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Bonding and Bridging- the significance of child sponsorship in generating social capital

The modern practice of child sponsorship is equivalent to a central axiom of social capital theory, which links bonding and bridging. These two concepts form the basis to all our bonds and relationships. In this context social capital can be understood as “emotional capital” since bonds are linked to emotions, or as energy from the mind which is evoked from bonds. Based on the results of an empirical study on the satisfaction and happiness of the child sponsors of World Vision, this article shows how bonding and bridging can contribute to society.

Introduction to Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory puts emphasis on the value of networks. This is nicely summarised in the English saying of “It isn’t what you know but who you know.”

Like all capital, social capital can be invested and carries a return, provided the rules of the game are adhered to. These rules attest that all three level of society (micro, meso and macro) must be active as a lively whole, and must all be bestowed with the appropriate amounts of attention and treatment. Social capital theory speaks of “multiple links” as the benchmark for the potential for strength and dealing with life’s challenges.

Accordingly, it would be insufficient simply looking for stability on the micro-level (“individual level”) of the family and peer group. Likewise, a strong belief on the macro-level of religion, culture or politics is insufficient in giving life sufficient meaning. And whoever can boast of hundreds of acquaintances and colleagues on the meso-level (“community level”) but misses out on ideological identification or close relationships, will not be able to find true success in life.

These multiplier-linkages apply to individuals as well as any type of community be it schools, businesses, parishes or nations. They all generate their strength from the interaction of trust between the loved ones, the cooperation within networks on the meso-level, as well as from the enthusiasm for a greater common good on the macro-level. It may seem obvious, but many communities appear to fail because they look for success on just one of the levels - from the individualist drive for prosperity of small communities, to sacrifice through fanatical religious faiths, politics or stardom, to activism by society and management. In all these areas social capital theory emphasises, that it is the balance that counts.

Bonding and bridging originate in our first relationship

Bonding and bridging, the basic concepts in social capital theory, signify the inward-looking *bond* within a community and the outward-looking *bridge* to other communities and hence to society as a whole.

Robert Putnam, one of the most distinguished scholars of social capital theory, defines the difference between the social capital of bonding and bridging such that, “Some forms of capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organisations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organisations” (Putnam 2000).

Bonding – often termed “exclusive social capital” – refers respectively to one partnership, from the family and close circle of friends up to the nation or religious

denominations. It connects people of similar sociological circumstances. Bridging – also termed as “inclusive social capital” – connects people from different origins. They could be residing among different circles than their original origins, but are ultimately connected through the community of mankind and are hence understood. The form that bonding and bridging take can ultimately be attributed to our first relationship.

The term “bonding” was first used by the psychologist John Bowlby. In his “theory of bonding” he documented how the infant develops a strong connection (the “bond”) with its psychological parent. This has great influence on all later bonds and relationships of the infant in later life (cp. Bowlby 1988). In his theory, the infant develops a safe bond to the parent, which enables it to develop outwardly “into the world”. Hence, bridging has its origin in bonding, as only when a child is sure that its parent are “there for it” when it moves out into the world, it will do this with enthusiasm.

Kraemer and Roberts similarly emphasise the common origins of bonding and bridging in “The Politics of Attachment”, “Ironically, while people tend to think of the family as the prime source of bonding social capital (because it is the most powerful form of such affiliation), they neglect the fact that it is also likely to be an important influence on bridging social capital. Feeling secure and confident in oneself is almost certainly a necessary prerequisite for interacting with others who seem different and unfamiliar [...]” (Kraemer/Roberts 1996).

The quality of bonding which has its origin in the first relationship is the crucial factor in determining the later ability and willingness in engaging with people from the own surroundings as well as those who might seem “different” and “strange”.

The bonding, the love between mother and child, is always strongly and inevitably bound with fear, and hence with anger and aggression. Fears start to emerge in connection with the bonding behaviour at a certain developmental stage of the child. The “strange” surroundings of fellow human beings causes the emergence of ambivalence of affection and renunciation in the child. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, who has observed the mother-child relationship in many parts of the world describes, “With 5 to 6 months infants start the process of ‘estrangement’. Until this point they smile at anyone who gives them attention, but afterwards they start to distinguish between familiar persons and strangers. The infant continues to smile at familiar faces and the parents, but starts to display shyness towards strangers. The child might smile at the stranger for an instant, will turn away and salvage itself with the mother, but might return to seek further friendly attention. In this cyclical process the child can alternate between turning away and paying attention” (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1984).

