

Social Capital and the Cities: Advice to Change Agents

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In discussions of community building, politics, and social change, the term “social capital” is in serious danger of becoming a victim of its own success. It has taken on a circus-tent quality, piling all things positive and social underneath. While academic purists might disdain this as intellectual sloppiness, I take it as a rather encouraging sign that social capital is what Mark Moore would call “a powerful public idea,” something that fits so well into a larger conversation—about changes in public life and problem-solving, say—that it mobilizes people and institutions.¹ This brief essay is to encourage a little carefulness, lest we march off (mobilize) eagerly in some unproductive, or even dangerous, directions.

Having sounded a cautionary note, let me clarify that I find social capital a very useful concept and one very important for thinking through both the promise and peril of community building efforts around the world. Social capital illuminates topics as seemingly diverse as tenant management of public housing, parent involvement in schools, infant health, getting a job, surviving a divorce, and leveraging block grant funds to build affordable housing. I’ll make a few more claims:

- *Social capital is crucial to making devolution work.* Getting it right (built) is not enough, but getting it wrong—losing more of the useful kinds of social capital—will be fatal to America and especially to its most divided cities, along with other parts of the world where decentralized decisionmaking is the trend.
- *Businesses have never thrived, nor economies flourished, without social capital.* Such capital is probably not substitutable to any great degree, though, for the other kinds of capital (the myth of self-help). Rather, social capital makes the other kinds—land, labor, and investment—work well. It greases the gears of commerce, along with other areas of life.

Getting Our Thinking Straight

Social capital is most useful to me, and to the people I work with and advise, when we are all aware of the multiple guises it assumes, especially in our most distressed cities. Here, a

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little scholarly jargon will be useful as a kind of shorthand: first, a definition, then some current examples from America's cities. "Social capital" has been used for about 40 years now to describe resources that are neither traditional capital (money or the things that money buys), nor human capital (skills, know-how).² Social capital refers, then, to *resources stored in human relationships*, whether casual or close. It is *not* "civic engagement," though engagement in public life helps to generate social capital by usefully connecting people. It is *not* trust per se, but some of the best "goodies" come from trusting, as opposed to wary, impersonal ties among people. Social capital is the stuff we all draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish things that matter to us and solve everyday problems. These distinctions in what social capital is, and, just as importantly, in what it is *not*, turn out to be very important.

Having a fairly broad role as a resource for action, social capital works at various levels: family, neighborhood, city, and society. It is used by *individuals* for at least two purposes:

- To *get by* (for social support): to cope with the everyday challenges that life presents, from flat tires to divorces. When we confide distress in a friend, or listen as the confidante, social capital is at work, directly serving the person in distress but also renewing the relationship in ways that will, over time, be used by the speaker and the listener. When poor moms share caregiving tasks and rides to church along networks of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, they each draw on social capital.³ These kinds of support often, not always, come from people who are like us—in race, class, and other terms. What is more, we are born into many of these supportive ties (to kin, for example), and we are very choosy about others (friends) who come so close. Participating in associations or civic events tends to have minimal effects on these closest ties or "intimates."⁴
- To *get ahead* (for social leverage): to change or improve our life circumstances or "opportunity set." When we ask a friend who is "connected" to put in a good word as part of a hiring or grantmaking decision, or when an inner-city kid, through a personal tie, gets a shot at a life-changing scholarship, this, too, is social capital. For the disadvantaged, especially for poor people of color, leverage often comes through the routine or nonroutine decisions of people who are different—much better employed, white, living in the suburbs, college-educated. Sometimes, and especially if you're on the bottom of the opportunity structure, those who help you get by can do little in any direct way to help you get ahead: they have the same problems or know the same people that you do. For these people, mechanisms for building more diverse networks are critical, whether they be schools, community associations, job partnerships, etc.

Social capital also works for organizations and for systems of organizations or people (as a "collective good"). When a system *as a whole* functions better because of the ties among actors which make it up, we see this collective aspect, which Robert Putnam brought to center-stage with his aptly entitled *Making Democracy Work* (1993). A handful of my colleagues in urban policy are exploring the role of social capital in making effective use of scarce affordable housing dollars. They argue that cities that have affordable housing *systems* rich in social capital will be the "winning horses" in an era of increasing competition ushered in by

devolution.⁵ These are the cities where housing developers and managers, government agencies, foundations, and intermediary groups are connected by a variety of dense ties, including overlapping board memberships and career paths and volunteer corps that span the system – ties that facilitate trust, high-skill cooperation, and even appropriate risk taking. The same notion applies to any urban sector that depends on close coordination and trust to make scarce dollars go a long way: trust and understanding require ties among *disparate* groups and individuals, built up over time, probably with stutter steps and often with visible leadership by (at least) a committed few.

