

SPORT EVENT VOLUNTEERS OR PAID CREW: THEIR IMPACTS ON SOCIAL CAPITAL PRODUCTION

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Abstract

National governments promote event volunteerism and sport participation as a means to improve the social capital stock of communities (Coalter, 2007). Many studies have focused on the motivations of volunteers and on how sports clubs can promote unity within a community. However, there has been little exploration of the perceptions of sport event volunteers on the presence of social capital in their social interactions and its impact on the production of social capital in their locality.

Volunteers are key stakeholders in events and are known to contribute to social capital of the community (Putnam, Feldstein & Cohen, 2004). Without volunteers, events might not be staged. The challenge for event managers is to understand social capital generation so that organisational needs might be better balanced with the needs of volunteers (Costa, Chalip, Green, & Simes, 2006). Increasingly, major events organisations have leveraged their volunteer resource through the use of financial reward for community clubs and sports teams.

Research on the social capital concept relies on qualitative analysis techniques, reflecting that social capital is borne out of relationships which constantly change. It is the location, quality and quantity of interactions which determine whether social capital is produced and used, and can impact the success of sport event strategies (Doherty & Misener, 2008; Reimer, Lyons, Ferguson & Polanco, 2008). Understanding the driver in the process of production of social capital (Doherty & Misener, 2008) was key to assessing which level of social relations dominates the normative structures of a community (Reimer et al., 2008).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of sport event volunteers about the presence of social capital in their social interactions and its impact on the production of social capital in Taupo (the location of the study). Taupo claims to be "the events capital of New

Zealand", and with a full calendar of events and large pool of long-term volunteers, it was considered the ideal place within which to conduct this study. Access to volunteers who support two long-established events, specifically Ironman New Zealand and the Mizuno Half Marathon was facilitated by Destination Lake Taupo.

Using a case study approach, data collection was undertaken in two stages. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews with event managers provided the organisational context of the Taupo events industry. The second stage generated volunteers' perceptions of social capital through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Subsequent thematic analysis examined the process and location of social capital production, using the model created by Doherty and Misener (2008), within the framework of normative structural relations promoted by Reimer et al. (2008). The presence of social capital was confirmed by the study's participants.

Of particular note is that the influence of the vertical links of market relations on the production of durable social capital appeared stronger than do the horizontal bridging ties of associative relations. While community groups share a common incentive for supporting events with the payment of crew, the incentive is not a catalyst for forging bridging ties. Individual club members considered themselves volunteers benefiting their club, rather than as paid crew benefiting events. Additionally, the bridging ties of volunteer event directors to community groups are fragile. As intermediaries they put in the most effort for least social and economic reward. This fragility, combined with the expectations placed upon these intermediaries by event organisations could place the event industry in Taupo in jeopardy and warrants further investigation.

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