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Transmitting Values between Generations

Introduction

The world's attention in the last decade has been focussed, understandably, on environmental sustainability. Relatively little attention is being paid to 'social sustainability', which refers to a society's capacity to maintain social capital, inter-ethnic harmony, community cohesion and family integration which are required to minimize conflict and ensure human well-being, including physical and psychological health. Transmission of values from one generation to the next is a central plank in what is required to ensure social sustainability.

The values needed to ensure strong and positive relationships in extended families and communities, and more widely in society, are easily recognised; they are defined by reference to the world's great religions and to conscience. They include compassion, responsibility, faithfulness, kindness, generosity, humility, mercy and self-control. By the same token, a society needs to reject violence, vengeance, greed, cruelty and self-centredness. At the level of ideology, both individualism and materialism take people's attention away from developing the kinds of relationships which create what might be called a 'relational society', and thus impede the transmission of those values to subsequent generations.

Formation and Transmission of Values

In this brief paper, we will examine two main institutional contexts within which values are formed, practised and transmitted within and between generations. The first and most obvious of these is the extended family, and especially within that the nuclear family. Since children at their most impressionable age, when they absorb unselfconsciously what is around them as the norm, spend most of their time in a family setting, it is self-evident that many of a child's core values are picked up from watching the way their family behaves, as well as learning from what they are deliberately taught.

The second, and perhaps less obvious, influence on the values of a generation which are then transmitted to the next generation, are the institutions through which a nation conducts education, business and finance, health delivery, administration of justice and other aspects of public life. Through their structures, ethos and working practices, organisations in these sectors, often unconsciously, embody and live out values in daily life, and influence profoundly the way citizens of a country think, feel and behave. The next generation will learn these values both directly from these institutions as they begin to encounter them in their own lives and also indirectly from observing the attitudes and behaviour of their parents, and others of their parents' generation.

Families and Values Transmission

Because values are transmitted primarily through personal influence, along the channels of affection, families will obviously play a primary role in teaching and passing on values to future generations. How, when and where the process of transmission takes place is clearly an enormous subject, on which there is an extensive literature. Only a small number of factors will be considered here.

Time has been described as the ‘currency of relationships’.¹ It is one way, albeit highly simplified, to measure what is going on in a relationship. The amount of time given to a person is a crude measure of the importance attached to, and depth of, that relationship. So it is important to ask how much time parents are spending with their children, and what are the main determinants of that time allocation. Some argue that it is not the quantity of time spent with children which matters, but the quality of that time assessed in terms of whether a parent’s attention is fully focussed on the child. However, it seems ‘quantity time’ and ‘quality time’ provide different benefits to a child. Quantity time provides a child with security; quality time gives a child a sense of significance. Both matter for developing the ‘channels of affection’ which facilitate transmission of values.

Discipline plays a vital role in transmitting values. Discipline is the training of a child, teaching ways of doing things, helping a child respond to their environment in a positive way, instilling habits which will protect from physical, psychological and social harm. It is the parents’ special task to define for a child what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’. A child’s conscience is trained inevitably by interaction with wider society, but parents have the primary opportunity and responsibility to focus and hone that understanding. In the early years it will involve the use of some form of punishment where the message is not being received positively. Punishment should enable a child to experience a negative response, in a controlled and unthreatening environment, so that it is able to avoid far more severe consequences of that behaviour later in wider society. Choosing what and how to punish will reflect what parents believe matters most as well as what they regard as the most effective means to communicate their displeasure.

It is generally agreed that children learn more from what their parents do than from what they say. Hence, the importance of parents modelling relational skills such as negotiation of differences of opinion, conflict resolution, forgiveness, generosity, hospitality and simply love for one another. The issue here is one of integrity. Children will be quick to pick up mixed messages, spotting the difference between what is said and what is acted out. As all parents have mixed motives, and few act consistently with their beliefs, their response when this is pointed out to them by their children needs to avoid defensiveness, admit culpability and welcome discussion.

Probably every generation faces a major influence on their children from outside the family. In the author’s generation it was radio and television; today in many societies it is the internet. Mass communication has implicit values. Parents have to engage with the medium sufficiently to decide what these are and whether they agree with them. They then have to find the best opportunity to address any concerns with their children. To opt out is to demonstrate a lack of concern about what their child imbibes; to avoid the new medium out of fear may encourage a child’s curiosity to discover what is so special about it. One colleague’s response to his children’s preoccupation with the internet has been to require ‘internet fasting’ for three days a week, and for two months a year, allowing time to stand back from the medium to evaluate its message and its impact.

1 Michael Schluter, *The Relational Manager*, Lion Hudson, 2009

Schools and Values Transmission

Those who lead, govern, teach and administer schools play a major role in transmitting values from one generation to the next. This is not just through the content of what is taught in a formal classroom context, but arises from the way values inform teaching methods, school organisation, underlying presuppositions informing the curriculum and choice of skills to be assessed. Just a few of the key issues are discussed here.

The approach to learning can be based on a competitive or a collaborative model. Pupils can be encouraged to learn as individuals, and compete against one another in exams, to achieve personal excellence. Or they can learn and be assessed on a collaborative basis. The latter has been shown to achieve better learning outcomes,² but is still little practised. The international basis of school and nation educational achievement is based on an individualist approach.³ The danger is that this competitive approach is carried over into the workplace, where it is often counter-productive, and can often lead to a 'long hours' work pattern which undermines the priority of family formation and time availability for children.

