

The Symbolism of Giving

Part of our work at CGAP Strathclyde is to investigate the various types of capital possessed by entrepreneurial philanthropists. Using Bourdieu's (1986) perspective on capital theory, we are exploring economic, social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital and analysing their influence on entrepreneurial philanthropy. The purpose of this piece is to highlight some of the issues specifically surrounding symbolic capital and the symbolism associated with giving.

Bourdieu (1986), distinguishes symbolic capital from other types of capital explaining it is a source of power based on the resources available to the field participant such as recognition, prestige and reputation. Bourdieu also argues that holders of symbolic capital are able to influence and control the thoughts and behaviours of others, such is the power afforded to them via the possession of symbolic capital (De Clerq & Voronov:2009). For example do possession of symbolic capital and the attributes associated with this capital enable entrepreneurial philanthropists to influence the giving of others? Are they also able to influence decision making and Government policy? Does the giving itself provide the agent with additional symbolic capital?

Bourdieu's theory of capital argues that individuals (agents) compete to place themselves in particular 'fields' according to the types of capital they can draw upon. However symbolic capital represents something unique from the other forms of capital, something that is intangible. Within the field of philanthropy, an agent's symbolic capital may be indicated by their reputation, networks, prestige, honours and the perceptions of others. A distinguishing feature of symbolic capital is that, for the most part, it cannot be purchased or given. Rather symbolic forms of capital are intangible and can provide the agent, in this case the entrepreneurial philanthropist, with power and influence which, in turn, can attract others in possession of similar amounts and types of symbolic capital as well as those who wish to be associated or connected with such entrepreneurial philanthropists.

These notions of symbolic capital can usefully be illustrated by an example such as Sir Richard Branson. Sir Richard is a high profile individual whose business, philanthropic and personal achievements are highly documented in the media. The Virgin brand itself is instantly recognisable and has a high symbolic worth. Sir Richard is often photographed with prominent figures from the world of politics and celebrity such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former US Vice President Al Gore. Former Prime-Minister Tony Blair has holidayed on Sir Richard's private island along with other luminaries such as Larry Page (Google) and Jimmy Wales (Wikipedia). However Sir Richard's ability to bring together the group known as The Elders (<http://www.theelders.org/>) which includes Nobel peace prize winners Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela, former Irish Prime Minister Mary Robinson and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan demonstrates the power afforded to Sir Richard by way of his symbolic capital (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19836050/>). His reputation as an unconventional, innovative and successful business person, entrepreneur and philanthropist running the not for profit foundation Virgin Unite, together with his high media presence provides Sir Richard with the symbolic capital needed to create a group of some of the most prominent figures in the world. These figures in turn also have high symbolic capital and attract others of equal symbolic worth. Endeavours such as these provide philanthropists with more symbolic capital and in turn more power and influence as they have access to key decision makers and can create high-level networks.

Networks themselves can also have a high symbolic worth and from our research so far we have found that high profile philanthropists also form alliances, often taking an active role in various trusts and foundations apart from their own. Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) is the foundation created by financier and philanthropist Arpad Busson. Chairman of ARK is Stanley Fink CEO of International Standard Asset Management and also a notable philanthropist. Patrons include Jamie and Chris Cooper-Hohn of The Children's Investment fund, as well as Honourary Patrons Sir Elton John and Lily Safra. The highlight of Ark's fund raising year is a high profile dinner attended by celebrities and notable world figures. In the past donations from artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin have added to the fund raising 'kudos' as have contributions from Fiat, Graff Diamonds and the opportunity to meet Former US President Bill Clinton and have entertainment provided by musicians such as Prince and Stevie Wonder. The ability to attract these individuals to ARK highlights not just Mr Busson's symbolic capital but also shows the symbolic worth of those connected with his foundation. Everyone involved gains more symbolic worth in the field of philanthropy by association and in turn a network develops of everyone past and present involved with ARK which can impact on the future fund raising potential of the foundation.

These examples raise the question of whether the 'symbolism of giving' is different for the super-rich. Many of us will have donated to various charitable causes throughout our lives, albeit some loose change in a charity box, Gift Aid or a donation to televised fund raising events such as Comic Relief or Children in Need. Such giving involves not just a financial gesture but also involves emotional and psychological issues, for example we may be moved by a news bulletin to contribute to something that has affected us or someone close to us. Although for the most part our donation goes unrecognised we hope it will have some impact in the lives of those less fortunate. However, the symbolism of high net worth giving goes much further than such economic, psychological and emotional motivators. The substantial amounts gifted by high net worth individuals, including entrepreneurial philanthropists often attracts media interest and thus becomes public knowledge. Consequently, the giving behaviours of high net worth individuals is often known, documented and, with the publication of rich and giving 'lists' by Forbes and The Sunday Times, high net worth philanthropists become recognisable. As such, for the entrepreneurial philanthropist, the act of giving can in effect enhance their symbolic capital.

To conclude, emerging findings from our research reveal two patterns in relation to symbolic capital and philanthropy. First, high net worth individuals involved in philanthropy are often perceived to possess high amounts of symbolic capital which can wield significant influence, gain access to other high profile individuals and in turn facilitate change outside the normal conventions of Government and decision making. Secondly, a pattern is emerging of high-net worth individuals taking an active role in the charitable works of foundations other than their own. Such individuals possess not just economic capital but also symbolic capital which, when combined, serve to wield greater influence and power by the creation of powerful networks and alliances of high net worth individuals. In both instances others wish to be part of the 'circle of influence' which surrounds these individuals. The research is at an early stage and we hope to provide more interesting insights of the interplay between various forms of capital and giving. For more information on the work being undertaken at CGAP Strathclyde please go to:

<http://www.strath.ac.uk/huntercentre/research/cgap>

References

Bourdieu, P. (1986) "The forms of capital," in J G Richardson (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, pp 241-58. New York:Greenwood Press.

De Clercq D & Voronov, M (2009) Toward a practice perspective of entrepreneurship: entrepreneurial legitimacy as habitus. *International Small Business Journal* 37, pp395-419