Building Social Capital through Cause-Related Sporting Events: A Catalyst for Social Change

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The aim of this presentation is to elucidate and discuss the social impact of a cause-related sporting event working for social change. According to Putnam (2000), cause-related sporting events hosted by NPOs can provide a venue for civil engagement that has the ability to create and strengthen network bonds, bridge distinct groups, and build a level of trust and commitment among community members. To frame our investigation, we adopted social capital theory, which assumes that “participation in an activity which involves similar levels of participation from other individuals and which has stated aims and outcomes leads to the accrual of social capital for the participants” (Spasij, 2009, p.249). Social capital is produced by and invested in the inherit characteristics and values of social life. Participation in sporting events is a complex compilation of social practices that involves the development of relationships with a diverse range of individuals and the development of both personal and shared goals (DeGraaf & Jordan, 2003; Portes, 1988; Sherry, 2010). This study shows how, through a sporting event, a vague intangible cause (such as, transplantation) that affects a minority is presented in a tangible way to the greater community.

The purpose of this research, therefore, was to investigate the three levels of social capital - bonding, bridging, and linking - and how they relate to the meso and micro levels of the U.S. National Kidney Foundation (NKF) Transplant Games. This research examined the Games at two levels: meso, which is situated at the team and community level; and micro, where the focus resides on the individual as a participant in the sporting event. We adopted a multi-level approach to our research in order to examine the interconnectedness between organizational levels and organizational members (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008). The research questions for this endeavor were as follows: a) does participation in the Transplant Games result in positive personal change and development in Games participants?; and b) how does the Transplant Games help to bond, bridge and link donor families, donors, transplant recipients, and the greater transplant community?

The site selected for this case study was the 2010 U.S. Transplant Games, a four-day athletic, Olympic style competition for recipients of organ transplants, held every two years. The NKF has organized the Games for the past 20 years, and in 2010, the event drew 1,350 athletes from all 50 states. Participation is open to “all recipients of life-supporting allografts and hem poetic cell transplants, as well as to living donors, who are eligible to compete in selected events in their own division” (NKF, 2010). As our aim was to elaborate social capital theory, we searched for an extreme case to magnify the variables under investigation (Pratt, Rockman, & Kaufman, 2006). We selected the Transplants Games as the context for our investigation because of the unique aspect of how the event unites other NPOs that support transplantation, such as the Lions Club NPO that gives the gift of sight (Lions Club, 2010). Unlike other cause-related sporting events that focus on raising money and awareness for one NPO’s cause (i.e., kidney disease), the Transplant Games involves the entire transplant community in a collaborative effort for the benefit of organ donation. The event also contributes to the successful rehabilitation of the national transplant patient community.

We chose qualitative case study methodology for our exploratory investigation. As such, qualitative research is well suited for addressing our primary research questions and uncovering the multiple levels of societal change influenced by a NPO hosting a national cause-related sporting event (Berg, 2009). Credibility was established by using triangulation of measures. Several data-gathering techniques were utilized to assess pre- and post-impact of the event, including focus groups, personal interviews and opened-ended qualitative questionnaires. To provide a deeper analysis, data was also collected from 62 NKF documents (websites, blogs, and press releases) and direct observations during the event (competitions, ceremonies, educational sessions, and personal interactions). Given the fact that this study was exploring personal and societal change, we adopted a longitudinal design. A longitudinal case study design has been utilized by several researchers investigating change and social capital (Burnett, 2006; Welty Peachey, 2009). Twelve participants were purposefully selected to participate in focus groups for the first phase of the study, guided by the premise that individuals who could best answer the research questions would be strategically selected. These individuals then took part in personal interviews six months after the event (Creswell, 1998; Neuman, 2006). Participants included a mixture of athletes, donor families, living donors, transplant professionals, supporters, volunteers, and staff members. Open, axial and selective coding was used to analyze the data and to form conceptual codes (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The principal investigator conducted member checks with all participants to further enhance credibility. Transferability was achieved by the principal investigator keeping a reflective journal. This provided a contextual narrative useful for examining similarity to other organizations and their situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to improve dependability and confirmability, the second investigator, who was not involved in data collection, served as an auditor and reviewed all codes, analyses and interpretations (Locke et al., 2000). We stored and analyzed the data by utilizing NVivo9.
Our analysis revealed six key themes of personal impact and change from participation in the Games: a) improved self-confidence; b) enhanced motivation; c) development of supportive networks; d) increased education; e) creation of hope; and f) formation of alternative identities (other than being sick). Since the Games, many participants have become greater advocates of transplant in their personal lives, local communities, and in their national organizations. Additionally, the Transplant Games exemplified the three different types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking (Sherry, 2010). The Games bonds donor families and donors with transplant recipients. The event serves as an opportunity for the transplant recipient and donor family to meet for the first time, something that previously was uncommon, if not impossible. For example, an event participant stated, “It is no longer my mother’s liver it is his liver, but he’s my family now, he’s part of us,” and “I came to honor my donor family. I’ve never met them, but I owe my entire life to them.” The concept of bridging social capital was exemplified through fostering relationships and creating links between similar groups that share support for a common cause. The final theme, linking social capital, allows organizations like the NKF to unite dissimilar groups around a cause, which then creates a larger group that can draw from an even larger pool of resources.

During the presentation, our contribution to the understanding of social capital theory will be illuminated, and practical implications for NPOs hosting successful cause-related sporting events will be discussed. Future research will be proposed that will further aid in the advancement of social capital theory and illustrate how sport can be a catalyst for positive social change.