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Social Capital

In Bowling Alone (2000) Robert Putnam describes social capital (or support systems) as something that is just as important as financial capital. He is talking about our connections with others, our networks, the things we do for each other with the trust and knowledge that they would do the same for us. Well-connected people feel a mutual obligation to help others; they have “favor banks.” One man said, “It’s like the golden rule. I’ll do this for you now knowing that, down the road, you will return the favor.”

Individuals have social capital, and so do communities. While individuals have many connections with other individuals, communities have a number of clubs and organizations like bowling leagues, service clubs, unions, religious organizations, and so forth.

*There are two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. **Bonding social capital*** is what we have with our tightest friends. It’s exclusive, usually keeping others out. It is about belonging and identity. Others in our bonded group have many of the same resources and connections we do. Some examples of bonding capital are ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based reading groups, and country clubs. Some bonding groups are harmful, such as gangs, the Ku Klux Klan, or certain neighborhood groups that form to exclude others. These individuals and groups tend to have the NIMBY (not in my back yard) attitude.*

Bridging social capital, developed during GA, is often the first and strongest support for change.

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is what we have with people outside our usual circle. It’s inclusive of people from different backgrounds. Examples of bridging capital are civil rights movements, youth service clubs, organizations that promote the arts, United Way, block parties (if you live in a neighborhood where there are people from different classes), etc. When you have bridging capital, you have relationships of mutual respect, many acquaintances, and lots of connections—along with your numerous bonding connections.

Putnam cites Xavier de Souza Briggs who says bonding capital is good for getting by, while bridging capital is good for getting ahead. By this he means that our bonding-capital friends will have the same contacts and knowledge of job opportunities as we have. But someone outside our normal circle will have a number of contacts that we don’t have and might be able to give us good leads for jobs and access to other resources.



Activity: 'Mental Model of Personal Social Capital'

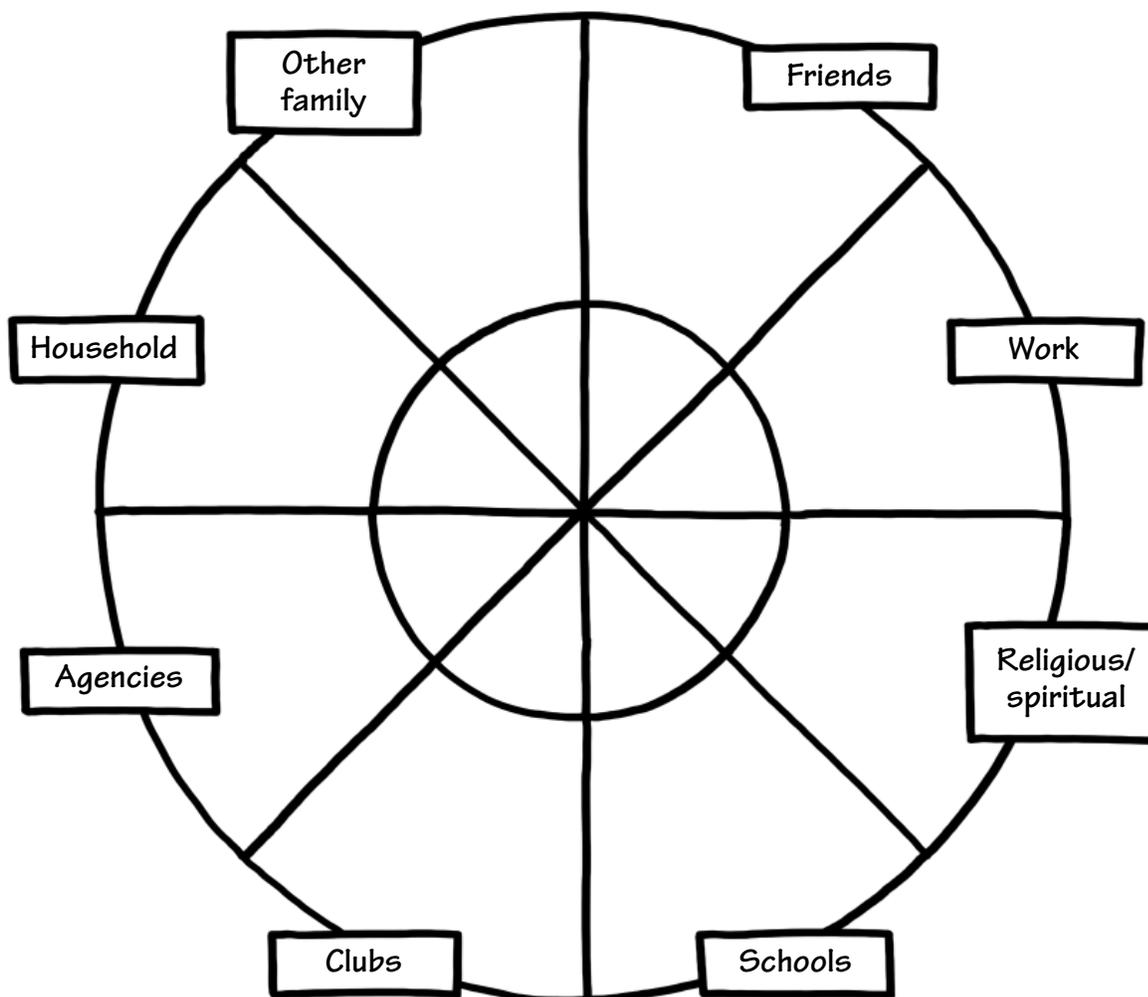
Time: 10 minutes

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure: Use a full sheet of paper to create a mental model. Draw a small circle inside a larger circle. The center of the circles represents you.

1. Thinking of the circles as a pie, draw eight pieces of pie and write the following labels around the outside of the larger circle: Household, Other family, Friends, Work, Religious/spiritual, Schools, Clubs, and Agencies.
2. In each section of the pie, put the initials of the people who are in your life. Those with bonding relationships will be in the inner circle, while those with bridging social capital will go in the outside circle.
3. After group discussion, place this mental model and your notes and reflections inside your Future Story Portfolio.

Mental Model of Personal Social Capital





Discussion

1. How many people did you name as bonding capital? Why did you name them? How many people did you name as bridging capital? Why did you name them?
2. What are the positive things you see in your relationships when you look at this mental model?
3. What are the negative things you see in your relationships?
4. If you decided to make a change in the future, how might this information help you?
5. How does this pattern today impact what you see in your future?
6. How might you strengthen your social capital?
7. Bonding social capital may be important to people who are struggling financially. If you don't have money to solve problems, you'd better have lots of bonding capital; your people will make it possible to survive. Bridging social capital may be more valuable to people in wealth because of the value placed on connections. How do the social realities of different groups support or maintain their economic status?