as anchor institutions, can facilitate bridging and linking social capital for marginalised communities through a case study of Kitty's Launderette, a worker cooperative in a deprived area of Liverpool. The research demonstrates that Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) supported Kitty's via knowledge transfer, leadership mentoring, and access to institutional resources, enabling the cooperative to expand its networks and strategic influence. Key findings underscore the necessity of trust-building, intermediary "anchor brokers," and contextual sensitivity to community driven timelines, **which can conflict or differ with institutional expectations**. The partnership supported Kitty's to strengthen environmental sustainability and address local challenges such as hygiene insecurity and structural barriers yet also highlighted bureaucratic processes underpinned by inaccessible language, creating tension between university and community collaborations. The study advocates for a balanced approach of external support to avoid undermining local autonomy, and questions whether universities are always suited as anchor institutions. This ongoing case-based study contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms underpinning social capital formation.

**Introduction**

There is a dearth of literature on the lack of bridging social capital and its significance in helping those in deprived areas and marginalised communities and local businesses to 'get on in life' and not 'just get by' (Skoba,2019). At the same time, there is growing interest in universities as anchor institutions and their potential to address social inequity through developing partnerships in their locality. Scholarly attention is needed around building bridging and linking social capital in marginalised communities and this study aims to address this gap.

This case-based study relates to Kitty's Launderette, a community-based social enterprise in Anfield, Liverpool, which has operated as a worker-community co-

operative since 2019. With a flat, non-hierarchical structure, it employs eight local residents and engages volunteers. The launderette offers affordable, eco-friendly washing, drying, dry cleaning, and commercial laundry services to the likes of local football teams and hospitality, while also serving as a social hub for creative and community-focused activities. Awarded the Community-Based Social Enterprise prize at the 2023 Social Enterprise UK Awards, Kitty's aligns its mission with Rawhouser, Cummings, and Newbert's (2019, p83) definition of social impact (SI) as "beneficial outcomes arising from prosocial actions... experienced by intended beneficiaries and/or the broader community". They aim to address pressing local issues such as financial hardship, hygiene and fuel poverty, and social isolation by providing essential services and inclusive social spaces (Kittys, 2025).

Worker co-operatives like Kitty's are rooted in democratic governance and collective ownership, operating on a 'one member, one vote' basis to prevent external profit-driven control (Spear, 2004), reflecting the values of the International Co-operative Alliance (2019), including self-help, equality, and community concern, guided by seven core principles promoting member benefit over profit. As locally embedded models, co-operatives enhance economic resilience by retaining resources within communities and supporting long-term sustainability (Novkovic and Nembhard, 2023). They also encourage collective learning and innovation tailored to local needs (Mazzucato, 2015; Pitelis, 2022) and play a key role in building social solidarity and community capacity (Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan, 2012; Saner et al., 2019). Thus, it could be argued their capacity to impact social equity is greater than traditional business formats and efforts to strengthen their SBC and SLC could maximise such impact further.

The area of Anfield in Liverpool with over 14000 residents is synonymous with Liverpool football club yet ironically is ranked as one of Britain's most deprived areas (Harvey, 2024; Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, 2024), within the ten most deprived neighbourhoods nationally (GOV.UK, 2019) based on the Index of Deprivation 2019 (IoD2019), associated with chronic disadvantage for its inhabitants. In turn, this impacts entrepreneurs and small micro businesses suffering from both scalability and growth issues (Jayawarna, Jones and Macpherson, 2011; Morris, Santos and Neumeyer, 2020) and business support (Morris, Kuratko, Audretsch and Santos, 2020). The ripple effects influences reduced 'capacity to aspire', educational attainment and university applications (Ghosal, 2021), poorer employment prospects and higher unemployment (Bailey, 2017; Zhang and Pryce, 2020 and Fiorentino et al, 2024), hygiene poverty (Armstrong, 2018), reduced access to social and creative spaces (Hastings et al, 2017) and social isolation (Anderson, 2019). Furthermore, living in areas and neighbourhoods of deprivation are typically associated with lower levels of social capital (Verhhaeghe and Tampubolon 2012; Myers et al., 2024) and are marked by few new business launches and limited self-employment (Edwards, 2021; Mouraviev, and Avramenko, 2020; Williams and Williams, 2011). To compound this, increased living costs have had a greater impact on deprived communities (ONS, 2022). Collectively this contributes to social

inequality, and the role of universities as anchor institutions within such areas is critical.