This behaviour is characteristic of a stage in the development of children which they are born with. At a certain age the child refuses close contact with strange members of the surroundings, in spite of a growing sense of sociability. This happens during the age when the child begins to crawl and walk away from the mother and independently tests separation, distance and closeness. The child’s enthusiasm for exploration depends whether the mother can convey a sense of security and trust. During this time of dependence on the mother, the father can take on the role of the play mate, which whom the child can feel “big and strong”.

From a historical perspective, this phase of fear and caution is a prerequisite for survival. Bowlby assumed, that during prehistoric times the mother-child bond served to protect the child from enemies. Hence the descendents of these survivors were genetically programmed for this type of bond, “In the theory here advanced it is, or course, that very archaic heritage that is placed at the center of the stage. A tendency to react with fear to each of these common situations – presence of strangers or animals, rapid approach, darkness, loud noises and being alone – is regarded as developing as a result of genetically determined basis that indeed is ‘preparedness to meet real dangers’. Furthermore, it is held, such tendencies occur not only in animals but in man himself and are present not only during childhood but throughout the whole span of life. Approached in this way, fear of being separated

unwillingly from an attachment figure at any phase of the life-cycle ceases to be a puzzle and, instead, becomes classifiable as an instinctive response to one of the naturally occurring clues to an increased risk or danger” (Bowlby 1973).

Fear acts as a restraint to generating social capital. Whenever something goes wrong in society or in the mind of a person, we can assume that fear could be the root of the problem.

However, we are not at the mercy of our first relationship. The relationship between mother and child is a “system of interaction” as long as the bonding-signals of the child activate the relevant memories of bonding in the mother’s subconscious (cp. Bowlby 1979; Main/Solomon 1985; Grossmann et al. 1987).

“The response comes in correspondence with her internal working model of attachment. Our results can illuminate this process a little. It appears that a mother who remembers well how she felt when something bad had happened to her and how her parents responded or should have responded to comfort her, will listen emphatically to her own infant’s distress signals. Being able to identify with her infant, she interprets them correctly and responds to them in the interest of the infant. A mother who cannot remember much of her childhood distress, or remembers only in a distorted form, seems less able to listen openly and feel sympathetic with her infant. She may push aside memories of her own former distress by ignoring her infant’s distress” (Grossmann et al. 1987).

Research by Grossmann and his team shows how crucial the factor of reflection on emotions and experiences is for the development of trust, one of the central components of social capital. This applies to the relationship between mother and child as well as the relationships between adults. Likewise, it can be applied to larger communities, for example the reflection of and confrontation with a nation’s history.

The early mother-child relationship with its components of “love and fear” can be understood as a microcosm for social capital theory. In summary:

- Bonding and bridging have their origin in the early mother-child relationship, while the bridging depends strongly on the quality of the bonding.
- Bonding is crucial for the relationships and bonds with people of the same group and – with reference to bridging – with people of different origin.
- A trusting first bond initially supports the exploratory interests of the child and later the acceptance and treatment of strangers.
- A “not good enough bonding” (or – according to Donald W. Winnicott – a “not good enough mother”) initially retards and obstructs bridging. However, it is possible to reach a new point of view and hence new behavioural abilities through conscious reflection and confrontation with the emotional roots.

Bridging often has to battle with the problem, that fear and repulsion of the strange and love for the familiar have a historically stronger instinctive grounding than the urge to get to know the strange. To love our neighbours corresponds with human nature, but to love strangers or “enemies” seems more in opposition to it.

The moral teachings of religion and the philosophy of enlightenment are marked by the characteristics of bridging by their support for neighbourliness, love for humankind and universal human rights. However, in real life it is common practice to evoke a sense of community through isolation, to mobilise feelings of identity through the “natural” fear of the strange, and to create bonds through an “image of the enemy”.

As long as enough social capital of bridging is present in a community, the inner bonds are strengthened. However, when the capacity of outward bridging deteriorates, the inner bonds are weakened simultaneously. The consequences of this vicious cycle can be seen in numerous examples when strong isolation to the “outer world” concurs with inner power struggle, mobbing, witch hunts, war and civil war. History holds an abundance of examples of such catastrophes.

To overcome this phylogenetic imprint of the homo sapiens, we need cultural structures to generate bridging. History has produced numerous institutions and cultural patterns, which took bridging as their central concern and turned it into norms and behavioural patterns. Examples are the universities of the Middle Ages in upbringing and education, the Quakers in religion, the Red Cross in charitable communities, the pacifists in politics, and global arts.

