



Perspective / Opinion

Social Capital: The Flipside of Discrimination

By Tracy Bui

My wife and I recently celebrated our first wedding anniversary. Somehow, we got engaged, married, and bought a house all in the span of a year. Sometimes people will ask if our parents helped us with the wedding or mortgage and are impressed to find out that they did not.

My wife and I come from very different backgrounds. Her family is Scandinavian and has been in the Midwest for generations, inheriting land and a cabin from their great-great-grandfather. She has college-educated grandparents, college-educated parents, and a family who had the foresight and means to create a college fund that allowed her to graduate mostly without loans.

My Vietnamese family arrived in the United States in the 1980s as immigrants and refugees of the Vietnam War. We relied on public assistance to make ends meet. I am the first to graduate from high school and the first to attend college. I think back to the time a visiting college lecturer, upon hearing my story, problematically held me up as an example of what someone could achieve in the face of adversity. While I am incredibly proud of my accomplishments, I readily acknowledge both the privileges I had and the challenges I faced.

For context, I almost became unhoused one summer when I couldn't cover my landlord's requirement for me to put down two extra months of rent. Neither I, my father, nor my uncle had the credit to secure a loan for \$1,000. To put it bluntly, some of my accomplishments were possible, in part, because a friend extended both their social capital and resources.

“Social capital” is defined as resources controlled by an individual’s social contacts. While I did not possess much social or economic capital, my friend from UCLA extended their economic capital by lending me money to pay rent and their social capital by referring me for a job in DC. This job later helped me secure a much higher paying job in NYC where I was able to start saving money that would eventually pay for our small wedding. My wife and I were able to live with her mother rent-free for six months while we saved for some of our housing down-payment. My wife’s mother also co-signed our mortgage.

As I reflect on my own advancements, I see my own social capital at work. Recently, I helped a struggling in-law find a job thanks to my “connections.” My wife’s younger sisters would be welcome to stay in our home, if they needed. Newly made friends have asked for advice regarding medical school applications.

While I am more than glad to help, there has been a commonality between all of the people who I have helped. They are all white. Given that over half of all active physicians identify as white and, with an even greater percentage in leadership and the homogeneity of social groups, it becomes clear that groups with more social capital, through no malice of their own, can perpetuate racial achievement gaps in medicine. They might do so by introducing one of their family members to a research opportunity, letting a neighbor’s child shadow in clinic, or helping a friend obtain a position.

As the outgoing co-president of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), where our mission is to support current and future underrepresented minority medical students, I implore my peers and future colleagues to take a hard look at how they are shaping the future of our medical community. It is possible that the helping hand we selectively offer to candidates in our own social orbits will perpetuate disparities between white people and people of color in ways that are as insidious as when people exhibit outright bias or discrimination.

Just as economic capital compounds over time, social capital also is passed from generation to generation. What is the social capital equivalency for an early start in research, a job in healthcare, inside insight into medical school admissions, or placing a name on a search committee for a leadership position?

We benefit from diversity and inclusion. We must reflect upon the demographics of our social circles, thoughtfully make efforts to expand and diversify them, and to be intentional in our outreach and mentorship efforts. If we are not intentional, we may only serve to widen racial and class disparities.

Tracy Bui is a second-year medical student at MCW-Milwaukee.