### Universities as Anchor institutions

The term "anchor institution," introduced by the USA's Aspen Institute in 2001, refers to urban place-based organisations such hospitals, universities and other large organisations (Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson, 2001). Hodges and Dubb (2012) emphasise the role universities could play in leveraging local wealth in equitable and sustainable ways (Garton, 2021), advancing social and economic objectives within local communities as catalysts for addressing regional challenges (O'Farrell et al., 2022). Through partnerships with local government, businesses, and community organisations, universities may contribute to regional economic development by driving innovation, supporting workforce development, addressing skills gaps and community wellbeing (Brown-Luthango, 2013). Their involvement may extend beyond education, encompassing research, strategic collaborations, and public engagement to prioritise connections and engagement for social cohesion and reducing inequality (Goddard, 2018; Harkavy, 2006). Universities can contribute to community well-being through projects that address local issues such as poverty reduction, financial inclusion, and public service improvement (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008). Civic engagement underscores many universities mission to create thriving communities while ensuring that the benefits of higher education extend to wider society (Ehlenz, 2018). While this potential portrays a convincing picture, the benefits of effective partnerships are too often not maximised simply because community organisations are not 'in the know', to leverage university anchor support, as is the case with Kittys.

We argue insufficient social bridging and linking capital may be at the crux of this, and if universities strengthen their partnership commitments, could be a tipping point, especially for businesses in deprived communities. As aforementioned, the challenges and barriers of building bridging capital in poorer communities is under explored (Ansari, Munir and Gregg, 2012; Narayan, 2022). Is it possible that universities gloss over these deficits and focus on the benefits of an anchor institution? Indeed, some may argue this is asking too much of universities as they navigate choppy economic waters (Financial Times, 2025). and may have insufficient resources

### Social Capital

Social capital is a key mechanism through which inequalities influence the social organisation of communities (Sampson, Morenoff and Earl, 1999), acting as a mediator between deprivation and community outcomes to explain how structural disadvantage translates into social disadvantage. Although the definition of social capital (SC) remains debated due to its varied interpretations, at its most basic it combines "who you know," "what you know," and "where you live" (Smith and Christakis 2008), key elements that shape how individuals, through their networks and interactions, gain differential access to resources

(Smith and Christakis 2008; McCulloch, Mohan and Smith, 2012; Jonsson, Busfield and Sodergren, 2024; Dederichs, 2024).

### Research purpose and questions

So, building bridging and linking capital in marginalised communities is underexplored (Hurlbert et al., 2017) and this study addresses this gap through exploring a symbiosis between the university (LJMU) as anchor institution and Kittys. Like other community organisations, Kitty's already has strong bonding social capital amongst its workers and community members.

First, we focus on interrogating precisely what bridging and linking social capital are and how they can be leveraged through a partnership with a university. Second, we explore the challenges of relationship building with Kittys. Third, we identify where Kittys are now and where they aspire to be, and co-devise ways of addressing gaps. Finally, we reflect and co-write our journey with Kittys.

### **Conceptual / Theoretical Background**

The term 'social capital' originated in the early 20th century (Hofer and Aubert 2013), and has since been driven by two prolific authors, Bourdieu and Putnam. Definitions of social capital vary. Bonding capital describes inter-community ties based on trust, and while it supports everyday survival, it can limit social mobility. Bridging capital enables mobility between social groups and the formation of ties between people from different networks. The concept of 'linking' capital refers to a relationship between a community of insiders (e.g. family, neighbourhood) with outsiders (e.g. NGOs), in other words connections where there are differences in power or social status.