Another concern, especially in Western societies, is the dominance of the peer group especially among teenagers. Historically this has been countered by dividing up larger schools into cross-year groupings, often referred to in Britain as 'houses'. In boarding schools, these 'houses' are geographically separate units, leading to strong relationships among their members crossing academic year group loyalties. This arrangement has offered older pupils the opportunity to exercise responsibility while still at school in supervising younger pupils as well as organising events, games, and clubs with authority delegated from teachers. This has been one effective way to teach teenagers responsibility and reduce pressures to conform to peer values. A similar principle has operated in older universities where students are organised in colleges, rather than just academic faculties, to encourage inter-disciplinary dialogue.

In sex education in Western societies, which plays a crucial role in transmitting values relating to family, an underlying presupposition is that almost any sexual act is legitimated by consent of the two (or more) people directly involved. Issues for debate are thus reduced to whether he was old enough, or she was sober enough, to give consent. However, it is not difficult to demonstrate that sexual acts outside marriage always have multiple impacts on a much wider range of people, even when a child does not result from the incident. Other parties affected include future partners who may suffer from the health or emotional damage resulting from a person's previous sexual acts, workplace colleagues if the sexual partners work in the same organisation, and parents, siblings and friends whose relationships with those directly involved may well be altered, whether or not they find out about the sexual encounter. On occasion, there are much more serious political or social consequences to a sexual relationship.⁴ So in a 'relational' as opposed to individualistic approach to sexual ethics, the underlying presupposition is a community-based rather than consent-based ethic, with enormous implications for the values of the pupils. Sexual acts are only permissible if there has been prior agreement to the union by the family and community: this, of course, is the purpose of marriage. A sexual act outside marriage is an act of injustice against family, friends, and neighbours known and unknown.

The evaluation of pupil and student ability in almost all situations today focuses exclusively on

2 Johnson, D.W.; Johnson, R.T.; & Holubec, E.J. [1994]. *The Nuts & Bolts of Cooperative Learning*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

3 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ratings.

4 A recent example is the impact of Mrs Robinson's affair with a younger man in Northern Ireland, which at time of writing, threatens the peace process.

an assessment of academic ability. This is surprising when as many as 50 per cent of jobs require significant relational skills. An assessment of relational skills, whether based on emotional intelligence or some other model, would incentivize parents and schools to help pupils cultivate conversational skills, at meal times for example, and provide a restraint on leaving children in front of computer or television screens every day. Face to face communication, negotiation and conflict resolution cannot easily be learnt through internet-mediated contact.

Business Organization and Values Transmission

Many aspects of business and finance involve the communication and practice of values which are imbibed by parents and passed down to their children, or even grandchildren, as well as impacting directly on the next generation. A few brief examples will suffice to demonstrate that this is an issue which deserves further research.

One obvious example is the length of the working week, and the amount of work required during 'unsocial hours'. Issues have arisen in part from whether a nation provides for a day off each week, and requires premium pay rates for unsocial hours to discourage employers from moving towards 24/7 working patterns which are hostile to family life. The evidence is overwhelming that long and unsocial working hours have a negative impact on family life.⁵ As parents and other relatives spend less time with children, relationships with children are generally less strong, and the channels for transmitting values less open.

A second potential source of negative impact on family relationships, and in particular quality of parenting of small children, arises from pressures on the working environment.⁶ When companies downsize, perhaps just to protect 'shareholder value', those remaining in the business have to accept substantially greater workloads. As the workplace demands increase, capacity to handle domestic stress diminishes.

Advertising messages, on television and the internet, carry implicit and explicit messages which impact on the values and expectations of children as well as their parents. These often achieve impact by the number of times they are experienced by a child. As an example of a value-loaded advertisement, consider this message from a major bank to promote its credit card in the 1980s, 'It takes the waiting out of wanting'. Direct marketing of toys and other goods to children also impacts on the values of children; consider how many girls' view of themselves is influenced by the figure of a Barbie Doll if it comes to be seen as the norm.

More subtly, perhaps, the structure of companies and nature of investment in a Capitalist economy impacts on the values of a generation, and gets passed down to children often without either party being aware of it. Those who own pension funds in Western societies, or have personal shareholdings, now assume the right to a return on capital with no involvement in, or responsibility for, the affairs of the company. The only justification for the return, it seems, is acceptance of some degree of risk.⁷ However, to make risk-taking alone a legitimate basis for expecting a return on capital is to make capital investment and betting indistinguishable. Perhaps those of us concerned for the values being transmitted to the next generation should adopt the slogan, 'No reward without responsibility'.

5 Paul Shepanski et al, *An Unexpected Tragedy: The Case for Integrated Public Policy*, Relationships Forum Australia, Sydney, 2007.

6 Ibid.

7 In the case of debt finance in a Western economy, there is a return on capital with only very minimum, if any, risk being involved, especially where the borrower provides collateral for the loan.

Some Concluding Comments

Several implications follow from the analysis in this short paper. Firstly, if it is true that the education system and business organization impact on a society's values, and thereby influence values transmitted to future generations, it must also be true that the institutions and rules governing the criminal justice system, health and welfare provision, the tax and benefit system, and other parts of public life will do the same. This point, as it impacts on families specifically, has been explored elsewhere.⁸

Secondly, effective transmission of 'good values', as defined above, depends not just on what happens within families, but on decisions by school principals, business leaders, health professionals, judges, civil servants and political leaders. Thus, to build a 'relational society', which will ensure social sustainability, requires a social vision informed by these values which is applied systematically across the education system, the economy and all sectors of society. This social vision will have as its pivotal component a focus on quality of relationship, rather than prioritising individual rights and freedoms or economic growth.

The task before those of us committed to the future strength and solidarity of families, and to social sustainability more generally, is to research how institutions across public life impact directly on families, and how the values they embody and practise indirectly influence what is passed on to our children. Having understood these influences, the second and related task is to reform these institutions so as to enhance and protect the lives and well-being of our children.