

Relationships Matter: You and Social Capital

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Purpose

The purposes of this lesson are to:

- help participants understand the concept of social capital, and
- translate difficult concepts into practical applications for building relationships.

Presenting the Information

The leader should understand the concepts of social capital and building relationships before attempting to teach the lesson. Many people use the term social capital, and some ideas have strayed from its original concept as outlined by Alexis de Toqueville, Robert Putnam, and Michael Woolcock. It is best to introduce the concept of social capital, but concentrate on the importance of relationships.

The Lesson

A community where residents enjoy well-developed interpersonal relationships has better health outcomes, lower crime rates, and more unity in business dealings, according to social science research. A person who has well-developed friendships and active community involvement is said to have high social capital. That high social capital not only contributes to the well-being of the individual, but also contributes to the overall health of his or her living environment, because it affects others.

Research suggests communities that have well-connected individuals — that is, are high in social capital — are better places to live and play. This lesson touches on social capital as a framework for social interaction. However, the main focus centers on interpersonal relationships and how they improve quality of life.

Social Capital

What is it? The term “social capital” refers to personal relationships which, much like money, can be used for personal gain. In most cases, people do not make friends with the thought, “How will this friendship benefit me?” However, relationships are a resource that each person can draw upon.

Political scientist Robert Putnam refers to social capital as “Connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Urging a community to attend a fund raising activity, the Gold Beach, Ore., volunteer fire department puts norms of reciprocity in the simplest terms: “Come to our breakfast, and we’ll come to your fire.” Baseball great Yogi Berra may have been less eloquent, but the point is clear: If you don’t go to someone’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.

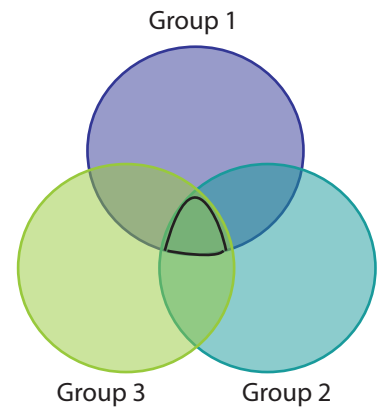
Types of Social Capital

The trust that arises from relationships depends on the quality of the personal connection. For example, relationships that develop over time will have deeper levels of trust than mere acquaintances. Characteristics of trustworthiness are mutual reliability, responsibility, mutual respect, and mutual gratitude. Putnam and social science researcher Michael Woolcock refer to two types of social capital: bonding and bridging.

Bonding social capital is made up of the ties between like people in similar situations such as family, close friends, and other near-kin. Bonded groups tend to be inward-looking, with exclusive identities separate from other groups outside the “fold.”

Bridging social capital connects people from one close-knit group to members of other groups outside the immediate bonds. Bridging from one group to another helps generate broad and inter-connected circles, according to Putnam. Woolcock referred to bridging social capital as distant ties of like persons, such as loose friendships and workmates. Those ties are seen as critical to social unity. Social unity is the result of reliable relationships and trust within and across varying groups.

A Venn diagram (at right) illustrates bridging social capital. Imagine that each circle represents a separate community of interest. Notice the intersection of the three circles. The intersection, triangular-like and outlined in the diagram, represents where people from different groups come together to exchange ideas and share resources.



Relationships as Capital

How can people consider their relationships as a source of capital? Money is financial capital that people use to buy food and pay mortgages. In other words, money is exchanged for wants and needs. Like investing money for later return, perhaps you can say you invest in your personal relationships for later assistance. Of course, the immediate benefit of a relationship is companionship and interacting with people of like minds. More personal relationships mean more access to other networks and resources. Imagine the benefit that would be for an elderly person living alone.

Remember, friends on social networking sites such as Facebook, for example, usually are not seen as sources of social capital since those “relationships” cannot be well-developed and often there are not opportunities for building levels of trust.

Building Strong Relationships

Relationships matter. Where do you build your relationships? Possible places are church, school, civic clubs, men’s or ladies’ clubs/societies, work, neighborhood centers, or other places where people of like interests gather. What do those relationships mean to you? Remember, building interpersonal relationships does not have to be deliberate. Relationships can be built anywhere. Some ties begin in a personal capacity and spill over to professional alliances, while professional connections often turn into long-term friendships. Relationships can be recognized as a public good that generates positive outside connections, which, in turn, create cooperation to reach common goals.

Measuring Social Capital

Since social capital is a vague concept, researchers look at the human activities that tend to connect people to one another and that help maintain social equality.

They may use gender, age, income, length of residency in a community, education, marital status, and race/ethnicity to predict levels of social interactions and community involvement. A questionnaire is provided on page 4 of the fact sheet as an example of a research instrument. Questions one through seven, in this case, will be used to predict answers in the remaining questions. These questions indicate levels of social connectedness and community involvement. Persons with high social capital will likely report many social contacts, will likely be actively engaged in the community, will likely volunteer, and are most likely to have at least a bachelor’s degree or be in a well-paying job earning a comfortable living. Persons with high averages of social contacts and well-developed relationships can report low incomes and less than a high school diploma and still show wide ranges of connections and active community involvement — that is, high social capital.

Communities with stronger connections, more trusting relationships, wider and denser networks, and more bridging across lines of difference are in a better position to promote the well-being of their members.

Building Social Capital

Forget about building social capital but instead work on interpersonal relationships. Most researchers do not view social capital as a deliberate action that an individual attempts to achieve in order to elevate personal status, contrary to Putnam's idea that social relationships are more purposeful. That may be truer in formal networks or associations such as memberships in civic clubs, churches, and business organizations. You have the choice to be deliberate about building social relationships. You could join as many civic or social clubs as your time allows. What if you are not a "joiner"? Look around you. What can you do for other people? Do you volunteer? Do you offer your talents to people, organizations, or to your community? The best way to build your relationships is not to think about what other people can do for you, but what you can do for other people. That is what builds relationships and networks, i.e., social capital.

Activity

Social capital indicators are represented in the sample survey provided in the handout. The point of the survey, in this case, is not to measure your participants' social capital. Instead, it gives examples of what researchers look at to measure this somewhat vague concept. For example, women are shown to have more social contacts (an indication of well-developed relationships, i.e., social capital), but men will likely show higher income, another indicator of high social capital. The important thing to know is that a combination of the indicators is what constitutes high or low levels of social capital.

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