

Mega Sport Event Volunteers: Tracing the Process and Outcomes of Social Capital Development at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games

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Aim

This study explored the process of social capital development among the volunteers who participated in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics Games. Specifically, the study applied and extended the social capital development process proposed by Zhou and Kaplanidou (2017), which demonstrated the antecedents and outcomes of social capital from active sport event participation in a participatory sport event setting, to volunteerism at a mega sport event.

Theoretical Background

While there are divergent definitions of social capital, Putnam (1995)'s interpretation was adopted in this research in that social capital is viewed as a public good that rouses a series of behavioral outcomes as well as societal benefits from building psychic connections. Scholars (e.g., Adams, 2011) in sport management have utilized this Putnam's approach to explain the social benefits that arise from participation in sport. For example, Tonts (2005) examined the linkage between sport and social capital to propose that sport acted as a vehicle for developing social capital and found the sporting activities created opportunities to build strong ties among divergent groups and enhanced community identification through bonding relationships. Similarly, Skinner et al. (2008) elaborated how sport can bring social changes in communities as they postulated that sport could act as an effective hook for organizations and governing bodies to cultivate social capital and foster sustainable development. While there has been an increased amount of research that focuses on identifying the motivation of the volunteers, less emphasis has been given on measuring the impact of the experience on the volunteers themselves. Welty Peachey et al. (2015) broadened the spectrum of social capital research by studying volunteers who participated in a sport-for-development event and found that the volunteers' experiences contributed to positive behavioral outcomes, such as embracing broader learning opportunity and willingness to work for social change. Also, Zhou and Kaplanidou (2017) presented a perspective regarding the production of social capital and social capital itself as two different concepts to propose procedural steps based on the relationships between event participation, social capital, and community.

Research Design and Data Analysis

A qualitative research design was adopted to secure in-depth data on the process of social capital development. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select and interview 30 domestic volunteers to serve as study participants. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted according to guidelines developed based on recent scholarship on sport-for-development and civic engagement. The interviews, all of which were conducted by the lead researcher with some of the interviews involving secondary researcher monitoring or assistance, took the form of face-to-face interviews and each one lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The content was recorded and relevant themes, detailed below, emerged as the lead researcher listened to the interview recordings and simultaneously examined field notes during the data analysis stage.

Results, Discussion and Implications

In accordance with the findings by Zhou and Kaplanidou (2017), the current study found that social interaction was a pre-condition to rouse social capital development. Furthermore, there were two unique findings related to the social capital development stage in the present study. First, bonding and bridging were heavily used to broaden the volunteers' personal network, while only two participants shared their experience with linking. Second, the way bridging was defined differed based on age groups as the younger participants viewed it as building relationship with people from different academic disciplines and age groups but the older volunteers perceived it as related to other people's prior social status (e.g., job). Regarding the outcome stage, two themes identified in Zhou and Kaplanidou's study also emerged in the current investigation: increased prosocial behavior and everyday interaction with others. Furthermore, four new themes emerged: Increased awareness regarding 1) winter sport and 2) social and political issues; Increased intentions regarding 3) volunteering for other sporting events and 4) joining other forms of social engagement. Specific examples of the various themes will be provided during the presentation.

This study revealed both similar and unique additional findings when compared to previous research in this area. Regarding the enlarged personal network established through the means of bonding and bridging, the participants claimed similar positive outcomes as identified by Putnam as well as sport management researchers. However, the wide range of demographic diversity, especially the participants' age gap, exerted significant influence on shaping their understanding and practicing of bridging, which, in turn, led to contrasting behavioral outcomes. Also, the uniqueness of the event plays a role in shaping the outcomes. The findings of this study reveal that the outcomes of social capital development can be situational as the current study expanded research in this area to a mega sporting event.

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