Social capital literature remains divided. Claims that an increase in (only) bridging capital improves a community, are met with counter claims that bonding capital provides the backbone to a community (Recker 2013). Based on this study, to help a community have access to and utilise more social capital an increase in both bridging and linking is necessary, yet marginalisation potentially affects the eligibility rules and outcome of both.

Both Bourdieu and Putnam (2001) suggest that people in poorer areas have fewer social capital ties, and such ties are worth less. Here is where we start to see Bourdieu's notion of the reproduction of inequality beginning to emerge, and the ways that capital can be reproduced, depending on its presence, absence, who has it and eligibility rules.

## **Methodology**

The article is based on the work with Kitty's worker co-operative, national award winners for their ecologically and community-based laundry and dry cleaning who secured the Eurovision 2023, BBC contract for their services.

The use of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) is growing (Rice et al., 2024) as a method to bridge the gap between the community-stakeholders and professionals. We used this method as it actively engages the community in all research activities and is a recognised method for using with marginalised communities (Mendenhall et al., 2010). Some of the benefits of utilising the method, such as training and development (Oetzel et al., 2022) our community in this research have also experienced. Indeed, the first author taught the company's organisational development leader on the MBA course that they completed at LJMU.

The action research element of the methodology was reflected in how our lead author, after developing academic knowledge with the organisation via the MBA, joined their Board. There is no shortage of models of action research.

Underpinning the methodology we return to the founder and their four stages planning, acting, observing and reflecting of action research (Lewin, 1948). There are different options on the number of stages with the core being that they have adapted to account for involvement of community members. For example, the six stage process cited by Ambuehl, Appiah, Bibi, & Kretchy, (2025) includes consultation, exchanging knowledge, mutually agreeing goals, contribution, evaluation and dissemination; this research focuses on stages one to four.

The research is qualitative derived from the relationships formed with the organisation. We will share some of the mutually agreed outputs of the consulting communication and exchange ideas in the findings section. We have labelled these Access; Staff Development and Specific Projects.

## **Findings**

This section outlines key findings from the collaborative research journey between Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), as an anchor institution, and Kitty's. Findings are presented in alignment with the three intervention areas: (1) Access, (2) Staff Development, and (3) Specific Projects, analysed through the lens of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR), with particular attention to how bridging and linking social capital were facilitated through the university-community partnership.

### **Access**

#### **Knowledge Exchange**

An outcome of the partnership was access to a carbon assessment conducted by the Faculty of Engineering and Technology School of the Built Environment in 2023 (prepared by: Dr Cameron L Kelly & Scott Caldwell), with Joy(pseudonym)

the sustainability lead for Kittys. This highlighted the successful approach Kittys already had, purchasing their energy from a renewable energy supplier and using a renewable energy host service for their web page. Based on the recommendations of the report, Kittys plan future carbon footprint training for their staff, and has access to the basic CAM containing the additional calculations, to enable them to track their carbon footprint going forwards. Additionally, Kitty's gained access to student support via a 10-week media internship intended to facilitate the co-creation of marketing materials for community events and ease resource constraints for the co-operative. Initially promising, however, the interns' intended remit was not fulfilled and thus highlights the need for continued liaison contact from the university to underpin and support such relationships and collaborations through to fruition. These tensions between institutional communication, timelines and community needs underscore the importance of aligning expectations from the outset and having access to clear support structures—a point returned to in the Discussion.

### Anchoring Knowledge

Over two and a half years, the lead author, in their capacity as a Non-Executive Director on Kitty's board, embedded the concept of the university as an anchor institution. Through board meetings and informal discussions, the author gradually introduced insights on how anchor institutions can offer academic and professional services expertise. This 'drip-feed' method allowed trust and mutual understanding to develop over time.