Advice to the Eager

Let me suggest a few modest caveats here for people working to make our cities more livable, whether more prosperous in the aggregate, more equitable in the way prosperity is spread around, or both. First, social capital that benefits me may not benefit my neighbors. That is, individuals may further their own aims through social capital without doing much for the community at large. Creating collective benefits depends on targeting that aim in: (a) the choice of players (people and institutions) to connect; and (b) the way connections among those players are made. This may be obvious, but the key implication is that social capital builders should be quite strategic about what important, socially beneficial relationships are missing in their domain and equally strategic about how to create more of those, avoiding scattershot outreach into some “civic engagement mill.” We will not reweave the fabric of American democracy, nor make any serious progress on inequality in our cities, by attracting everyone at random into associations or internet chat rooms. I, for one, do not want closer or more numerous ties among people out to do me wrong. *We could stand to lose social capital in a few social niches.* When business groups are too chummy, for example, we call them “trusts,” and these are illegal as well as unfair.

Second, Polonius’ advice to “neither a borrower nor a lender be” may have been sage in the Denmark of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but it has little application in the realm of social capital. Social capital is built up through repeated exchanges among people (or organizations) *over time*. It depends on regular borrowing and lending of advice, favors, information, and so on. It breaks down through disuse as much as through distrust that alienates. Granted, close ties to people or institutions can be burdensome as well as beneficial, as anyone who has *not* wanted to go “home for the holidays” can attest! But the lasting rewards of social capital depend on making regular deposits and withdrawals into a system of relationships, some of them quite casual, others very intimate. Attending a meeting is only the crudest measure of this, since one may not “exchange” anything with others present. Meetings are a place to start, as long as we acknowledge that connecting people’s lives – head, heart, and spirit – is the real deal. And so all of us out to measure social capital should focus on *what and how much is being exchanged*.

Third, and most important, as a resource or means, social capital has no “right” or “wrong” to it until some judgment is made about the ends to which we put it. We covet social capital for the reasons that many people covet money: not for what it is but for what we can do with it. Note that profitable youth gangs and Mafia rings depend on social capital. Sweetheart corporate deals, including those that cheat taxpayers, depend as much on off-the-books social capital as the mountains of legal paperwork. The now impolitic “old boy network” functioned,

and still functions in many places, through trusting ties among the “boys” involved, to the detriment of those excluded. As a sociologist, I would argue that some exclusion is almost inevitable wherever a group is particularly cohesive. Part of what makes “us” us is that we are not “them,” whoever the “them” may be. This point suggests that social capital builders ought pay as much attention to what they are building *for* (the discrete ends) as to the details of the building process. Vague pieties about community and democracy are popular because everyone can jump on board – the devil and dissent are in the details – but let us acknowledge that it is discrete, widely *desired* ends that make social capital powerful, such ends as higher school completion rates, safer neighborhoods, more responsive government, or healthier babies.

Fourth, because it is stored in social relationships, social capital is organized, whether we like it or not, along the very “fault lines” that relationships, neighboring, and social participation often are in our world: race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and creed being some of the most important. Contrary to our romantic notions of community-as-urban-village – of local places swarming with social connections – those fault lines are usually more important to our social ties and participation than place *per se* (neighborhood of residence), especially for professionals with far-flung and very useful networks. And these points relate to the previous point that social capital is value neutral. In most of our cities, degrees and types of participation in any civic process, and lines of personal and organizational affiliation, tend to be segregated like the larger society. So building more democratic or inclusive social capital entails the application of some new, or updated, social “technologies” – running better public meetings or establishing more inclusive neighborhood associations, for example – to some very old and persistent problems of social division. We will not sweep race, class, sexual preference, and other social borders under the carpet thanks to the irresistible pull of this powerful idea of social capital. We *can*, armed with more a more critical sense of the enterprise, envision stronger, more cross-cutting kinds of social capital that will make diversity work. We need “bridges” that span diverse social worlds as much as “glue” that binds any one group together internally.

Stories from the Street: Social Capital at Work—and Not

Two brief cases will illustrate these main ideas, suggesting ways that we can both measure and build the kinds of social capital that we may agree are broadly valuable. In each case, a seemingly progressive policy initiative has created serious challenges along with key opportunities for the families and institutions involved. In each case, social capital is important in myriad ways – and sometimes most decisively so where it is missing.

Case #1 - Neighborhood Revitalization in Minneapolis: A Community of Communities

A few years back, Minneapolis launched a seemingly progressive Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP), which provided substantial monies for “community-driven” revitalization projects. More community, less government, was the idea. I joined a team of researchers, one of whom spent almost a year living in one of the target neighborhoods and talking to its residents. The NRP monies were channeled through a very active community development corporation (CDC) that had a strong reputation citywide.

We learned that social capital had two faces in this neighborhood.⁶ First, thanks to the quirks of Minnesota tax law, the CDC ran its affordable housing through leasehold cooperatives. Co-op residents were required to participate in tenant meetings and other co-op activities and, in most cases, were given training, as well as real opportunities to make decisions about who their neighbors would be, whether a problem tenant would be evicted, how the management company would allocate resources, and so on. Residents in the small co-op buildings knew each other, and they reported high levels of confidence about working with neighbors on shared problems as well as greater feelings of safety. These co-ops were the standouts in our national study of CDC activities aimed at building community.

