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Social Capital

Most of the decisions that we make are based upon some expected future impact. Investing money for retirement, or engaging in physical activity are examples of this. Future impact is also an important consideration in decisions we make about relationships.

In economics, “capital” is a term commonly used to refer to accumulated wealth, which in turn can be used to produce more wealth. The concept of “social capital” generally refers to cooperative connections among people in social networks that involve norms such as reciprocity and trustworthiness. According to Robert Putnam, a Harvard University Professor of Public Policy and one of the scholars most associated with this concept, social capital is measured by examining factors that include community organizational life, engagement in public affairs, community volunteerism, informal sociability, and social trust. It includes cooperative activity, and shared maintenance of norms. Social capital can be examined on an individual level, or on a community level, including large populations. The investments that one makes in relationships build social capital.

Higher social capital has been associated with greater educational attainment, further economic development, and more effective government. Social capital has also been studied with respect to health, and in general, higher social capital is associated with better health. Stated another way, investment in good relationships appears to contribute to better health over the long term. This pattern has been found in marriages, families, rural communities, urban areas, and the workplace. The phenomenon is international.

While having better health can certainly allow individuals to be more invested in social networks, there is ample evidence that social

capital contributes to improved health status. This can be explained with a number of theories, each of which has research support.

- Good relationships tend to buffer the ill effects of stress.
- In caring relationships, persons are often urged to implement and maintain healthful practices.
- Social networks are a source of information, including information about health.
- Engagement with others tends to increase a sense of responsibility for the well being of others. In order to fulfill such responsibilities, one needs to be healthy.

Health promotion typically brings to mind such things as diet, physical activity, sleep, safety, and other such behavioral domains. The literature on social capital and health suggests that decisions to invest oneself in social participation can also support health throughout the lifespan. This means that behaviors such as attentive listening to a significant other, volunteering on a community project, participating in a neighborhood block party, or staying in touch with friends may all function as health promotion. Building social capital involves individual commitment to maintaining quality relationships among family, friends, and colleagues, and also involves attention to the maintenance of communities that are marked by cooperation and trust.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021