The partnership also enabled targeted signposting to other university services. For example, the Organisational Development Lead was referred to LJMU's Law Clinic, for free legal support. Interestingly, while the advice received was technically sound and cost-effective, Kitty's found the process too slow and the language too complex, indicative of a mismatch between the university's capacity for legal outreach and the urgency required by community enterprises—highlighting a tension between the rhetoric and reality of institutional support. These experiences reflect the complexities of fostering linking social capital: while Kitty's gained access to new networks and expertise, institutional systems and language often posed barriers.

### **Staff Development** and Leadership Growth

Developing tacit knowledge through soft mentoring and informal coaching, Hope the OD Lead at Kitty's benefitted from ongoing conversations with the author. Engagements focused on applying insights from LJMU's MBA Scale up modules—particularly those related to sustainable productivity, workforce planning, and leadership for growth—within the operational context of the co-operative. Reflection catalysed critical thinking and supported strategic goal setting for Hope, aimed at strengthening Kitty's autonomy and financial resilience.

Through this iterative process, Hope was able to identify priority areas such as procurement, communication strategy, and reducing grant dependency. While

several opportunities were proposed (e.g., AI-enabled marketing, a student-led social media competition), Kitty's adopted a cautious, incremental approach. Their preference for steady progress, rather than rapid uptake of external ideas, was attributed to internal capacity limitations and a cultural co-operative ethos grounded in deliberation and reflection.

### Leadership Through Innovation and Impact

Hope's evolving leadership and high engagement from team members enabled Kitty's to diversify its service offer—e.g., launching a delivery service and providing consultancy to Wirral Council on co-operative start-ups, a shift signifying the co-operative's movement from being a recipient of support to an emerging provider within the social economy. The partnership helped amplify this transition by enhancing the internal capability to link social impact goals with practical organisational development.

Recognition of Kitty's success—such as winning the 2023 award for Best Community-Based Social Enterprise—was enhanced through encouragement to publicise achievements in the local press. This elevated the organisation's profile and built bridging social capital by raising awareness and credibility among local stakeholders like businesses, media, and community institutions.

### **Specific Projects:** Hygiene Insecurity and Participatory Research

#### Building Research Capacity and Ethical Literacy

Steven, Kitty's Community Lead (pseudonym), developed substantial research skills and confidence through engagement with the author. Initially introduced to impact case study methodology, Steven identified hygiene insecurity as a pressing and underexplored local issue. This became a focus for collaborative inquiry, allowing him to gain familiarity with academic literature via platforms such as Google Scholar, and to distinguish between assumptions and evidence-based claims.

As a co-researcher, Steven co-designed open-ended questions for use in focus groups and community workshops. He participated in the ethical approval process, completing ethics training and contributing to documentation design, such as the creation of the recruitment poster for participants. This hands-on experience deepened his understanding of project and research planning and methods of data collection. Steven led the development of an internal audit to assess staff knowledge and perceptions of hygiene insecurity, aligning with co-operative principles of participation and democratic decision-making and his compilation of and co-analysis of results have skilled him in the basics of qualitative data analysis techniques.

#### Co-Production and Contextual & Language Sensitivity

Through participatory processes, Steven helped coin a locally relevant definition of "hygiene insecurity"—preferring the term "insecurity" over "poverty" due to its

reduced stigma and broader resonance. He designed recruitment materials and contributed to workshop facilitation tools, iterating drafts with the author to enhance accessibility. However, Steven's experience also highlighted structural challenges: ethical documentation remained dense and difficult for non-academics to interpret, highlighting the challenge of co-producing knowledge in ways that avoid academic hierarchies—a concern addressed further in the Discussion.

The project strengthened Steven's social capital by enabling him to initiate informal conversations with local GPs, food banks, asylum seeker organisations, and children's centres, to gain a multi-lens perspective on HI. These engagements, facilitated by his growing confidence and institutional backing, signify emerging bridging and linking social capital—connecting Kitty's to new actors, networks, and spheres of influence.

