Combating Urban Isolation: Bowling Together in a City Known for Bowling Alone

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During the height of their popularity in the 1950's and 60's bowling leagues served an important social function as one of numerous inexpensive or publicly subsidized recreational outlets that fostered the exchange of social capital and strengthening of neighborhood communities (Putnam, 2000). Bowling served the unique dual purpose of providing a means of recreation and a social environment that enabled its members to be part of a bowling community.

The decline in the popularity of bowling leagues has led to the closing of many traditional bowling facilities. Some have suggested that this decline, and similar declines in the memberships of other neighborhood associations, reflects a move away from a shared sense of community toward a more isolationist and individual oriented set of societal values in American culture. In recent years, bowling has attempted to reinvent itself by marketing a more modern version of the sport. Trendy bowling lanes have emerged complete with sports bars, dance floors and sushi. The question that arises is whether these new facilities can create social environments in which communities can form and individuals can bond around shared norms and common goals.

The purpose of this study was to explore the social world associated with a service industry bowling league residing in a trendy bowling facility and to examine the web of social interactions that combine to create communities built on the development of social capital. A bowling league held in a modern facility served as the setting for this research study. This league represented a sub-culture that was embedded in a greater urban environment known for its exclusivity, elitism and gated communities, all barriers to the development of social capital and strong sense of community. The league was comprised primarily of men under the age of 35 who resided in close proximity to the facility.

Communities are comprised of groups of people that share common purposes, norms and values. Traditionally they form around such gathering places as recreation centers and bowling allies (Coakley, 2009). Privatization has replaced public financing as a source of funding for many recreational pursuits and “gated” communities have come to represent the new norm in which people who have the financial means, create exclusive settings in which to live and gather. This style of housing literally and figuratively constructs barriers to the greater world around them. (Coakley, 2009).

Putnam (2000), in his landmark work Bowling Alone, identifies social capital as a set of norms, values and expectations that exist within community based organizations. Affiliation with these organizations helps promote mutual trust, understanding and cooperation. Putnam asserts that membership to these organizations are essential building blocks to a democratic society because of their inclusive nature and shared goals.

Crossley (2008), in his study of the development of social capital within a health club showed that strong bonds and mutual trust, did form around a common recreational pursuit and that this health club community extended into other social worlds. The study did reveal, however, that a certain exclusivity did arise that cast non-members as outsiders. Dyreson (2001) in his rebuttal to Putnam asserts that recent incarnations of bowling – with all its modern glitz – reflects more the commercialism and consumerism in the sport than it's supposed civic engagement potential. As he states: “bowling... seems designed for producing communities of consumers rather than democrats in funny shoes” (Dyreson, 2001, p. 27).

Ethnographic methodology was used to examine the complex social dynamics developed over a ten week period that led to the formation of a distinct community. An in-depth case study analysis was conducted of a ten-week bowling league comprised of 14 teams representing various restaurants, bars and other service industries located in a popular beach front tourist destination location. In-depth interviews, systematic observations, field notes and unobtrusive analysis comprised the data for this study (Berg, 2004). The interviews were transcribed; member
checked and organized using an emergent thematic structure to address the central question of community
development and the exchange of social capital.

Preliminary results indicate while traditional bowling leagues did indeed decline the re-emergence of leagues within modern bowling facilities indicate the underlying desire of individuals to be part of a community formed around the common goals of a recreational team sport. In addition, social capital was created among the participants due to the strong social bonds and individual investment in the bowling community. Democratic processes were established that created a sense of ownership and “buy in”. Bonds were formed around social and political trust so that bowlers created a social resource they were able to draw on to combat the isolation inherent in the greater urban community in which they resided.