



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

Home Renaissance Foundation

Working Papers

Number 10

The importance of creating
a context for relationships

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November 2008

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I hope that you will be able to see some strong connections between this paper and the previous ones as it is important that our thoughts connect without duplicating each other. I would like to go deeper on what has been referred to as the organisation of the social, the importance of the third place, particularly the importance of engagement with people. I will concentrate much more on the use of relationship and connection. Calling to mind what Charles Handy referred to in his paper as 'separate but together,' for example, I do believe in the importance of separate spaces but what I would like to focus on is the implications of togetherness in the context of the home.

I would like to make two points by way of introduction and to the way my thinking went on this. The first is that we were asked to bring things that were relevant from our sphere of professional work into reflecting on the home. I am in a Business School and work in a Management faculty and I found myself thinking about all the questions the invitation from the Home Renaissance Foundation raises in your own mind. I found myself very quickly slipping into the assumption that home equals family. I come from a strong family and am a great believer in the family as an important social unit. However, I do not want to assume that the only set of relationships that we are talking about when we talk about the home is family relationships.

I spend part of my life in the university world and, therefore, what you are often trying to do is create a context which is home-like for a set of people who are away from their home. These people might not bring with them an assumption of the nuclear family and the extended family as the basis for their understanding of ways of relating. I found myself asking, what is it about building effective relationships that we find most quintessentially exemplified in the family but is also important in other contexts? I am not trying to be politically correct, but the reality in many parts of Western society is that the family as a social unit is not the primary unit for many people. I think that if we can find ways of enabling people to understand and build relationships, it may be a roundabout way of building effective families. If I do not focus entirely about the family, then, it is not because I do not care about the family, but rather that I have put a discipline on myself to think about relationships that may be exemplified through the family but exist in other kinds of contexts.

My big message is that relationships are the foundation of society. I do not subscribe to the statement 'there is no such thing as society.' I think that without our ability to work together, connect to each other and do things together we are impoverished as a community. My argument is that the home provides the foundation for relationships. For me, then, relationships are the foundation of society and the home is the foundation of relationships. I put these ideas down and thought they were obvious beliefs that everybody would agree on, but it is important to spend some time unpacking what that means and what we might do about it.

As I mentioned above, my area of expertise is management, so I would like to draw a few points from management and the world of work and the world of organisations. We are starting to see a growing recognition of the importance of relationships in the business world and in the organisational world. Relationships have always been important for business and have always been an important element in organisational success. There are several trends now that have people are saying, 'hey, we need to look at that again.' I will give you some examples. Many business organisations are now dependent on other organisations for their survival and success. This is partly a function of outsourcing – many things that were conventionally done within an organisation are

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now put out to other organisations – as well as through alliances and collaborations, partnerships, joint ventures. Indeed, in some sectors you cannot be a player in the sector at all unless you have effective partnerships. Here I am thinking, for example, of the pharmaceutical sector, and particularly the biotechnology sector. If you are not linked in with scientific communities and with other partner organisations you cannot be successful in that industry. A view in the strategy world now is that perhaps people should think less about the range of businesses as a set of separate businesses and actually think of their ability as an organisation to build relationships as their critical factor for success. In other words, they are beginning to look at what they do in terms of a portfolio of relationships rather than a portfolio of businesses. If you connect with that world, that is a language that they are beginning to speak. They are saying, ‘who should we connect with? How do we build trusting relationships? Where can we trade risks? What kind of collaborations do we need?’ Internally in organisations we are seeing a significant shift away from the dominance of hierarchy as what shapes what happens in the world of work and organisation. At the moment there is an increasing emphasis on collaboration, projects and sideways-working where your authority and your ability to succeed is not a function of your position and your job title, but rather your ability to work alongside others.

What I am arguing, and what I work on with many organisations, is how they build the ability to collaborate and build effective partnerships with a whole range of constituencies. One of the projects I am engaged with at the moment, for example, is with an international aid organisation. They are saying, ‘our ability to be successful in delivering aid is a function of our ability to collaborate with local communities, with donors and with local authorities. If we cannot do that well, then we are not working effectively.’ In this sphere of organisational life, what I am suggesting is that there is a growing interest in partnering, collaboration, how we understand relationships, how we talk about them and how we build effective ones. I would like to suggest that there is a lot of research out there that goes under the label of social capital and that you will find being looked at in political science, the organisational fields and in aid. Social capital is really a way of talking about relationships. It is fundamentally about the value of social connections and relationships. By using the word value I do not mean exclusively financial and economic value, but the social value of relationships and connections. If you look at the social capital field of study, you will find there are two stories there. On the one hand, there is a story about bonding. This is a story of social capital, about norms, about trust, about shared identity, about the degree of reciprocity in our relationships. So there is a story about community and there is a story also about networks, about how people are connected to each other and what patterns of connection we have.

Social capital language and social capital research provides a valuable backdrop and set of insights when thinking about the topic ‘from house to home’. What does the evidence tell us about social capital? Here we are talking about the importance of norms, trust, and the values that facilitate cooperation and that may be learned in one place, but may be transferable to other social settings. That is what the social capital agenda is about. The evidence shows us consistently that societies that are high in social capital and families that are high in social capital are where people are more successful and where children do better. There are various ways in which we might measure this but, in general one can say, and the evidence suggests so also, that social capital fosters educational and career success. There is a whole sphere of medicine that demonstrates, again, that where individuals and groups have high levels of social capital, they have a healthier life, are less prone to certain illnesses and their life expectancy is longer. We also know that for individuals and for organisations high levels of social capital are conducive to learning and innovation. Lord Layard's report on well-being looks at the relationship between well-being and economic performance. In it he defines seven factors that are important: family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, personal freedom, health and personal values. Many of those are directly affected or are representatives of high levels of social capital. What I am

suggesting to you is that this language, although it has some value connotations, provides us with some useful insights through research.