Thus far, LJMU's role as an anchor institution has been useful (rather than pivotal) and at a slower pace than anticipated in enabling Kitty's to build bridging and linking social capital. Time investment in forging relationships was underestimated by the authors. To date Kitty's has been given access to students, faculty, and future potential to access professional services and others who may provide practical support while fostering a culture of learning and reflection. Whilst still at the early stages, Kitty's leadership have become knowledge co-producers, leveraging institutional relationships to amplify their voice and impact.

## **Discussion**

### **Access**

The university acted as an anchor university by providing place-based support to Kitty's, notably through a detailed carbon footprint analysis conducted by staff from the School of Built Environment, which informed future training and carbon reduction targets (Ehlenz, 2018; Brown-Luthango, 2013; Harris and Holley, 2016). This fostered bridging social capital by connecting Kitty's to university staff, resources and expertise (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000).

Simultaneously, vertical linking social capital was developed through strategic relationships with senior university academic staff (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). However, this social capital mobilisation was limited to a one-off interaction, reflecting critiques of short-term projects that fail to establish sustained relationships and risk tokenism (Farr, 2018).

The potential benefits from a 10-week student internship were unrealised when the intern failed to meet expectations and severed contact. Such setbacks risk damaging trust, which is critical for ongoing collaboration (Hall, 2024) and challenge the often-positive narratives surrounding anchor universities. This underscores the need for robust anchoring infrastructure that supports communication and relationship management (O'Farrell, Hassan and Hoole, 2022).



## Anchoring Knowledge

Awareness of the university's potential as an anchor institution for Kitty's was cultivated through a sustained, relationship-based approach. The lead author's role-as a former MBA lecturer to Hope (Kitty's OD lead), a local Anfield resident, and a Non-Executive Board member culminated in "legitimacy through place attachment" and established the author as a credible advocate for Kitty's (Lang and Fink, 2019). The slow, trust-building process over two and a half years aligns with literature emphasising the significance of time and relational credibility in developing institutional partnerships (Dubb and Howard, 2012; Harris, 2021; Nooteboom, 2007; Tinkler and Tinkler, 2020). Trust, achieved through relational engagement, is foundational for fostering both bridging and linking social capital (Claridge, 2018; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Doornbosch-Akse & van Vuuren, 2019; Levin et al., 2016).

While LJMU enabled Kitty's to build bridging and linking social capital, such as accessing legal networks, university processes upholstered in complex language and slow timelines, too often act as barriers (Ehlenz, 2018; Taylor, 2023). This tension between institutional procedures and the agile needs of community organisations diluted the university's impact as an anchor and facilitator of social capital. Transparent communication of timelines and processes are essential to manage expectations and ensure meaningful engagement that maximises anchor institution impact.

## Staff Development

### Leadership and growth

Strengthening the partnership with Kitty's relied on ongoing, iterative engagement with Hope, the OD Lead, through informal coaching and reflection on MBA learning. This approach enabled the practical application of strategic knowledge, supporting Kitty's in clarifying its vision and objectives to drive growth, community action, and visibility. Sustained, trust-based engagement is recognised as key to developing bridging and linking social capital, empowering organisations and universities to co-create solutions to organisational and social challenges (O'Farrell, Hassan and Hoole, 2022; Taylor, 2023).

While additional university support such as student assistance with social media and procurement advice was considered, these opportunities were paused, revealing a mismatch between the university's preferred pace and Kitty's more reflective, democratic approach which aligns to culture of co-operative ethos. This highlights the need for alignment in partnership working; as Bringle and Hatcher (2002, p. 506) note, the most productive collaborations are founded on mutual understanding and shared goals.

## **Specific Projects**

Consistent with existing literature, ongoing face-to-face engagement with Steven, Kitty's community lead, was pivotal in building trust and developing his research skills, particularly around the priority issue of hygiene insecurity, which supported effective co-production and social capital formation (Bridger and Alter, 2006). Through collaboration with academic staff and participation in structured research and ethics training, Steven bridged the divide between academic and community, gaining access to knowledge, methodologies, and professional norms, exemplifying bridging capital by facilitating organisational learning and social mobility (Woolcock, 2001).

