
FOUNDATIONS OF VOLUNTEER SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR COMMUNITY SPORT CAPACITY

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

AIM OF THE PAPER

Social capital (trust, reciprocity) that is generated among individuals and within groups that interact (Bourdieu, 1986) may be an important resource for an organization to draw on to achieve its objectives (Lin, 2001; Payne et al., 2011; Putnam, 2000). The social capital generated among volunteers working together may be an important resource for community sport clubs for the effective delivery of sport programs; however, the nature, mechanisms and impact of social capital are still not well-understood in this context. The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature and development of social capital among volunteers in community sport clubs, and its impact on the capacity of clubs to achieve their goals and objectives.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A theoretical framework that weaves together social capital and organizational capacity guided the investigation. Organizational capacity is the ability of an organization to draw on various assets and resources to achieve its goals and objectives. According to Doherty et al. (2014, p. 125S), "It is important to understand the nature of those resources so that capacity may be accurately assessed, and capacity building efforts may be effectively focused." Social capital may be a critical resource in the community sport club context, particularly given the heavy reliance on volunteers there.

Social capital is conceptualized in the study framework as a resource that is produced (and reproduced) in a social connection(s), and which individuals or groups may draw on for further benefit (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Payne et al., 2011). Both cognitive and relational resources can accrue over time in a social connection (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), depending on the frequency and intensity of the engagement (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), and the human capital

individuals bring to the connection (Adler & Kwon, 2002). The cognitive and relational resources that characterize social capital are expected to shape individual attitudes and behavior (Payne et al., 2011) and group performance (Fredette & Bradshaw, 2012; Oh et al., 2004, 2006; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), and ultimately impact the capacity of the organization to achieve its goals (cf. Hall et al., 2003).

The study builds on the growing body of work examining capacity (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011), and social capital (e.g., Hoye & Nicholson, 2011; Nichols et al., 2012) in the community sport organization context.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with 30 volunteer board members and coaches from different clubs in the province of Ontario, Canada. Participants were asked to identify what connections with other volunteers within the club are most important to carrying out their role, describe how each of those connections was established and is maintained, what both parties bring to each connection, and what resources or benefits they accrue from those connections. Participants were encouraged to describe both positive and negative experiences associated with those connections. Interviews were transcribed and returned to each participant for verification. Data analysis followed a process of open (a priori) and emergent coding (Patton, 2014).

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that both relational (e.g., cooperation, trust, encouragement, loyalty) and cognitive (e.g., shared ideas and values, understanding) resources were evident in the participants' most meaningful connections with other volunteers. In turn, these social capital resources were reported to contribute to participants' self-confidence and role execution, and to the performance and growth of the club. Notably, the initial relationships from which these resources were derived were predominantly task-based hierarchical connections initiated for the purpose of acquiring a needed resource from the other volunteer (e.g., equipment, funds, information, knowledge). These connections tended to evolve over time to more balanced, "collegial" relationships of a social nature. This shift was likely prompted by daily or at least weekly interaction, and the contribution of the human capital (e.g., experience, energy, creativity) of both parties to the relationship. Overall, the findings suggest that social capital is evident in connections among community sport volunteers, and is important to individuals' role in the club, and to the club overall.

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide insight into the nature, mechanisms and impact of social capital generated between sport club volunteers. They contribute to the growing body of research pertaining to community sport delivery, and have implications for building capacity in sport clubs with regard to effectively managing and enhancing volunteer connections for social capital.

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