

Relational Capability; framing the relationships question

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From our personal experience, we all know how much relationships matter. Relationships are the stuff of life. They have been described as 'essential to human thriving' (Ryff and Singer, 2000) and a fundamental part of being human (Weiss, 1974). Good relationships both within and beyond the family are associated with better health and longevity, wellbeing, happiness, and importantly, the ability to cope with adversity (O'Donnell et al., 2014; Stoll et al., 2012; Foot, 2012; Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010; Stilglitz et al., 2009; Hauser et al., 2006; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). The capacity for intimate relationships has been found to be a key factor in explaining why, at times of change, challenge or crisis, some people flourish while others flounder (Foot, 2012; Hauser et al., 2006). And not just in their personal lives. Across so many domains of life, from school through to the workplace, from home through to hospitals and care settings – good outcomes turn on good relationships. Put simply, study after study show that, people who get on with others, get on in life (Munro, 2013; Bell and Smerdon, 2011; McNeill et al., 2005).

And yet, relationships are under pressure - forming and maintaining them seems to be getting harder - with commentators warning, before the pandemic, of a relational poverty marked by a decline in the quantity and quality of social relationships (Foot, 2012; Griffin, 2010; Green and Janmaat, 2011). Now, trying to make sense of the relational health of a postpandemic world is challenging as longitudinal data sit astride an incomparable 'before and after' event which has driven people even deeper into their homes and virtual connections.

Relational Capability - a unifying framework

The framework borrows from thinking within international development - the Capability Approach - and integrates it with insights from our own research and practice in relationships science. The premise of the Capability Approach is that societies should support the capabilities of individuals to pursue their lives as they wish; helping people to 'be and do what they have reason to value' (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2002; Nussbaum, 2011). The ability - and opportunity - to form and enjoy relationships is one of these fundamental capabilities. Without relationships people's access to many of the goods of life - health, well-being, social participation and employment is in jeopardy.

We differentiate between '**Internal Capability**' - the skills, attributes and characteristics essential to establishing and maintaining relationships, from, '**Relational Opportunity**' - the influence of the wider world and the settings in which we find ourselves on our ability to exercise those internal capabilities in order to establish and nurture relationships.

In providing a new lens under which to consider the sometimes uneasy role of the state and other institutions in supporting private relationships, the Relational Capability framework moves the debate away from prescribing particular types or forms of relationship. Instead, in keeping with evidence on the importance of relationship quality rather than structure, it encourages policy makers and practitioners to look at building Relational Capability as a means of maximising each individual's relational potential. The Relational Capability lens helps to provide clarity, a sharp eye, on what enabling relationships might look like in practice for different settings, groups, and people. At OnePlusOne, with its eye on supporting families, it has meant developing training that strengthens relational working. Fostering practitioners' skills - the building blocks of emotional competence, communication and mentalisation – as well as giving them the agency / opportunity to bring to the fore the individual and organisational factors that hinder relational working. Buy-in from organisational leads provides the mechanism to address those constraining factors. The expression of those skills and the circumstances that curtail our ability to engage positively in relationships will differ from setting to setting – but bringing that lens to focus on each setting illuminates what might just help the journey from ailing to thriving relationships.

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