Moreover, Steven's ethics training connected him vertically to institutional authority, enhancing his technical competence and enabling engagement with formal ethical research protocols and governance. This vertical linkage represents linking social capital, granting access to institutional resources that influence research agendas and ethical standards (Poortinga, 2012). However, Steven also identified challenges: complexity of ethical procedures and language that exist contrary to claims that community-based research mitigates academic elitism (O'Farrell, Hassan and Hoole, 2022). He expressed frustration with lengthy processes and ethical revise and revision fatigue, highlighting how university compliance protocols sustain structural inequalities and constrain social capital development.

## **Conclusion**

The partnership between LJMU and Kitty's demonstrates that anchor institutions can effectively facilitate bridging and linking social capital for marginalised communities by providing support such as knowledge transfer and leadership mentoring, access to new networks and expertise (Ehlenz, 2018; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002). Realising this potential requires universities to prioritise community needs and be reflexive about their own power and institutional structures. Overreliance on university support risks undermining community autonomy, underscoring the need to balance external assistance with local self-determination (Sotarauta et al., 2012).

Central to the partnership's success were intermediary actors, including the authors, university staff, and co-operative leads who served as anchor brokers, sustaining collaboration and trust. Contextual understanding was vital, particularly recognising and respecting Kitty's incremental, community driven pace, even when slower than university expectations (Brown-Luthango, 2013). At times, the issues extended beyond differing tempos to the university's seemingly unquestioned assumption—rooted in its role as an anchor institution—that its support would be welcomed and beneficial. While well-intentioned, this led to numerous support offers proposed simultaneously, both overwhelming and with little account for the co-operative's timing, needs, readiness, and self-directed ethos. The findings highlight that trust and social capital formation are slow, non-linear processes requiring patience, sustained engagement, and relationship-building (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001) and institutional

enthusiasm and positional authority can neither substitute or circumnavigate this.

Despite these successes, institutional barriers, such as potential for temporal misalignment, institutional overreach, communication gaps and inaccessible professional language, persist and raise questions about the suitability of universities as anchor institutions, suggesting that non-profit organisations may sometimes be better positioned to respond flexibly and accessibly to the needs of marginalised communities and local businesses (Taylor and Luter, 2013).

## **Implications**

This study advances social capital theory by revealing how universities, as anchor institutions, actively foster bridging and linking social capital in marginalised communities. It reinforces that social capital extends beyond internal community dynamics and can be purposefully cultivated via collaborations that bridge institutional and community boundaries (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).

Practically, the findings highlight the necessity of sustained, context sensitive engagement, the importance of anchor brokers, and the imperative for universities to adapt structures and communication to align with community driven priorities (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Ehlenz, 2018). For practitioners, effective university community partnerships demand ongoing reflexivity, mutual goal-setting, and investment in accessible, trust-based relationship-building.

## **Limitations**

This ongoing research is limited by its reliance on this contextual single case study of a community worker cooperative in one locality, limiting the generalisability of findings (Yin, 2017). The qualitative approach, insider researcher and role duality may introduce bias and limit the breadth of viewpoints represented (Dhillon and Thomas, 2019). The study's relatively short timeframe thus far limits the ability to observe longer-term outcomes related to social capital development.

## **Future Directions for Research**

Future research should critically consider roles and suitability of anchor universities versus other organisations such as NGO's in supporting social capital and community empowerment, identifying the contexts in which each is most effective. There is a need to move beyond descriptive accounts and unpack the mechanisms behind bridging and linking social capital formation (Putnam, 2000; Small and Gose, 2020; Woolcock, 2001). Longitudinal studies are especially important to capture the evolving dynamics of trust and relationship-building, core yet often overlooked in social capital development. Such insights will be vital for refining university-community partnerships and maximising their long-term social impact (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; Ehlenz, 2018).

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