The second face of social capital in the same neighborhood was much more sobering, and to see it, we must step back from the co-ops that so impressed our research team. The neighborhood as a whole was no unitary community of interests, despite the hard work of the local CDC. On one side, living in CDC housing, were low-income, mostly African-American moms. On the other, living in homes they owned nearby, were middle-income, mostly white, childless households, many of them headed by gay males. These sub-groups were internally cohesive, but few if any “social bridges” spanned them. They held different priorities and members of the two groups seldom interacted in any meaningful way, political or otherwise. The homeowner group opposed proposals that would expand the stock of affordable housing or add amenities (a park, for example) for the children living in CDC housing. Not surprisingly, the sudden availability of city monies for neighborhood projects led the white homeowner group first to take over the CDC board, which was chosen at an open neighborhood meeting, and then to dismantle most of the innovative CDC programs that served low-income families. The very activities and community building resources that had made this community-based organization a standout in our national study were eroding by the time we left the study site, because the stock of local social capital was uneven and parochial—plainly unable to handle the rapid influx of external funds. Leaders and students of the Empowerment Zones, and of community politics more generally, may find familiar threads here. The appeal of “community-driven” agendas will depend on who falls inside and outside the bounds of community, and the results of those agendas will depend on whether new funding supports or undermines efforts to build the cross-cutting ties which are the lifeblood of collaboration.

Case #2 - Revisiting Housing Desegregation in Yonkers, New York

My second example involves the controversial court order that created new housing opportunities for public housing residents in Yonkers, New York. Here, as part of a large study of the impacts of scattered-site public housing on its residents, the receiving neighborhoods, and the city as a whole⁷, social capital has been revealing in several ways. For starters, it helps us organize our thinking about the costs and benefits to the young people who moved with their families from high-crime, high-poverty neighborhoods in the central-city Yonkers to much safer, middle-income neighborhoods of Yonkers (hereafter, the “movers”). (For comparison, we are also interviewing very similar families—“stayers”—who live in the movers’ old neighborhoods.)

What are the early impacts of those moves? First, and very positively, there are no signs that moving away from familiar others has cut social support, a key to the way poor families cope with poverty and, as I described it earlier, one of the two key forms that social capital takes from the standpoint of the individual. Second, and less encouragingly, few of the movers interact with whites in the new neighborhoods beyond their public housing complex, and few report having white friends or acquaintances in any domain (neighborhood, school, etc.). This should not surprise us since neighboring is largely driven by race/ethnicity and class, especially where mechanisms for social “border crossing” are either missing or ineffective. Also, the movers do not attend neighborhood churches, which help neighbors get acquainted in many American communities. Rather, they go back to their old churches across town. This, too, is not surprising, since choosing a church is not like choosing a deli: there is much more social and ethnic “stuff” involved in choosing where to worship and with whom. But partly because of their ethnic isolation, one-half of the mover youth (and an equal proportion of stayers) cannot think of a single adult they could count on to provide helpful advice about a school program or getting a job. These early Yonkers findings suggest that we make important housing policy choices bearing persistent social realities in mind: geographic proximity does not a neighbor make, especially where *social* distance is great.

The Road Ahead

The evidence from these and countless other urban experiences tells us that social capital is about active, social choices and concrete mechanisms that connect people, and that thanks to race, poverty, and other old familiars, we have a long way to go. We need public domains that are safe and that *look* safe to a range of people with differing priorities, styles of rhetoric, and even norms of exchange. Along the way, and with all due respect to the enthusiasm that mobilizes people around big rediscovered ideas, we should think hard about which kinds of social capital we want more of, which we want less of, and how and through what institutions to create more of the desirable kinds.

¹ See Mark Moore (1990) “What Sorts of Public Ideas Become Powerful?” In *The Power of Public Ideas*, edited by Robert B. Reich. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

² The architect and social critic Jane Jacobs was one of the early users of the term, though she did not develop it. See *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961. Jacobs recognized that the resources stored in connections among people were key to creating and preserving vital, desirable places to live.

³ The best and still classic description of this “coping” capital is Carol Stack’s (1974) *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row.

⁴ See, for example, Barry Wellman’s wonderful long-term evidence on the social networks and lifestyles of East Yorkers in Toronto. Barry Wellman (1988) “Networks as Personal Communities,” in *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, edited by B. Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ See Langley Keyes, Alex Schwartz, Avis Vidal, and Rachel Bratt (1996) “Networks and Nonprofits: Opportunities and Challenges in an Era of Devolution,” *Housing Policy Debate* vol. 7, no. 3.

⁶ See Xavier de Souza Briggs and Elizabeth Mueller with Mercer Sullivan (1997) *From Neighborhood to Community: Evidence on the Social Effects of Community Development*. New York: Community Development Research Center.

⁷ The study, teaming researchers at Columbia, Harvard, and Michigan State University, was launched with funding from The Ford Foundation. My participation in the larger team has also been supported by the National Science Foundation.