What is important for building social capital? I have taken a set of abstract factors and I would like to look at how we might use them practically in thinking about managing the home. The evidence suggests that for many features of social capital time is important. Trust, in most cases, is not built overnight. It is built through time and through a whole set of experiences. It takes a long time to build and can be broken very quickly. The time for connecting is an important dimension. Secondly, what builds social capital is interaction – the chance to meet each other and engage in conversations. I suspect that this is an event that will build many dimensions of social capital. We will bump into people, have a conversation and a bit further down the line we will think, ‘that is someone I can go back to because they know about that.’ Interaction, therefore, is important for building trust and for building connections. Furthermore, a sense of interdependence, the degree to which I depend on you and we do things together, builds strong connections and relationships. There has been a debate in the academic world, and the policy world, about how innovation happens and how important it is to be in the right kind of social environment. Silicon Valley is a good example. For a long time people said Silicone Valley works because there are norms of collaboration there and that willingness to collaborate and work with other people leads to innovation. In fact, the longitudinal research that has been done suggests that the relationship often goes the other way. It is by working together and doing common projects that trust is built. The importance of working and doing things together, not just interacting, is very important for building social capital. Finally, we have closure. There is plenty of evidence that says that if we have a boundary around us where there is something that we can call inside and something that we can call outside, then that sense of boundary fosters the development of strong social capital through trust, shared norms, reciprocity, etc. This sense of closure might be an abstract one, like a virtual community around photography or the design of some particular project, but it may also be a physical sense of closure.

These factors all come into play when you think about the home, because the home is a space in where people often spend a lot of time and where they interact in a whole variety of ways. We like to think that there is a level of interdependence there and certainly it is an environment in which there is a sense of closure. In summary, social capital research tells us that those four factors are important for building relationships. What I suggest is that the home is a social setting in which all of those are very important.

Three things need to be taken seriously in order to think about these things practically and in a way that allows us to do something about it: the three C’s for building relationships. One is that we should not underestimate the importance of *conversation*. There are some social scientists that argue that it is not the family that is the fundamental social unit, but rather the conversation between people because primary relationships are fundamentally developed within the context of conversation. It is through conversation that people develop skills in questioning, dialogue, negotiating, listening and so on. I would argue that if we paid attention to those factors in the design of the home that enable and encourage rich conversations across the generations, between the family and friends, we should see that as absolutely fundamental. We know it is important, but we should pay huge attention to it as managers of the home and designers of the home. A lot of the work that I am doing with organisations at the moment is built around questions such as, what are the missing conversations in organisations? Where do people feel unable to have courageous conversations? How do you encourage creative conversations? I suggest that the home is the place where people have their first and enduring experiences of conversation and we need to take that seriously.

The second C is *cooperation*. I think it is very important that we think about the way we enable people, family members and friends, to work together. What are the common projects that bring people together, and encourage them not only to interact but to become interdependent in some way? It might be doing a jigsaw together or designing an extension or building a snowman – what are the common projects that really engage people in doing things together? We know that that is hugely important in building enduring relationships. Again, the way in which people experience and learn relationships in the home is the skill that they transfer into other social situations and into other forms of social organisation.

Finally, it is really important that we think about the connections between the home and the outside world. I think it is very easy, in a Northern European context, to think of the home as being inside four walls or however many walls. In many other societies, much of home life is lived outside those four walls. It is not an accident or a coincidence that many people are speaking of 'third places'. I think that it is really important. Research on the psychological well-being of people shows that they need at least three places: their home, their work and a third place. The third place used to be clubs, a church, etc., but what are the equivalent third places now? Is it the internet café, for example, or some other institution?

We occasionally go on holiday to Menorca and stay in a small development. About eighteen months ago they decided to redevelop the children's playground. There was, I thought, a pretty good children's playground there, but they decided to redo it. It is the simplest, clearest example of an investment that has really changed the pattern of relationships in that community. This community is on the edge of the village. The natural gravity is around the harbour, so that this development is rather peripheral. The design of this children's playground, though, is very colourful. It has a lot of comfortable seating around and because it is so attractive, it has drawn people from different parts of the community and has connected the core established community with this peripheral development with the outside of the town. It has certainly worked at connecting people intergenerationally – it links the transient population with the enduring population. It took me a while to realise that not only has it got children's play artefacts, it also has a number of very attractive, wooden exercise stations, so you actually get the joggers and the people who are pounding around the place, coming back and doing their exercises there to the delight of the children who cannot understand this at all. This, of course, engineers a completely different set of conversations. It is a simple example of how thinking about how the inside connects to the outside and the outside connects to the inside, rather than concentrating on high-tech or huge investments, we can begin to alter the way in which people connect with each other.

The point I want to make with this is that the home is the place where people learn about relationships. They learn relational skills and they learn relational values. Those values are then transferable out into a range of other social settings. Clearly, there are links between the home and the school, between the home and work, and I think we need to ask questions about the links between the home and the third place.