

The commercial training centre –arena for individualised training or creator of social bonds?

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Introduction

The capacity to create social bonds is often regarded as a characteristic of voluntary sports organisations, while commercial training centres are conceived as arenas for individualised activity. This paper examines the sense of community created within a commercial training centre. It asks two questions: **1)** What forms of community, if any, are created within this organisational setting? **2)** Which aspects of the organisation influence the establishment of different forms of community? An underlying assumption is that when a sense of community is produced among participants, this creates stronger attachment to the training centre.

Methods

The data material for this paper is drawn from a larger qualitative case study that compares a voluntary sports club and a commercial training centre, both localised in the same neighbourhood in a large Norwegian city. Methods include participant observation, 22 interviews with members and 7 with leaders/instructors in the organisations, and document studies. Members are between 28 and 67 years of age, including 15 women and 7 men. This particular paper is based on interviews with 3 representatives of the commercial training centre and 11 members, whereof 4 men.

Results

1) Starting from a typology coined by Enjolras (1) this study distinguishes between a “normative” and an “expressive” foundation for community. A “normative” sense of community is based on the individual member’s adherence and obligation to a collectively defined set of norms and rules, while an “expressive” sense of community is based on how participation confirms important aspects of the person. In the latter case, the member thus experiences community because he or she experiences *similarity* with other participants. In the study of the different groups within the organisation it is concluded that even though participants in daytime groups may experience feelings of togetherness, there is no sense of a bounded and stable “we” within these groups. Therefore this is not characterised as implying a sense of community. The exception is formed by a group for “mature adults”, which includes members above 60 years of age. In this group it is concluded that there is a sense of a stable and demarcated “we”. This sense of a “we” is based on the shared value of keeping oneself fit and on the shared experience of ageing. Hence, this group implies stronger similarities among participants in life situation, which forms a basis for a sense of community.

2) In short the foundations for community are laid in the intersection between the core *activities* that the organisation offers, that is, the training activities, and the symbolic meaning that the organisational/social context is given. The training centre tends from the outset to be defined as an arena for individual training, not for forming social bonds. This makes the creation of a sense of community more difficult. On the other hand, Norwegian training chains have been striving to define themselves as “popular” organisations, with a low threshold for participation. This may provide a set of values through which individual members may identify. In relation to activities, aerobics and other forms of instructor led activities do not imply interaction that creates shared norms, as communication/coordination passes mainly through the instructor. Within these activity settings, then, “expressivity” is the possible vehicle for a sense of community. For “expressivity” to work in this way, the activity must succeed in conveying first, a feeling/an experience of similarity, and second, an experience of this similarity as bounded. It is argued that the instructor is crucial in the mediation that this requires. She serves both as a mediator of what this organisational context and this particular practice is, and as a mediator of feelings between participants, which give them a character of being shared. For this to take place it requires a certain expressive attitude on the part of the instructor. In addition, other aspects of the organisations as material/symbolic structures may influence and support certain experiences and interpretations on the side of the members. Among

these the organisation's structuring of time and space in combination is important. Through its timetables and through the disposition of venues the organisation structures the stability of groups and the interaction that may take within them. For example, the elderly trainers at the centre has got their particular sessions twice a week, which serves to link members in this category together. Moreover, the training centre provides facilities that make it possible to spend time in conversation after the session. The group for the elderly thus has regular gatherings after training which serve to deepen mutual knowledge of each other.

Discussion/Conclusion

The study concludes that the training centre may create social bonds through the relaying of feelings of similarity among participants. The type of activity, the instructor role and processes of segmentation are seen as crucial to achieve this. Even though the "expressive" type of community described may be characterised as weak as compared to traditional sports communities, it still seems to create a stronger attachment and loyalty to the training centre.

(1)Enjolras, B. (2003). Unpublished paper

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