

COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

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This article is taken from the book, Cultural Shifting (TRN Press, 2002)

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Community is a network of people who regularly come together for some common cause or celebration. A community is not necessarily geographic, although geography can define certain communities. To come to an understanding of community is to appreciate that community really is based on the relationships that form, not on the space. In fact, space can be an abstract notion when it comes to understanding community. Think about the global community created by the Internet. These communities are not bound by geography, but are relationships forged in cyberspace.

The term “community” is the blending of the prefix “com,” which means “with,” and the root word, “unity,” which means togetherness and connectedness. The notion of being “with unity” is a good way to think about the concept of community. When people come together for the sake of a unified position or theme, you have community.

The term “culture” is analogous to community, but culture relates more to the behaviors manifested by the community. People bound together around a common cause create a community, but the minute they begin to establish behaviors around their common cause they develop a culture. In this way, culture is the learned and shared way that communities do particular things.

This basic approach to community and culture blend three key features. One is the fact that community is a network of people. Often these people may have great differences or even distances between them. They can be different in age, background, ethnicity, religion or many other ways, but in spite of their differences, their commonality or common cause pulls them together. The similarity of the common cause or celebration

is the second key feature of community and the glue that creates the network. Regardless of who the members of the network are as people, their common cause overrides whatever differences they may have and creates a powerful connection. Finally, as the collection of people continues to meet and celebrate on a regular basis, they begin to frame behaviors and patterns and become a culture, the third key ingredient. These regular meetings bond the community members as they discover other ways that they are similar.

Again, these three key features are:

1. Diversity of membership
2. Commonality of celebration
3. Regularity of gathering

One of the most important facets of community is that it promotes a sense of social capital for the members who belong. Social capital refers to the connections and relationships that develop around community and the value these relationships hold for the members. Like physical capital (the tools used by communities, or human capital - the people power brought to a situation), “social capital” is the value brought on by the relationships.

L.J. Hanifan first introduced the idea of social capital in 1916. He defined it as: “those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit...The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself... If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living

conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.”

More recently, Robert Putnam (2000) defined the concept of social capital as: “referring to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them...[It] is closely related to...civic...virtue...A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.” (p.19).

Other sociologists suggest that social capital is enhanced by social currency. This idea is how social fodder links people together. For example, a popular person who is the life of the party might be regularly included in activities. To this extent he is strong in social capital. His jokes and storytelling, the items that make him popular in the gathering, are the social currency he exchanges.

Think about the many communities with which you are involved. People who might be different from you in many ways surround you – your family, your work team, your church, or your clubs or associations – but the commonality of the community tends to override the differences you have and create a strong norm for connections. The exchange is based in social currency. Further, these relationships become helpful to you for social reasons. Sociologists call this helpfulness “social reciprocity.”

Social capital is critical to a community because it:

- allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily
- greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly
- widens our awareness of the many ways we are linked
- lessens pugnaciousness, or the tendency to fight or be aggressive
- increases tolerance
- enhances psychological processes, and as a result, biological processes

This last point prompts Putnam (2000) to assert:

“If you belong to no groups, but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half!”

The fact that social capital keeps us safe, sane and secure cannot be understated. Most of us tend to think that institutions or organizations are key to safety. Places like hospitals or systems like law enforcement are thought to keep us safe, but the bold truth is that these systems have never really succeeded in keeping us safe or healthy. Rather, it is the opportunity for relationships that community offers us as well as the building of social capital. Simply stated, your circles of support and the reciprocity they create are the most important element in your safety. In fact, it has been suggested that social isolation, or the opposite of social capital, is responsible for as many deaths per year as is attributed to smoking.

When we consider social capital for people with disabilities, we must recognize the void. We know that people with disabilities still are separated from the greater community and mostly involved in special programs or services designed for them. In these realities, the major outlet for social capital is found only within the borders of the special programs. To this extent then, the relationships that constitute the social capital of many people with disabilities are other people with disabilities. The narrowness of this reality leaves a significant void.

Consider the notion of reciprocity. The more you become connected with your community, the more people begin to watch out for each other. If one day a regular

member of your group doesn't show up, a natural inclination would be to check up on them. This sense of group reciprocity is what leads to individual safety.

If the major social capital outlet for people with disabilities is other people with disabilities, then the reciprocity factor can become narrow. The more narrow the confines of reciprocity the less impact it offers.

Putnam's ideas of how social capital builds tolerance and lessens pugnaciousness also fit closely to the concept of cultural shifting. Anthropologists have found that for communities to get better, new and different ideas, people or products are necessary. Yet intolerant and angry communities are not as open or as ready to absorb new things. Consequently, cultural shifting is more difficult when communities remain narrow. Social capital helps build tolerance because the exposure to others challenges us to consider new things. This developing openness then has an effect on pugnaciousness. Simply put, if you become more exposed to difference, anger levels have a greater potential to go down.

This notion of social capital and the blending of similarity of interest with natural diversity of the members create unique phenomena for growth and development in both people and organizations. The drive to find, create or be more than we had before is magically transformed when it is blended with community. The reciprocity developed through social capital is helpful as well for either specific or general reasons.

Many current business leaders understand the notion of community and social capital. Most successful companies and organizations work to create a community sense among their employees. A company can be energized by the idea that people

can bond around a mission statement and objective to find mutual success. The relationships that form a bond create opportunities for social reciprocity and build social capital. In fact, about any organization or work force, including families, can lead to a greater sense of bonding, focus and success. Quite simply, community is a universal concept that creates advancement not only in products and ideas, but for people as well.

Cultures and communities have many features, but one key ingredient is regularity. That is, for a community to be viable it must have some regular points of contact and connection. For a family community, this might be annual reunions or the celebration of holidays together. For a religious community, this would be weekly services and holy days for celebration. For organizations this would be regular staff meetings or stakeholder gatherings. For clubs, groups or associations, regular meetings or gatherings formalize the group as a community.

The more people come together the more they find other ways that they are linked. That is, when a person first comes to a community they are drawn by the common interest of the community. As they attend again and again they will find other similarities with people in the community and create a deeper sense of bonding.

Other features of community include the notions of consent, creativity and cooperation. Years ago Robert Nisbit (1972) suggested that community thrives on self-help and equal consent. He felt that people do not come together merely to be together, but to do something together that cannot be done in isolation. Others (Sussman, 1959) identified community for its sense of interdependence. McKnight

(1988) described community as a collective association driven toward a common goal.

Indeed, if we think about communities that we know, they all work toward some identified goal. From teaching people new skills, to saving souls, to addressing a common problem, to launching a government, all of these ventures capture the power of community, and then, through their behavior, create a culture. The most vibrant and successful of these communities are the ones that have built more social capital.

* The book Cultural Shifting, (TRN Press, 2002) can be ordered by contacting 866-823-9800 (www.trninc.com) or 412-683-7100 x 0 (www.ucppittsburgh.org).