Mobility also contributes to get to know and love the unknown. The contemporary world has turned into a “global village” and for the first time humankind knowingly shares a common destiny. At the same time we see an emergence of immediate threats to humans, such as weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, climate change and environmental pollution, crime and addiction. To tackle these problems effectively, both bonding- and bridging-qualities are necessary. There is a requirement for local and global bonds, norms and relationships of trust, through either top-down international politics or bottom-up civil movements. The OECD’s program of social capital can be seen in this context.

Child sponsorships generate social capital

The organisation World Vision arbitrates child sponsorships in the impoverished regions of the world. In other words, it acts as a modern bridging institution. Its goal is to provide sustainable financial and ideological support and help for self-help to the child as well as the community which it is a part of.

The relationship between the child sponsor and the child can be likened to a traditional socio-cultural institution, which we are familiar with from our cultural circles, for example from godparenthood. The godparents enter into the relationship voluntarily, and are usually chosen from the close circle of family and friends. Sometimes the godparents are socially well positioned and accept the godparenthood of a related or well-known child. Godparenthood excludes the possibility of a common household or adoption, the relationship is active on the meso- but not the micro-level.

Traditionally and based on its religious character, godparenthood also works on the macro-level. At baptism the child is officially accepted into the Christian community. The godparent is witness to this acceptance, and takes on the responsibility for the spiritual guidance of the child.

Confirmation can be compared to a rite of transition from childhood to adolescence. Again, the godparent’s role is to be the adolescent’s spiritual guide on the now consciously experienced entry into the Christian community.

In the context of social capital theory, these types of relationships between godparents and child work on the meso-level, but always within a trusted community. This strengthens the character of bonding, but also provides the potential for a bridging relation. It forms a connection between the stronger and the weaker within manageable communities, and hence works as a stabiliser for power relations.

World Vision child sponsorships connect people of different cultures and builds a bridge between the “rich” and the “poor” on a global level. People from richer countries agree to sponsor a child in one of the impoverished regions of the world – in this case Africa, Latin America, Vietnam, India and Indonesia.

In the context of social capital theory this serves as a strong bridging function. The sponsorship is carried out on a personal level, insofar as both parties involved (the sponsor and the child) know of each other and can individually send each other messages or even meet in person, depending on their relationship. This brings with it the emotional aspect of bonding. Emotions like love for humankind, neighbourliness, ethics and a sense of responsibility are generated on the macro-level.

The hypothesis, that taking on a child sponsorship generates and strengthens social capital is based on these considerations. The questions which arose were concretised through personal talks with child sponsors of World Vision, as well as through the author taking on a child sponsorship herself.

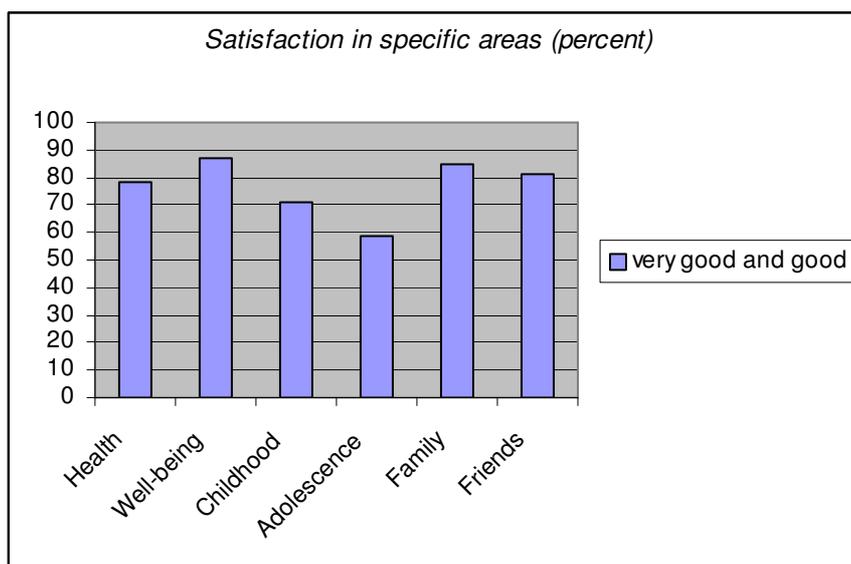
Questionnaires were sent to every one of the Austrian child sponsors to collect empirical data. The goal was to establish which social profile people display who sponsor a child in an impoverished region, and how further social capital could be generated through this process.

