Sunday Afternoon Social Capital: An Ethnographic Study of the Southern City Jets Club

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Sport organizations are a source of socialization for many individuals (Melnick, 1993), tied to team identification, an important part of social identity for many people (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001). For fans residing outside the geographic area that their team represents, opportunities for socialization with other fans may be more difficult to find. For non-local fans, these interactions foster engagement and identification with the team. For non-local fans that are also far from the social supports of “home”, these groups serve to replace extended family and peer connections. While people initially join fan groups based on shared social identity relating to team identification, over time the focus this social identity shifts and becomes as closely tied with the group itself, as with the team itself.

This study will demonstrate how members of one such fan group in a mid-sized southern city transformed their social identity from one tied specifically to a sport franchise, into an identity that is deeply connected to the group itself, and resulted in the creation of bonds that transcend both football and the Jets. The group is made up of both displaced individuals whose home of origin is location represented by the team, as well as individuals whose home of origin is the area in which the fan group meets. Group members, however, share a common social identity based on team identification. For the displaced fans, the geographic connection to home acts as both symbol and surrogate for familial and social relations left behind when the individual left his hometown. The individuals who are not displaced then serve as agents to aid the displaced fans in assimilating into the new geographic community. The relationship between these two groups of individuals allows the fan group to produce bonding and bridging social capital that mirrors what might be expected from an extended family.

Literature Review

Non-local fans seek out other fans (Andriijw & Hyatt, 2009), often through participation in fan groups (Kraszewski, 2008). Sport organizations facilitate the creation and maintenance of social networks, two critical elements necessary for the creation of social capital (Perks, 2007). Organizations create either bonding capital, that is, networks that connect relatively homogenous groups of individuals, or bridging capital, whereby different, heterogeneous groups of individuals are connected (Putnam, 1993). The literature on sport organizations as producers of social capital considers them as reasonable replacements for the traditional civic organizations known to produce bridging capital (Putnam, 1995), thus one would expect the same of sport organizations. Sport participation, however, has been found to be better suited to the creation of bonding capital (Devine & Parr, 2008; Wang, Li, Olushola, Chung, Ogura and Heere 2012). Palmer and Thompson’s (2007) ethnographic study of sport fans found evidence of bonding and bridging capital, however, further study of social capital and sport fans is warranted. This study seeks to extend the literature by examining the possibility that sport organizations are akin to familial groups, and therefore first create strong bonding capital based on shared team identification, and then become capable of producing bridging capital as the social identity of the group’s members shifts from one connected to the team to one connected to the group.

Method

I specifically chose the Southern City Jets Club for the ethnographic study because I am a displaced New Yorker and a lifelong Jets fan. As such, I was able to easily assimilate into the group and gain the trust of its core members as an authentic part of the group. While this began as a research endeavor, by the end of the first season, I had developed real friendships with the group’s regular attendees. As a newcomer to the city where the Southern City Jets Club meets, during the course of this project, the members of this group became my first purely social connections to the city.

From the beginning of my interaction with this group, I was welcomed into the fold, and within weeks, my status as a researcher had nearly been forgotten. Though the research for this project has concluded, I am still considered a
full member of the group, and am still included in group activities. During interviews with members of the group, it became clear to me that I had successfully gained mutual trust and respect with the group’s core members.

Results

Participants in the Southern City Jets Club originally joined due to a strong sense of social identity with the NY Jets. Involvement with the group boosted levels of engagement with the team; however, over time, this social identity has shifted from the Jets to the group itself. Interview data revealed that the networks created by this group are more reminiscent of familial bonds than the interpersonal bonds found in traditional civic organizations. Group members view these bonds as extending beyond each individual the NFL season, and thereby can withstand non-attendance at physical group meetings for extended periods of time. This type of bond was demonstrated to be strong, and effectively generated social capital.

Furthermore, interviews with group members revealed that the bonding social capital built through shared social identity did begin to extend to a new network of individuals in the larger community that were not in any way connected to the New York Jets. In this regard, it is the group members who are not displaced fans, but are simply fans of a non-local team that play a particularly important role. These individuals are critical to the group’s ability to build bridging social capital, in the they provide a pathway to assist the displaced fans comfortably assimilate into their new community, without the discomfort of severing their social identity connected to their hometown. In this way, the group serves as a surrogate for the family and social structures left in the displaced member’s place of origin.

Discussion

The authors propose the unique idea that fan groups such as the Southern City Jets Club should not be equated with larger civic organizations, but with more personal family structures. This study supports earlier literature showing that social capital exists within the context of sport fan groups (Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Like the group studied by Palmer and Thompson (2007), this group demonstrated elements of both bonding and bridging capital. Where this study extends the literature, however, is that it examines the processes and mechanisms by which both bonding and bridging capital are generated. It is through the shifting of social identity from being focused on team identification to being focused on the group itself that allows the group to create bonding and then ultimately bridging capital.

Once people choose to participate in some portion of the group’s social space, these individuals are viewed as members of the network, which takes on the role of a surrogate family. For the displaced members, the geographic connection between the team and the hometown often stirs memories of the individual’s connections to the hometown. Over time, this process leads to the creation of bonding capital, much the same as one would see in a large extended family. With continued participation, however, these displaced members are then afforded the privileges of membership, which includes not only engagement with the team, but also entry to the larger community in which they currently live. The members of the group who are not displaced serve as a conduit for the displaced members to become more fully included in the local community beyond the fan club. As such, these group members whose roots are in the geographic region in which the group meets are of critical importance to a group’s ability to build bridging capital. The significance of this finding is that this is the element of the group dynamics that prevent the group from simply being a way for displaced members to isolate themselves from the larger local community by surrounding themselves with individuals from the same background, and instead allows the group to be a way to help these displaced fans seamlessly become full participants in the local community in which they live.

References


