**Social Capital: The Power and Potency of Relationships**

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Introduction

In 1995 I was a relatively newly minted Executive Director of CLASS of Pittsburgh having been hired for this role by the board of directors in 1991. This organization has been supporting people with disabilities from its inception in 1951 and I had been associated with it since 1973 when I was hired as a direct support worker. Over the time of my experience, I had been working very hard to not only develop viable supports for the folks we served, but to intellectually understand what was needed to make meaningful progress. I had been trying new things at our agency, reflecting in national forums, and had just finished the second edition to my 1991 book, Interdependence: The Route to Community. I was ready to release my second book, Beyond Difference.

In both my thinking and practice, I was frustrated by our lack of success. I was clear we needed to move to a macroscopic paradigm to undergird and then improve our services and supports. I had tried to articulate that the clinical, microscopic focus on disability, that dominated treatment and policy approaches, was not the way to proceed. Rather, the approach we were taking was looking at a community perspective and framed that if we only could understand community we could make the overall changes we wanted to see happen. For the folks we serve. And we worked hard at that agenda.

Yet, in spite of the actions we were taking and the efforts we were putting out, there was still that lag. We had passed the ADA, and were promoting access and openness of community. We were finding that the community was being impacted in our macro efforts, but there was still that lag. As we looked at community outcomes, there was a gap. People with disabilities were still behind the eight-ball in all major community measures.

This was confusing to me. How could we have made some of the macro progress that we did in the early 90’s, but still find that the general measures of community success be so disparate. We had the ADA passed, there were clear changes in the community, people with disabilities were being seen in advertisements, movies, and general community aspects, yet Americans with disabilities were unemployed in massive numbers, they were still in institutional realities, they were rarely active in the places in the community that I found myself in.

In my programmatic struggles as we tried macro strategies and were still failing, I turned to academic reflection. In most of my career I have tried to frame my actions off what theory, reflection, and emerging ideas were suggesting. In fact, my entire practice has been balanced between theory and practice. Since 1973, when I first joined CLASS, I was active with the University of Pittsburgh, first as a graduate student, doctoral candidate, and then faculty. From 1980 on I have had faculty status at the University of Pittsburgh.

This balance between practice and theory has been important to me. Since my doctorate in 1980 I have had innumerable opportunities to leave direct practice and work as a consultant. As my books and reflections became better known, continued opportunities came.

Yet, though flattered by these invitations, I felt compelled to stay in the mix as a practitioner. It was clear to me that if we were going to produce better results it was important to not speak from the mountain top, but to remain in the vineyard. It is clear to me that my best contribution would be a doer, not as a critic. Now, don’t get me wrong. We need the critics, the consultants, the thinker, and outspoken advocates. They play a clear and important role in change, and always will.

But we also need those hard working players inside the tent. It is the people willing to stay in the mix that will ultimately make change happen. That is the arena I want to be in. The consultants and guru’s are important, but they often only offer words in the wind. Like the breezes that sweep the seeds across the land, they play a role, and sometimes the things they advocate unfold. But it is the farm worker, the ones in the vineyard that influence the crop. That is where I want to be.

It was in one of these shifts as a thinker I came across an article by Harvard sociologist, Robert Putnam titled, “Bowling Alone.” The article was not about disability issues, but about civic engagement. As a member of the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh, I am often exploring literature on community organizing, and that is how I found this article by Putnam.

This article pushed me as Putnam explored the notion of social capital. His thesis was that civic engagement is declining in the United States and that social capital was a key to community success or failure. Social capital - it was a term and concept that I had not considered in the work that we do. I was impacted by Putnam’s overview of social capital. He gave data that showed how social capital is related to a variety of important community issues. It not only influenced honesty, tolerance, compassion, achievement and other important individual behaviors, but it was also associated with health, happiness, and life expectancy.

After reading this article in 1995 I began to digest these thoughts. I looked at some of the references Putnam had cited and slowly started to consider its impact. Then in 2000, Putnam published his book built from his article and also titled, Bowling Alone. It is an epic book devoted to how social capital has changed and evolved over the past 100 years in the United States.

Since 2000, I have begun to frame a structure where social capital has become the cornerstone piece. As I looked more and more at community, it became clear to me that social capital is the missing piece to a pure macro shift. Without relationships life is challenging. The primary way we all gage our life success is measured by the impact we have with and by other people. Further, social isolation, as reported by Putnam contributes to as much premature death per year as all smoke-related diseases and illnesses. This information astounded me.

I didn’t have empirical data, but I was anecdotally aware that most of the people we served were socially disconnected. Many folks were deeply socially isolated and I had heard many times from families that we served that loneliness was a key issue in their children’s lives. Allied to this was the notion that all of us are affected by social capital. It is a universal concept that applies to everyone. It became more and more evident that social capital is the missing link in a macroscopic agenda.

To this end, I began to explore this concept of social capital more closely and in 2002 published the book, Cultural Shifting. This book allowed me to explore how the notion of social capital began to impact a community agenda. In this book I suggested that there are 4 key steps to building social capital. The book set a clear definition of community and then developed the 4 steps as action items.

Over the ensuing years we have taken these steps and attempted to apply them in the lives of people we serve and to coach systems that relate to people with disabilities in how to apply them. With my colleagues at CLASS we published the book, Together is Better (2008) as a coaching manual for family members and agency staff that would be interested in community building.

The book you are now reading, however, is a bit different. The agenda here is to look personally at the concept of social capital. We review the literature on this concept, and then focus much more closely on how social capital plays a role in everyone’s life. Although we are interested in how people with disabilities might gain and develop more social capital, we feel that the concepts covered are as important for any reader, whether they are advocates for disability issues, or just the guy next door.

Each chapter builds the social capital thesis and offers ideas and information that can be useful to not only the work you might do, but for the life that you are currently leading. Social capital has powerful implications in almost all good aspects of our lives, and this book attempts to help you in a broad way.

So, thanks for taking some time to read through this book. If you feel it is helpful, or has offered some new approach you might take in your life, or in the work you do, let us know. All of us can make a difference in the community life we play. Take time now, to make your life and the lives of others better by building social capital.

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