Getting by with a Little Help from my Friends: Volunteer Social Capital in Community Sport

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There has been much interest in the role of sport for the generation of social capital (e.g., trust, reciprocity, shared values) among participants (see Burnett, 2006; Jarvis, 2003; Kobayashi, Nicholson, & Hoye, 2013; Maxwell & Taylor, 2010; Perks, 2007; Seippel, 2006; Tonts, 2005). Social capital is purported to strengthen such things as individuals’ networks, civic-mindedness, and even a sense of generalized trust in the broader community. The research presented here adopts an alternative perspective and examines the generation and utilization of social capital as an organizational resource, specifically in the context of community sport. Social capital may be generated when individuals and groups work together (Bourdieu, 1986), with further implications for individual, group and organizational performance (Payne, Moore, Griffis, & Autry, 2011; Putnam, 2000). As such, the trust, reciprocity, and shared values that may be generated among volunteers working together within community sport organizations (CSOs), may be an important resource for those organizations to draw on for the effective delivery of their programs and services for children, youth, and adults.

This study is part of a larger project investigating volunteer social capital for CSO capacity. It builds on an initial study that uncovered, through personal interviews with volunteer coaches and board members, the specific nature of volunteer social capital in CSOs, and its development and maintenance there (Authors, 2015). The purpose of the current study is to further investigate, through broader survey research, the nature and relative extent of social capital among volunteer coaches and board members, determinants of social capital, and the impact of social capital on volunteer attitudes and performance.

The research project is framed by a theoretical model that integrates social capital and organizational capacity, where social capital may be a critical resource for an organization to achieve its goals and objectives (cf. Lin, 2001; Payne et al., 2011; Putnam, 2000). Social capital is conceptualized here as comprising relational, cognitive, and structural resources that may be generated over time in an interpersonal connection (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), depending on the frequency of engagement (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), and the human capital that individuals bring to the connection (Adler & Kwon, 2002). These resources may influence individual attitudes and behavior (Payne et al., 2011) that are critical to the organization’s capacity to achieve its goals (cf. Hall et al., 2003). Four hypotheses emerge from this framework, and our own preceding research:

Hypothesis 1: Relational, cognitive, and structural social capital will be evident among CSO volunteers.
Hypothesis 2: Social capital will be more prevalent among volunteers who interact more frequently;
Hypothesis 3: Social capital will be more prevalent among volunteers who bring valued human capital to the relationship;
Hypothesis 4: Relational social capital will be more strongly associated with individual attitudes and performance than cognitive or structural social capital.

A survey was developed to measure the three types of social capital ( relational - conceptualized as trust, support, reciprocity; cognitive – mutual understanding, shared values and ideas; structural – access to others/resources) uncovered in the preceding qualitative research (Authors, 2015). In the survey, participants are asked to think about another volunteer in their club with whom they have a connection and who is particularly meaningful to carrying out their role. Multiple items measure CSO volunteers’ perceptions of (a) what they bring to their connection with that other volunteer, (b) what the other volunteer brings to the connection, (c) the nature of that connection, (d) their attitude about their role and volunteering for the club, and (e) their performance in the club. Background information is also collected about the participant’s club, their role in the club, the other volunteer’s role, and the
length and frequency of interaction with the other volunteer. Data collection is currently underway and the survey is being administered online to a sample of 500 volunteer coaches and board members in CSOs across Ontario. Descriptive analyses and structural equation modelling will be used to test the hypotheses and address the purpose of the study.

The findings are expected to provide further insight into the nature, generation, and relative extent of the three types of volunteer social capital in CSOs, and their impact on volunteer attitudes and performance there. As such, the findings will contribute to a growing body of research informing the effective management of sport programs and services delivery in the community. The findings will also have implications for building capacity in CSOs (cf. Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014) with regard to cultivating and effectively managing volunteer connections that may generate positive social capital resources.

Select References:


