Conclusion: Social Capital and the Quality of Life in Nevada

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Conclusion: Social Capital and the Quality of Life in Nevada

Introduction

Our contributors have presented data and analyses which bring up questions Nevadans need to raise when they talk about the kind of home we want Nevada to be. We must take seriously their findings, their recommendations, and their pleas for help. These social indicators must be re-visited periodically. We make a beginning today, but we need to sustain public discussion of these problems of poor social capital in our home town and home state. Aristotle mentioned that a large number of people in one place does not make a community – practices, customs, institutions, and a shared moral culture change a lot of people into fellow citizens in a community. We are the raw materials, but we have not yet done enough community-building. Nevada, or Las Vegas, may market itself as enticing, amoral, and libertarian, but behind the stage-settings, we lack not only the physical but also what I call the “moral infrastructure” we need to live safely and fruitfully together.

I start this concluding essay with Robert Putnam’s concept of “social capital” (Putnam, 2000), because it will shed light on the overall problem that connects all our contributors’ insights which make up this story. Next, I look at a few of the many social indicators reported locally (and detailed in preceding chapters of this volume) and presented by Putnam. I then turn to Hal Rothman’s objections to Putnam (Rothman, 2002), and Harwood and Freeman’s analysis of the same questions in Las Vegas focus groups (Harwood and Freeman, 2004). Finally, I offer my own evaluation of these alternatives and suggest how we can bridge the gap between the “social well-being” and “social pathology” perspectives. We need to connect these dots if we are to reach each other, find some patterns among these many distressing analyses, and learn to function effectively as fellow citizens within the shared communal sphere.

Most chapters in this volume have shown that current funding and staffing are not adequate, and that even the collecting of information falls short of what is needed for public discussion and
informed policy-making. County Manager Thom Reilly has pointed out that we lack, not only the needed public funding, but also the private and non-governmental organizations from which a more fully-developed community benefits (Kihara, 2004).

**Social Capital**

Robert Putnam uses the term “social capital” to describe “connections among individuals” and to highlight the “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” The interaction between these networks and the norms which make them work well “calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

The phrase “social capital” dates back to 1916. L. J. Hanifan coined the phrase when writing about rural schools in West Virginia. He explained that he wants to describe “those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely, good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse.” Hanifan went on to observe that if social capital accumulates in a community, its members “may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The **community as a whole** will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the **individual** will find in his associations the advantage of help, sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors” (my emphasis; cited in Putnam, 2000, 19).

Social capital is motivated by our need to work with others to survive, and when survival is secure, then to work with others to achieve personal and shared goals. Plato saw this as coming together, first to live, and then to live well (Plato, *Republic*, Bk. I). It is also motivated by our need for play, and our need for friendship, family, and sharing. When social capital is high, its **private good** is that individuals are more effective, active, and successful. We enjoy better health and feel more sane. Our pursuits of our own interests flourish, and our sense of well-being in the way we live, as well as our longevity, are measurably enhanced. And we do worse in all those ways when our community is low in social capital – when our projects are foreshortened, our trust of others
has to be carefully calculated, our mental health is strained by going it alone, and our share of material goods is too small. Our productivity is limited by lack of colleagues, partners, synergy, and trust.

The public good of high social capital is that it sustains good standards of practice, and the norms of reciprocity. Reciprocity can be specific to a group, or to a single occasion, simply a *quid pro quo* – which is its most limited meaning. But reciprocity can go deeper still. It is generalized when reciprocity benefits some in the near run but everyone sooner or later. Generalized reciprocity is a contagious and justified anticipation that give-and-take is eventually mutual. When we reasonably feel that way, we are no longer greatly concerned about immediate pay-back or the need to have everything under our personal control. “A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society,” writes Putnam, and this is because we do not have to make certain that every act of responsibility or caring or contributing will earn a quick positive payback. We can move beyond tight moral book-keeping and begin to live with less hesitation as to whether or not we are getting back the equivalent of what we put out. When this quality of generalized, widening, and deepening social capital is seen on the larger scale, i.e., “when economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, [then] incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced” while incentives for cooperating and coordinating are increased (Putnam, 2000, p. 21).

At the same time, Putnam realizes that there can be a dark side to this. Not all social capital is positive. Timothy McVeigh succeeded in bombing the Oklahoma City Federal Building because he did extensive networking and worked the ties of reciprocity within an alienated group. So we must differentiate between constructive and destructive ties and reciprocities. If the networks and norms of reciprocity are beneficial to the whole community, however indirectly or in whatever degrees, then they are constructive. In principle, everyone benefits, though in various ways, as when a team effort contributes to those beyond the team. Thus, we must investigate how to develop positive, constructive, and life-sustaining
social capital, how to build mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness, while differentiating these from the negative kinds of social capital which we see in organized crime, sectarianism, ethnocentrism, and corrupting associations.

Though his wide-ranging research revealed continual decline in American social capital from the 1970’s to the present, Putnam is not arguing that our history is one of continuous civic decline since the founding of the republic. In fact we have had periods of increasing social capital, as at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, and again in the 1950’s through early 1970’s.

So, what accounts for these declines and revivals of social capital? After presenting his findings which chart this story from the great depression of the 1930’s to the present, Putnam looks at such modern changes as the introduction of the telephone, the television, and the computer, as well as overwork, urban sprawl, welfare policies, the rise of women’s rights, the struggle against racism, the growth of mobility, and the increase of divorce. (He does not consider the effect of the Vietnam War or of the political assassinations). Some of these factors turn out to play little role in the decline of social capital, while others may need more attention if we are to turn things around.

Why is this important? It is not simply about the presence or absence of the warm feeling that one belongs to a community of people with whom good interaction is dependable and fruitful. What Putnam calls the “Social Capital Index” – his cumulative compilation of social indicators ranging across wide social fields and tracking numerous networks of reciprocity – also correlates positively with the function of schools, government, and health care facilities, and with neighborhoods’ vitality and economic wellbeing, all of which affect people’s physical and mental health. Thus, social capital becomes a general indicator of society’s overall well- or ill-being. Moreover, “people who trust others are all-around good citizens, and those more engaged in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy. Conversely, the civically disengaged believe
themselves to be surrounded by miscreants and feel less constrained to be honest themselves” (Putnam, 2000, p. 137).

- The research done between 1960 and 1998 shows that the percentages of adults and teenagers who say other people can be trusted declined from 56% for both groups, to 34% for adults and 25% for teenagers.
- Employment in policing and law moved from a low in 1900 to its highest in the late 1990’s, with lawyering and formal contractual agreements rising steadily at the expense of informal relations.

“For better or worse, we rely increasingly . . . on formal institutions, and above all on the law, to accomplish what we used to accomplish through informal networks reinforced by generalized reciprocity – that is, through social capital” (Putnam, 2000, 147).

To illustrate and give evidence of social capital, Putnam and his colleagues locate about 80 kinds of reciprocity or beneficial networking, ranging from bowling leagues to sending get-well cards, from political involvement to having folks over for a meal, from church socials to athletic clubs, and from charitable giving to volunteering of one’s time. Here is a sample of key social capital indices:

- Voting is a generational phenomenon: younger people vote less frequently than their elders.
- Civics is no longer being taught, nor does civic engagement get the positive notice it once did.
- PTA starts in 1912, peaks in 1959 at 48 members per 100 families with kids, then declines to 18 out of 100 in 1999.
- Union membership (nonagricultural) was 7% of the workforce in 1900, 33% in 1954, and 13% in 1999.
- Association memberships is down, and so is social visiting, family dinners, card games, league bowling, blood donations, charitable giving, observance of STOP signs, newspaper readership.
- At the same time, body-fat is up, as are interest-group financed ballot measures (replacing the elected and deliberative legislative process), internet or dues-payer
“surrogate membership,” and the husband and wife full time employment driven by necessity.

Most of these kinds of networking are informal and low-key, as simple as feeding someone’s fishes when they are on vacation. A few are formal, such as voting or going to a planned meeting. What struck Putnam was that virtually all of these many kinds of reciprocity showed the same trends over the past seventy years:

- Indicators of social capital increased in quantity and quality from the depths of the depression until the early 1970’s, and then have been declining every year since then, until, at present, the social capital of the United States is about where it was in the Great Depression.
- Americans are more isolated, less interactive, less trusting, less linked to norms of giving and receiving, and more left to their own devices, than at any time since the early 1930’s.

Because of this, we require more time to go it alone, and going it alone is harder, more demanding of time and effort, than at any time in the past 70 years. We find less satisfaction in our activity because its scope or horizon is smaller, its range and depth and chances of lasting are lessened, and we have less confidence in our abilities and those of our public and non-profit and private institutions. Those of us who are at or near age 70 have lived through both this rise and this decline first hand. Here is just one recent example of the generational divide:

- As counties prepared for the Nov. 2, 2004 election, there was a shortage of as many as 500,000 election workers nationwide.

These have been elderly, civic-minded volunteers, whose life experience of social capital had included times of rich networks of giving and receiving, of connectedness to the larger community, and habits of generalized reciprocity. But as that generation ages and passes on, its ranks are not being replenished by younger folks with similar civic virtue. The reason seems clear: the younger generations have come to adult life with less and less social capital from which to draw and to which to contribute. The habits of
outreach, of sharing time and effort to form and sustain community, are dying out (Andrews and Withey, 1976).

**Social Indicators in Southern Nevada**

Putnam includes Nevada in his social capital investigations where information was available (see Appendix A for a summary of social indicators stories that appeared in the local press between 2002 and 2005). The studies assembled in this volume present a wide range of Nevada social indicators that can be understood in terms of social isolation (low social capital) and social connectedness (high social capital).

In his chapter on suicide, Matt Wray notes the mounting national efforts to reach out to, rather than shun or be ashamed of, those among us who are wrestling with the urge to self-destruct. Historically, Nevada has ranked high in suicide, with various risk factors exacerbating the situation such as social isolation, rapid change, weak bonds among people, immature public institutions, and related social conditions that point to missing chances for reciprocity and mutuality. If Latinos and Asians residing in Nevada are low in suicides, it is in large measure because their community networks are richer, because their social capital is higher. People engaged in addictive behaviors, on the other hand, expose themselves to risk factors known to increase suicidal tendencies. Our mental health infrastructure is underdeveloped, and the diminished opportunity to obtain treatment from depression and despair weaken our ability as a community to help those who are treatable, which is the case with 95% of suicide cases. In Nevada, points out Dr. Wray, “something unusually violent plagues our communities.”

According to Denise Tanata and Susan Klein-Rothschild’s chapter, on 29 out of 45 indicators for 14 kinds of child safety/abuse outcomes, Nevada was not in compliance with national standards. On Dec. 3, 2005, the media revealed that 35 children reported dead in Nevada from abuse and neglect was an underestimate, that the real number for 2004 was closer to 114. The error, as it turned out, had to do with the inadequate “reporting” techniques of the Nevada Department of Children’s Protective Services. While a
detailed plan developed in 2005 targeted the 29 below-norms indicators, children and parents involved with child abuse still face long waiting lists to obtain treatment. Resources are particularly meager for the children of the working poor. As the national standards for child protection are rising and kids are no longer presumed to be parental possessions, Nevada still falls short of this caring standard.

Sub-standard training of teachers and lack of home support are among key factors that Sandra Owens-Kane identifies as contributing to Nevada’s low graduation rates. When parents are poor, care-givers abusive, and children feel pressured to earn money, the dropout rates go up. The parents’ attitude toward education matters, and Nevadans are less likely to support increases in educational resources than residents in many other states. Again, low social capital is directly implicated: where the community shuns the burden, it is left to the parents and parents alone to cope with the shortages.

As Teresa Jordan shows in her chapter on academic achievement and school resources, Nevada does not make a legal distinction between the kids for whom English is a second language from those for whom English is their mother tongue. Initiatives designed to improve teacher quality are underfunded. Dr. Jordan urges helping poor and minority kids, recruiting higher-quality teachers, and securing a dependably adequate funding – measures likely to increase bonds of reciprocity and sharing in each other’s and our children’s futures.

Stephanie Kent and Deborah Shaffer present data showing that Nevada has the 5th highest murder and manslaughter rate in the nation and the 9th highest rate in violent crime. Their chapter highlights the fact that our state lacks uniform reporting of delinquency behaviors. Property crimes are highest in three rural counties, where economies are stagnant, and the urban areas reveal high rates of violence. Policing in urban areas is less effective, “residential stability” is low, institutional controls are weak, the gap between poorer and more wealthy people is widening, and single-parent families are more and more prevalent.
The authors recommend more legitimate jobs, community services, and after-school programs for kids.

An-Pyng Sun and Larry Ashley review addiction and substance abuse in Nevada. The social costs of unsolved problems are especially high in this area – lost productivity, illnesses, injuries, and early death, not to mention the heavy financial burden of running the criminal justice system, which amounted to $294 billion nationwide in 1997. Nevada is in the 2nd worst tier for alcohol abuse and 3rd worst for illicit drugs. We also lag behind most states in treatment and outreach facilities. Not only do the youth of Nevada have higher substance abuse rates than youth nationwide, they also score higher than most states in reporting the need for but not getting treatment! This means that many young Nevadans acknowledge the need for treatment but cannot find help. Awareness of these facts must be raised throughout the state if the public is to rally on this issue.

The chapter on mental health problems prepared by Kathryn Landreth and Simon Gottschalk documents that in 2004, 70 Nevadans had to wait 108 hours to receive help in Nevada; 50% of those were put in emergency rooms and released with no treatment. Overall, 40% of those coming to state clinics leave without help because they give up waiting after long periods unattended; 63% of kids needing mental health attention get nothing; 20% get too little. Many of these people are single, low-income, suicidal, addicted to drugs, serving sentences in jails – and most are socially isolated. Nevada does not have studies to identify gender, age, ethnic background, occupation, or other variables among citizens needing mental health care.

Chuck Mosely and Michelle Sotero present more data in their chapter on health care access and insurance availability in Nevada. Nationally, more than 46 million Americans lack health care coverage, and 80% of these are working families. 18% of the non-elderly are included in this dire situation nationally – but 21% of the non-elderly in Nevada. Worse, while about 12% of all children in the U.S. are uninsured, more than 17% of Nevada children are without medical coverage. Proportionally, Nevada Medicaid covers fewer low
income people than Medicaid in other states. Hence, of course, that means that a higher percentage of low-income people in Nevada are without any medical coverage than elsewhere in the nation. This is particularly true of Nevada Hispanics – 36% of the non-elderly Hispanics in our state lack medical coverage.

These figures, along with the data related to poverty and housing in the Silver State, illuminate the plight of the increasingly large numbers of immigrants settling in Nevada, as we can gather from Tom Wright’s and Dina Titus’s chapter on immigration and ethnic diversity. All social indicator chapters touching on poverty seem especially to implicate immigrants settling in Nevada.

Disability Patterns and Resources are the focus of Janet Belcove-Shalin’s chapter. During much of the 1990’s, Nevada was strong nationally in this area, but with the booming immigration, the state now ranks 50th out of 51 states and the District of Columbia for long-term care of the needy disabled. We lack a comprehensive statewide information system on disabled persons, we lack statewide accounting practices to track monies and programs for them, we have long waiting lists, and we are short on reliable screening and appropriate housing.

From Robert Futrell’s account of Nevada’s environment, we learn that 85% of southern Nevada’s ozone is produced by auto and truck engines. In April 2004, we fell below the minimum federal standard. Our water supply is nearing its limit, for it depends on snow-pack which will probably be lowered as global warming continues. Our water policies do not seem prepared for the future. Urban sprawl, air pollution, and soil erosion reflect current human policies. We face contamination from the Nevada Test Site, and the continuing threat of radiation escaping from porous Yucca Mountain. Futrell recommends decreasing reliance on gasoline engines, conserving water more intensively, and initiating land use conservation and planning.

Problem gambling and treatment is the subject of a report prepared by Bo Bernhard. The social costs and health risks of gambling have only recently begun to attract national attention. Oregon sets aside $4.65 million for gambling addiction treatment and recovery;
Nevada – Zero. Centers and institutes are studying the problem, but our services to pathological gamblers remain inadequate. The 2005 Problem Gambling Act passed by the Nevada legislature may signal an attitude change, however. Few public service announcements targeting Nevada problem gamblers are heard. Addictive habits formed by gaming employees call for further studies.

David Dickens and Christina Morales deal with income distribution and poverty issues. Not quite as alarming in the overall picture, this chapter still finds that day care expenses in our state vary between $4,000 and $10,000 a year – costs well beyond the reach of the poor, the working poor, and many others as well. Among the alarms sounded in this chapter are sub-standard accounting practices plaguing the federal poverty reduction programs in southern Nevada administered by the Economic Opportunity Board. Some of these programs have been halted by the federal government.

Writing about housing availability and homelessness in Nevada, Kurt Borchard points out that national policy since the 1862 Homestead Act has promoted housing as vital to our quality of life, but that only in 1980 did homelessness begin to factor as part of the issue. The homeless are educationally and ethnically more diverse than is commonly believed, and may include whole families. Nevada is now the 9th least-affordable state to live in. A one-bedroom apartment in Las Vegas goes for $770, two-bedroom $880, while the minimum wage worker can afford to pay only $423 a month. The average homeless person is 44 years old; 1/4 of all the homeless are without access to clean water; and 1/3 are without access to bathroom facilities.

Anna Prokos notices that Nevada has many wealthy people as well as large numbers of working poor, with fewer than the national average in the middle-income brackets. Most Nevada men are employed in service jobs rather than in management or business. The same is the case with Nevada women. Prokos raises questions about the educational qualifications of Nevada men and women for better-quality jobs. She concludes – as do most of our authors – that more data is needed before we can have a clear picture and move ahead on this front.
Kate Hausbeck, Barbara Brents, and Crystal Jackson write about the sex industry and sex workers. They draw attention to the “McDonaldization of Sex” in the United States generally, and Nevada in particular. Las Vegas is the “symbolic center” of the “pornographication of everyday life,” yet once again, we lack reliable data on details. In part this is because a stigma inhibits frank talk about this area, even though it has evolved into a major industry. Moreover, denial plays a role, as does the untraceable cash-basis character of many transactions. The authors advocate “a human-rights approach” to the issues facing sex workers, with the attention focused in particular on prevention, health care, education programs, and training for low-income women to facilitate their access to other kinds of work. Authors also urge stronger efforts to combat human slavery, exploitation, and stigmatizing of women in these jobs.

These and many other stories and statistical analyses illustrate the low social capital of southern Nevada. One way to pull them all together and measure the aggregate of social capital is Putnam’s concept of a “Social Capital Index.” To create this Index, Putnam sets out 14 social indicators which, he discovered, have .67 -.94 positive correlation with the composite of all 14 when combined into one Social Capital Index. Concerning trust, for example, – one of the 14 which functions in the Index – he finds that

- States range from 67% on trust measurement in Minnesota to 17% in Mississippi.
- Associational memberships per capita (another of the 14) range from 3.3 in North Dakota to 1.3 in Louisiana.
- Nationwide, the highest social capital is found in Vermont, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas, while the lowest is found in Nevada, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Kentucky.
- California and the middle Atlantic states are near the national average (Putnam, 2000, p. 291 ff).

Looking more closely at Nevada, we show up in eight nationwide Social Capital studies done by Putnam and his colleagues (as of the late 1990’s):
• The “Kids Count” Index of Child Welfare, 10 factors covered: Nevada is lowest, 50 of 50.
• Educational Performance: Nevada ranks 50th.
• Violent crime: Nevada is the lowest, #50 of 50.
• Pugnacity: Nevada is lowest (most pugnacious).
• Overall health: Nevada is the last of 50 states.
• Age-adjusted mortality rate: Nevada is in the 50th place.
• Tax evasion: Nevada is the worst – 50th in the nation.
• On equality of income distribution, Nevada is lowest in its Social Capital Index, yet above the middle in equality.

This apparent anomaly may be explained by what we see in other indicators, namely that it is not just the poor and the working poor, but also the middle and upper income classes, who live more isolated and private lives here than their economic counterparts in states with cultures blessed with higher social capital.

**Hal Rothman’s Neon Metropolis**

How are we to explain these national trends and Nevada’s glaring shortfalls in social capital? Is it a straightforward case of a frontier state, still filling with new people and therefore not yet having sunk the roots and nurtured the customs of sharing, cooperating, trusting, and networking? If that is indeed the case, the mere passage of time should suffice to raise the quality of life in Nevada. But then, other Western states with growth have done or are doing better. Or, as with Putnam, is that Nevada is experiencing a more severe case of decline of social capital, perhaps because social capital had not developed as fully here as it had in older states, before the national decline set it? Or, is there a new kind of bonding and outreach coming into being here, which others have yet to recognize and which Putnam never noticed?

Hal Rothman argues in his recent book *Neon Metropolis* that at least in southern Nevada, a postmodern service economy and relatively wide middle class may be without the neighborhoods, institutions and inherited ethnic, geographical and formal structures of networking and reciprocity, but that people here are creating a new kind of life that he calls “neighborhoods of affinity” which create community out of nothingness (Rothman, 2002).
American culture is “impermanent,” according to Rothman: “Every year, the quality of life declines. Costs rise a little bit, it becomes marginally harder to accomplish everyday tasks, and more things that Americans expect government to do go begging. The valley is engaged in a game of catch-up that it can’t possibly win, [and this is] the single greatest threat to Las Vegas’ future” (Rothman, 2002, p. 264). Evident throughout the nation but especially in southern Nevada, this impermanence is due in part to the transition from an agricultural and an industrial to a service economy. A service economy cannot provide stable jobs – only jobs that are moving and changing, and so, working people must adapt and change as well, doing what is possible under the circumstances. (I read this as suggesting that it is as if we must become post-modern nomads, rootless but surviving as well as can be, maybe aggregating in bunches but never sinking roots).

Rothman notes that our developers’ recent emphases on “planned communities,” which are tract homes surrounded by cement block walls, “created living that was intensely private” [is there such a thing as “private community”?] . “[The] connections of proximity have frayed [all over America ], but in Las Vegas in particular, they seem a reflection of the community’s preoccupation with the self.” Echoing Putnam and, in fact, a long line of political theorists since Aristotle, Rothman reflects on the need for public spaces and their recent decline: “Parks and libraries offered shared space and commonality of values, civic interaction and socialization. They combined education, relaxation, and social cohesiveness, all desirable traits in a growing community. Their very nature minimized differences and magnified similarities. They were crucial building blocks, pieces of the puzzle of quality of life that served the community and enhanced its reputation. They were also cornerstones of any model of changing outside perceptions of the city [here, discussing Henderson ]” (Rothman, 2002, p. 283).

As recently as 1992, there still were different sizes of homes beside each other, so that the young and the retired could live side by side. But now this “egalitarianism” is threatened. In the late 90’s, an average family could get a home in urban Nevada . Median price and median income were matched. But since 2000, the gap is
widening, as “the community’s overall success and the prosperity that accompanied it began to implode. The consequences of such a move could be dire” (Rothman, 2000, p. 280). If free-market developers see too little profit in modestly-priced homes because of land and physical infrastructure costs, then present trends, if they are to continue, will require most southern Nevada service personnel, nurses, police, firemen, and school teachers to live in Pahrump or Mesquite and commute by currently non-existent rapid public transport to a valley populated by the well-to-do and whatever rentals are affordable for their servants and staff.

This dire warning is rooted in the absence of social capital in southern Nevada, because the power of developers to obtain and use land for increasingly expensive housing goes unchecked by elected and appointed public officials. They do not feel morally a part of a share moral culture, but instead praise and honor the developers, saying “growth is good.” Increasingly wide-spread public disapproval of these abuses of trust and these harmful uses of public authority and of available space and resources for the benefit of a narrow group has been ignored and therefore ineffectual.

However, in contrast to Putnam, Rothman argues in his final chapter that, despite the most recent trends and their “dire consequences,” southern Nevadans can still be seen to have begun to create a new “postmodern” kind of community, presumably not measured by Putnam:

“Nevada ’s traditions exalted the primacy of the individual, the right to be free as the individual defined it and especially to use property as the owner saw fit. This worked fine in a state of 150,000 people, but when one metropolitan area topped 1.4 million, the ability of all to act in their self-interest without creating chaos ground daily living to a halt. As developers gained power, they shifted the cost of growth to customers . . . [but] as the new century took shape, freedom increasingly meant the developers’ right to pass on to consumers the basic costs of development. The mechanisms to temper such power simply weren’t there and weak government offered little recourse. . . . “People had to fashion community from
the chaos of a community that doubled in size in a decade. The mechanisms they found for the task were truly novel” (Rothman, 2002, p. 289).

And yet, “Neighborhoods of affinity are a tricky business.” What used to be the second tier, such as knowing who are the parents of the other kids on the Little League team, now becomes the first tier, front-line. Concerned about the safety of their kids and struggling to fashion community out of chaos, parents take their children and follow them everywhere. Because of the lack of institutions and formal structure, “neighborhoods of affinity are simply random meetings, chaotic events that happen independently.” A couple that started the hockey teams in Henderson is “building community from nothingness,” as do many others like them. What the transient community of southern Nevada needs is “more people like the ones who founded the synagogues and hockey leagues, more people who thought of more than their own personal needs, who practice activities of enlightened self-interest, who saw hope in a new city rather than fear, and who pushed their collective will upon it” (Rothman, 2002, pp. 302-313).

**Harwood & Freeman’s on Las Vegas Public Capital**

As far back as 1976, Harwood and Freeman have undertaken community studies based on survey research and focus groups from a wide variety of persons and residential areas. Their recent work in southern Nevada shows something of Putnam’s, but also something of Rothman’s, findings (Harwood and Freeman, 2004). On the one hand, the general sense of life in the valley celebrates individual opportunity to pursue the American dream, and to enjoy great and nearby natural beauty. Independence, tolerance, and initiative are strong values – an “independent streak.” On the other hand, the same people voiced the view that when everyone is pursuing his or her own path, one can hardly hope to build the kind of community in which they want to live, and in which they wish to raise their children.

“Many people describe feeling isolated from one another,” “many worry about the lack of infrastructure, overwhelmed public schools, and alarming trends in leading social indicators such as teen
pregnancy." They see too many walls and not enough open public spaces. The community is not able to act as one, to address the aspirations of its members which go beyond the person or the family in scope. "These self-imposed limitations often stymie progress." Much of America is in a similar bind, the authors point out, but the picture stands out more clearly in Las Vegas. The difficulty is that "People want to forge shared goals in a place that values individual effort and is hesitant to embrace joint endeavors." Fostering trust takes time, and time is not readily available when people value speed of action and result.

But the researchers conclude on an upbeat note: "If any community can tackle these challenges, it is Las Vegas. For it is here, in this community, that people believe anything is possible. This sentiment is not wishful thinking; the community’s rich history proves its strength. Now, the can-do spirit of Las Vegas must meet its next frontier" (Harwood, 2004, p. 4).

Ironically, the Harwood group finds many citizens in the eastern United States to be equally bereft of public capital and in need of building trust, but they are dispirited and pessimistic because of job losses and greater strain on fewer public assets. Notoriously lacking in the ethnic, employment, or cultural neighborhoods, Las Vegas, according to Harwood and his associates, frames the common trends and needs in a more optimistic spirit. The public dreams can happen here alongside more private dreams that the people of Las Vegas had been pursuing all along.

The volume does not prescribe actions, but it does weave the lattices of patterns illustrating how our current and future initiatives might cohere, even coagulate, into clusters of public spirit and public or social capital. In the end, Harwood’s insights do not differ much from Putnam’s, but they address the element seen by Rothman (“individualism” or selfishness) in a different way.

**Looking Beyond the Postmodern**

Studies outlined in the preceding chapters, reported in local newspapers, conducted by Putnam and his colleagues, and by the Harwood Group, all point to a nationwide decline in social capital.
And as I have argued, this decline correlates positively with decline in the physical and mental health, the quality of life, and the workplace and neighborhood bonds among our people. Emotional, physical, financial, social, and political deterioration are part and parcel of low social capital. Needed institutions such as family, schools, public safety, public places, streets, breathable air, drinkable water, civic government, and health care all suffer. In Nevada, particularly in southern Nevada, the picture is darker and more discouraging than elsewhere in the United States.

Putnam’s and Harwood’s work continues (see web links in the section on community resources). There may well be future investigation of new kinds of networking, new ways and norms of reciprocity, which have yet to be noticed. People may already be inventing new ways to reach out, to seek commonality of interests, build a hobby, a channel or a group, follow an activity or pursue a project which would generate its own norms for practicality and trust. Rothman cites examples of such innovations, though he does not claim that starting a hockey team, a Little League, or founding a new synagogue are brand new ways of connecting and reciprocating. His “neighborhoods of affinity” are meant to mark the distinction between postmodern communities and earlier neighborhoods by proximity based on shared ethnicity, job, or national origin. But all his examples – the street hockey team, the Little League’s beginnings, the congregation building – involve proximity. Relevant activities unfold in the physical places where people live, addressing their newness and lack of shared traditions by starting something, putting down new roots, or starting fresh traditions. Rothman does not address the issues raised by Massey and Denton in their discussions of “American apartheid,” and more broadly the situation faced by the working poor and what I call the “marginal middle” class in southern Nevada – those whose circumstances include very little savings, job insecurity and what may only be provisional health care coverage (Massey and Denton, 1997, pp. 143-162). And Rothman’s are still neighborhoods by the affinity of economic class, if not by racial, religious, or national origin distinctions. Indeed, though he does not discuss them, Las Vegas kids’ and grownups’ athletic leagues are being started by
Latinos and African-Americans living in rentals and lacking freely-chosen affinities of neighborhood.

The notion that Las Vegas exemplifies a new – postmodern – community unlike any other preceding it can be challenged on several grounds. Rothman seems to imply, and if so, take it for granted, that neighborhoods of affinity create social capital. In the process, he overlooks the gold-rush, zero-sum-game mentality that animates many of such communities and that creates winners and losers. As conceived by Rothman, then, neighborhoods of affinity are also at least somewhat socially divisive.

We need also to remember that the Nevada of the past did not always “exalt the primacy of the individual.” In 1950 and 1951, I worked as a cowhand on the Brennen Ranch south of Elko, where the ethos was one of teamwork for the sake of the humans, the animals, the hay and the land, and where all Caucasian and Shoshone ranch hands pulled together to round up thousands of cattle spread over thousands of acres. At least in its rural and mountain regions, Nevada has had long traditions of cooperation, mutual trust, and the collective accumulation of social capital. The western cattlemen may be rugged, but they are no urban, isolated “individualists” – contrary to what the “Marlboro Man” advertising implies.

To the extent that neighborhoods by affinity are random or chaotic, they would have to be ephemeral, and as such, readily elude social scientists’ efforts to pin them down. Rothman hopes that some of these communities will last after their inventors have gone on to other activities, but there seems to be an inconsistency here: a better connected world is supposed to grow out of the admittedly self-centered, self-indulgent postmodern society.

In his discussion of Home Owners’ Associations (HOA’s), Rothman writes that soon all new tracts will have compulsory HOA’s “because people have abandoned any conception of mutually-agreed coercion” (Rothman, 2002, p. 305). How can a mutually-beneficial agreement be coercive? This Libertarian note may be intentional (are all agreements that are not fully of and only of ‘my’ own choosing, therefore ‘coercive’?), but the usage seems to imply that
there are no cooperative, mutually-agreed, fair-to-all-consenting-parties agreements.

And this leads to the related question – are all “affinities” of equal moral and human merit? While Rothman does not define this term, Putnam distinguishes destructive and constructive social capital and networks of reciprocity. Rothman is optimistic that the better connections will last, but this will depend on what we can agree to see as “enlightened self-interest” (or else any affinity is worth just as much time and effort as any other, simply because I feel this or that way). I think Rothman needs the qualitative distinction discussed by Putnam, or another like it, since he hopes for “people who think of more than their own personal needs” (Rothman, 2002, p. 313).

Assuming that America and, implicitly, Nevada are tied to “the culture of the self,” does it mean that postmodern living sites cannot become communities in the normative sense, i.e., places with good social capital? If so, what is post-post-modern? Is it a form of society in which social indicators are favorable to habitation by children, women, and men? Nothing in my own investigations foretells that there will, or will not, be a physically and morally sound, habitable culture after the demise of the self-centered current culture. But I do need to call attention to the places where cooperation and mutual support are still valued, as I think Rothman calls attention to the small ways some immigrants to Las Vegas have had to make it out of “nothingness.” Anything pointing to constructive initiatives in this regard will be valued by all.

For all the authors in this volume and the three studies discussed above, the need for civic virtue is palpable. The sense of chaos and impermanence can and must be countered by actions that can stave off the fear of danger and bring some small connectedness and habitability out of the energetic but isolating ethos of the currently-dominant moral culture. In effect, Rothman is looking at a place with very low social capital and finding the first glimmers, in a few suburbs, of efforts to create social capital, if only a few pennies’ worth. In this sense his analysis is not so much anti-Putnam as pre-Putnam, or post-Putnam insofar as his observations tell what things
look like when social capital is very low. Things are not totally bleak because in small ways, here and there, people are putting out time and effort to make something happen which is shared, albeit on a small scale, but which might last awhile.

Implicitly for Rothman, and explicitly for Putnam and Harwood, these new beginnings need to be cultivated and expanded, given greater heft by being made into lasting habits, institutionalized, passed along and celebrated. In many cases, even Rothman’s “neighborhoods by affinity” need proximity as well – some place to play, work or meet, some law or custom to protect and stabilize their activities, and some larger temporal as well as physical horizon within which to operate so as not to be limited to very short time-spans and very small bursts of energy for only a few. As we saw earlier, networks of reciprocity can foster a generalized sense of reciprocity, which lessens our need for the distrustful habit of wariness and instead promotes trust in existing and possible new, shared efforts. And that gets us back to social capital and how it creates, and is itself fostered by, shared customs, institutions, and beliefs.

A place like Las Vegas in particular, but also Nevada more widely, that sells itself as a “destination resort,” peddles self-indulgence for a fee, and promises a “moral holiday” with no moral consequences to reckon with cannot govern itself, take care of its children, provide a humanly workable habitat for its working men and women, or build and sustain the needed institutions unless it moves past that image and begins to put down the roots of a more stable community for all those who live here. As Harwood found out, many isolated southern Nevadans want such a stable community to come into being.

Part of that work has to do with funding. Interestingly, the 2003 tax increases which were supposed to have ended many a career in the Nevada legislature did not produce this widely predicted result. Libertarians did not take over. Some adjustments are being made in the tax laws, but the Nevada public generally favors an adequate police force, more mental health facilities, better schooling, and improved health care access. None of those public sentiments is
self-indulgent, chaotic, or ephemeral. These are affinities many of us feel, and all of them motivate and also require social capital: we are not likely to trust anyone with our tax money, or even with a freely-given gift, if we think the money will not work for the benefit of all the intended recipients. Some base-line of trust is needed, just to have functioning city, county, and state government. And as Putnam and Harwood know, that is the fruit of social or public capital, of countless formal and informal ways people are inventing ways to give and receive time, share and exchange efforts, fend off and diffuse troubles.

Some, perhaps most of the social indicators by which Nevada ranks so poorly by comparison to other states will require more public revenue, more public commitment to staffing and research and the requisite funding. The only way to get to this point is by building from where we are and starting with who we are. Perhaps we are 21st century pioneers in a place with inadequate physical infrastructure and even more inadequate moral infrastructure. The vaunted “self” that values ‘freedom’ above all other moral values, that sees freedom to mean only doing what ‘I’ want to do, which has responsibilities only to those with whom it chooses to deal, and trusts only those whose services it chooses to value, cannot be a lasting friend, or, indeed, be a lasting anything. That brand of “individualism” cannot share benefits and burdens reciprocally and fairly with all fellow humans in one community, because its agenda are only private or within its own idiosyncratic definition of ‘public’ – namely, on ‘my’ terms. It must live in a foreshortened temporal and moral horizon, calculating and wary, energetic but anxious, never permitted to stumble or fail, to need others or join in common effort. Our American culture and the fantasy Las Vegas and Reno tourist attractions sell to it may emphasize self-indulgent amoral mindlessness in a timeless playfulness, but meanwhile, back at the ranch, Nevada’s people still want to live real lives with something beyond the impermanence, chaos, distrust, lack of solid fulfillment and frightening uncertainty of a place with its social capital in the tank. So our deeper work is to create new ways, or to reclaim old ways, of making neighborhoods of proximity and affinity, of living in small groups yet also reaching to wider communities as needs arise and as problems and their solutions require. Reciprocity – and the
networks and norms which sustain it – can blossom beyond this or that exchange to a more general culture of mutual support which may only be subliminally there, but really is there – so that we reasonably feel able to try for more than the momentary impulse, need, or dream. I think, in their different ways, Putnam, Harwood, and Rothman would all agree on this point.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of which explanation we offer for Nevada’s low standing on national indicators of personal and community well-being, the issue remains the same: men, women and children live better lives physically, mentally, economically, socially, and politically when they interact through reciprocating ties and networks of the beneficial and supportive kinds. With Aristotle, we may assert that the three deepest human capacities are for thinking, feeling, and associating. Our lives are impoverished when these capacities malfunction, when we labor too hard to express, share, and sustain.

We need to ask how such ties can be created and sustained under the present conditions in our home state – just as our predecessors found new ways of connecting with each other as society moved from the agricultural to the industrial age. What about sports leagues flourishing in Nevada and widely supported in our community, often running outdoor ball games well into the night? What are we to make of the networking and sharing evident in gardening clubs, among tree planters, volunteer cleaning crews working for Mt. Charleston? Are these social capital indicators, and if so, do they bode well for our future? Did the campaign for Red Rocks waged over the internet and through old-fashion canvassing engender lasting networks of reciprocity and connection? Did any of the internet networks fashioned for the 2004 election contain the potential to develop social capital “on the ground” for future political engagement? And does it count as an index of social capital when those who suffered greatly from man-made and natural calamities receive an outpouring of aid from persons and corporations throughout the valley?

From ancient times and all the way to the present, observers have acknowledged that public spirit arises almost spontaneously when
we meet, share, cooperate, work, or play together. Geographical neighborhood may be taking a back seat in this nascent century, but physical proximity still matters. It makes bonds easier to make and keep. We need to find ways to regenerate the spirit that once dwelt in neighborhoods, revive old- and or make new-fashioned public places, and stand ready to greet its latest incarnations.

References and Suggested Readings


Plato, Republic, Bk. I.


Community Resources

Web Links on Social Capital


**Links on Civic, Government, Public Ethics, and Public Integrity**

**Institute for the Study of Civic Values** – along with the Harwood and Putnam websites, this one will be useful in investigation current work on the revival of civic life in America: [http://www.iscv.org/](http://www.iscv.org/).

**American Society for Public Administration** – this organization has a code of ethics which is worth reading, and an ombudsman program to help city and county administrators who run afoul of politicians: [http://www.aspanet.org/scriptcontent/index.cfm](http://www.aspanet.org/scriptcontent/index.cfm).

**Chicago and Cook County, IL Better Government Association** – the first (1929) non-profit citizen’s watchdog group to work for reform of a corrupt system; still busy: [http://www.bettergov.org/](http://www.bettergov.org/).

**Center for Public Integrity** – the main location for studies into many aspects of public life, covering citizens’ efforts, lobbyists, and political and judicial issues nationwide: [http://www.publicintegrity.org/default.aspx](http://www.publicintegrity.org/default.aspx).


**State of Nevada, Commission on Ethics** – our own state’s Commission; good website for accessing laws and opinions, and for advice on how to file a complaint in perceived cases of intimidation, retribution, nepotism, cronyism, or any conflict of interest activities: [http://ethics.nv.gov/](http://ethics.nv.gov/).


**CampaignFinanceInformationCenter** – working for alternatives to The Money Chase: [http://www.campaignfinance.org/](http://www.campaignfinance.org/).


Ethics and Public Policy Center – a good general site, many issues crossing their path: http://www.eppc.org/about/.

Common Cause – non-partisan, non-profit, focused on informal and well as formal improvements in social and public capital: http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=186966.