Results of the empirical study

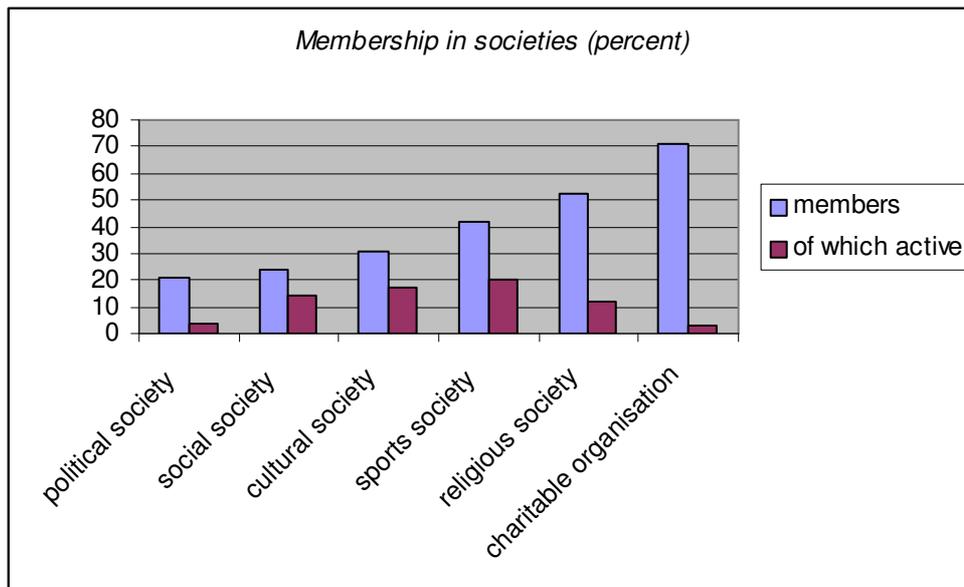
The results of the study of child sponsors of World Vision in Austria show clear strengths in the analysis:

The high participation rate in the survey of 1.726 Austrian child sponsors out of a total of 5.000 shows a high level of motivation, which appears above average for a charitable organisation. The child sponsors are members of all sections of society and age groups. Also, they are not marked by a higher level of women and the childless, but 43% of the participants live in families with one or more child.

With reference to their success in life, the child sponsors display good results of well-being and health. Their happiness lies above the norm, even after many of them experienced a difficult childhood and adolescence. This shows the significance of the above mentioned reflection on experiences.



Child sponsors are overall very engaged and participate in various forms of societies and are regularly active, with willingness to contribute to other charitable organisations.



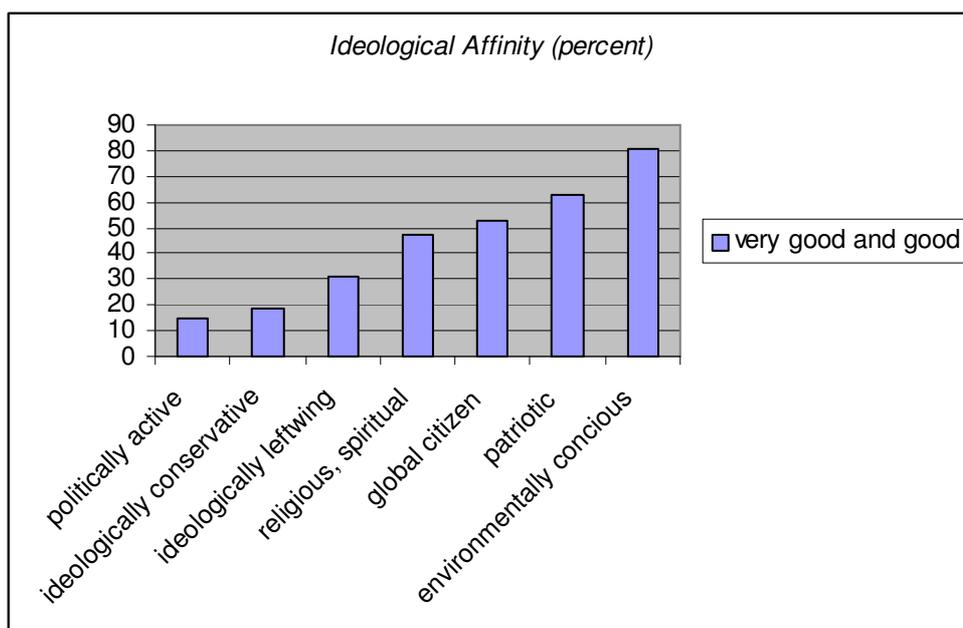
Ideological affinity

Child sponsorship is attractive from a humanitarian as well as ethical point of view, but is not exclusively linked with religious and ideological affinity. Child sponsors come from all different “camps” of beliefs, and to a significant proportion from the growing camp of the spiritually unaffiliated.