Project on Campaign Conduct – the site devoted to ethics in political campaigning: http://www.sorenseninstitute.org/CANDIDATE%20TRAINING/Campaign%20Conduct.php.

International Institute for Public Ethics (Brisbane, Australia) – one of two where our topic is seen to be exciting and energetic ‘down under’: http://www.iipe.org/.


Character Counts! – working nationwide, with Tom Selleck’s and others’ help, to re-introduce character development into K-12 schooling: http://www.charactercounts.org/.

Josephson Institute of Ethics – tackles many issues in ethics; worth knowing about: http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/.

Ethics Today (EthicsResourceCenter) – maybe the best single clearing house for websites and research activities in this field: http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/.

Christian Ethics Today (Journal of Christian Ethics) – one of 3 sites to note because of their religious affiliation coupled with a focus on the ethics of our shared life: http://www.christianethicstoday.com/.


Islamic-Ethics.com – #3 of these: http://www.islamic-ethics.com/.


Empower America (Jack Kemp and Bill Bennett) – protestant conservative political ethics voices: http://www.empoweramerica.org/.

Panetta Institute (Leon Panetta) – former White House Chief of Staff Panetta’s site involves a range of California and nationwide civic investigations and projects: http://www.panettainstitute.org/.

American Civil Liberties Union – a voice for the Bill of Rights, especially when someone relying on those rights does so for a hated or unpopular cause: http://www.aclu.org/.

ACLU of Nevada – their Nevada branch, and it stays very busy: http://www.aclunv.org/.

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University – has a wide-ranging program and conferences on business, civic and governmental ethics, and working to integrate them in one whole understanding. Fine scholars: http://www.scu.edu/ethics/.

Newport Institute for Ethics, Law & Public Policy – newer to me, worth a look: http://www.newportinstitute.org/.
Legal Ethics.com – this opens onto a range of public questions: http://www.legalethics.com/index.law.


Institute for Practical Ethics & Public Life, University of Virginia – lately working on hospital and health care issues, but broadly construed and built on input from scholars, community leaders and neighborhood groups in need: http://www.virginia.edu/ipe/.

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Supplementary Materials

Appendix A

Care for Children


**Education**


- Nevada ranked well on standards and accountability, parental involvement and class size, as well as showing an 8-point rise in its graduation rate.
- But Nevada students’ performance on reading and math proficiency exams is 20% and 23%, respectively, compared to a none too impressive national averages of 30% and 31% (1/5/05, *SUN*, 1A, “Nevada’s Graduation Rate Improves”).
- Nevada ranks 48th in per-pupil spending for education.

**The Status of Women**

• Women in Nevada are less likely to live below the poverty level than in many other states, and they make about 77¢ for every $1 paid to men, compared with the national average of 76¢ per $1.
• But this drops to 60¢ for Black and Asian women in Nevada and only 50¢ for Hispanic women. The median for women’s earnings here is lower than in thirty other states.
• We are 21st on the list of percentage of women-owned businesses, but rank 50th in the proportion of women in professional and managerial positions (11/18/04 SUN, 1A, “Nevada Lags on women’s issues”).
• In a study covering 1999-2002, in all 50 states, the Centers for Disease Control’s “Women’s health and mortality chartbook” found Nevada 4th worst in binge drinking by women, 2nd worst in suicide, and very high in the percentage of women who smoke.

These failures all compare negatively with social capital measures of the factors making for good health for women (9/20/04, SUN, 1B, “Study rates women’s health low for state”).

Welfare

Nevada is among the worst in reducing the number of people on welfare since the 1996 welfare reform.

• On the positive side, the Nevada caseload is decreasing since 9/11/2001: it was over 35,000, and is now under 23,000.

But that number, relatively and proportionately, is still poor by national standards. It is due to the fact that people come here expecting good paying jobs, but the jobs they get do not pay well, so they become our “working poor.” Many of them ask, not for public assistance for themselves, but for child care support, but they cannot find it. There is very little networking and reciprocity in these parents’ and children’s lives here (10/19/04 SUN, 4B, “State Gets Low Marks in Study on Welfare”).
Volunteering

According to the Points of Light Foundation, http://www.pointsoflight.org/,

- Nevada is #51 on the list of 50 states plus the District of Columbia in volunteerism, says. We have a 22% rate, where, by comparison, Utah is #1 in the United States with 48.6%.
- Also, the United Way’s State of Caring Index, http://www.unitedwayeauclaire.org/pdfs/needs_assessment.pdf, shows Nevada as the worst in the U.S. in volunteering and in giving to charity. Nevada has one volunteer center per 1,000,000 people, while Utah has 6 per 1 million people.

These centers link volunteers with needs for their help. Dramatic examples of volunteerism and public caring come to the attention of the television stations, but the larger picture is one of a near-disconnect between those who would be able to volunteer something, and those who need their help – another indicator of social capital (6/11/04, “Nevada Last in Volunteers,” RJ, 5B).

Blood Donors

According to United Blood Services,

- The national average for blood donors is 12-20%. In Nevada the percent of donors is 2% (6/10/04, SUN).

Health Insurance for the Employed

- Texas has the highest percentage of workers without health insurance, but the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, http://www.rwjf.org/index.jsp, says Nevada is one of the worst. This is because of the lack of preventive care, and consequently worse health for these Nevadans.

The Study adds that our existing assumptions about our health care system hold that workers get health care through their employers. But, in reality, “The shift of many workers from manufacturing to lower-paid service-sector jobs, and from bigger employers to
smaller businesses, means this assumption is increasingly out of
date. . . .” Our potential for mutual care and reciprocity, for forging
beneficial connections among each other has not caught up with this
change in our world (5/5/04, RJ, 1A, “Study: Nevada Has High
Percentage of Uninsured Workers”).

*This report stems from the Justice & Democracy forum on the Leading Social
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of Las Vegas." Individual chapters are brought on line as they become available. For
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