This is significant because the World Vision’s idea behind child sponsorship is deeply grounded in Christian values.

However, this is not reflected in the people who support World Vision. They consider themselves mainly “environmentally conscious”, feel “patriotic”, but also see themselves as “global citizens” and mainly consider themselves part of the modern culture of sustainability.

Let’s recall Putnam’s differentiation of bonding and bridging. As an example of social capital from bonding he uses a group of religious denomination. As an example of social capital from bridging he illustrates ecumenical religious organisations. Hence in the case of child sponsorships it has come to a bonding within a purely Christian community, to a bridging to a larger ecumenical and spiritual spectrum.



Trust and Affiliation to World Vision

World Vision enjoys great trust from its members, above average compared to other organisations. The affiliation correlates with a feeling of being sufficiently informed. Child sponsors who feel sufficiently informed about the culture of the sponsored child, and about the current projects, feel a stronger emotional bond to the organisation.

Table 1: Trust in World Vision (very good and good in percent)

Overall	34
Knowledge about child	
Good	66
OK	42
Little	24

Significance of the relationship between sponsor and child

People who take on a sponsorship take it seriously. Two-thirds describe their relationship with the child as “like to a strange child, with whom I feel a spiritual connection”. This forms the key to the development of social capital. Social capital is emotional capital, and in an actual sense a form of energy of the mind, as without emotion little energy can develop. Sponsoring a child comprises emotional capital from bonding as well as bridging. People who take on responsibility for a child, get in touch with their first relationship. However, the emotion does not act on a micro-level, but rather on the meso- and macro-levels.

Table 2: Significance of relationship with sponsored child

Overall	78
Motive for sponsorship	
Help a child	87
Help for Third World	75
Good use of Wealth	68

Optimism for sponsorships

Child sponsorships could turn into a mass movement and hence could significantly contribute to humanitarian globalisation. 34% of the respondents to the questionnaire suggested that they expect far more than 10% of people to be interested sponsoring a child, 34% think it would be 10%, and 32% expect less than 10% to be interested. This gives child sponsorship a spiritual and ideological significance, which goes beyond the financial efforts. 10% of the 2 billion people who belong to the richer parts of the world would constitute 200 million child sponsorships.

Table 3: Further willingness to sponsor a child (percent)

	¼ and more %	Around 10%	Few %
Overall	34	34	32
When happy with sponsorship			
Very	40	31	28
Rather	34	34	32
Little	31	35	35

Conclusion

The potential for accumulating social capital is not fully taken advantage of. Affiliation to organisations rises with the “right” information, specific information about the culture of the respective countries, as well as about the course and the results of the projects.

The child sponsors are connected with the projects on the macro-level through the ideological relationship as well as their identification with the idea of sponsorship. The phrase “World Vision Family” was recorded frequently. The possibilities of personal meetings and exchange of experiences on the meso-level can bring further benefits. To achieve a stronger sense of identity of the projects, a balance sheet of benefits and successes of child sponsorships, as well as stronger grounding of child sponsorships in public opinion would be effective.

“Relation by choice” (the voluntary supportive relationship between the stronger and weaker) is personal but not too close, of long duration but not enforced by law, and these forms of relationships are present in all different cultures.

Social capital theory and other recent studies predict, that with the decline of traditional bonds to (large) families and neighbourhoods, new flexible forms of associative relationships will emerge at the meso-level. On this level of voluntary autonomous affiliation, communities can emerge which do not necessarily tie the members intimately together, and which do not require a strict ideological coordination as for example religious or ideological denominations.

World Vision’s child sponsorships can be taken as a positive example as to how traditional forms of relationships can be transformed into modern social capital, which includes global ethics and comply with basic human needs.

In the words of Georges Devereux, “Ultimately people and cultures have more similarities than differences, simply because human beings are primarily human, and Inuit or Bantu later; and because all cultures are primarily authentic examples for culture as the characteristic product of the human species, and only later examples of a cultural domain.” (Devereux 1967).

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