Sense of Community And Social Capital: Examining The Moderating Effects Of Social Identity, Psychological Involvement, And Behavioral Involvement In Adult Recreational League Tennis

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The development of social capital may be an important outcome of participation in recreational sports due to its association with numerous other positive outcomes including increased economic prosperity, happiness, and general health (Putnam, 2000). Broadly, social capital represents the value of relationships among persons (Coleman, 1988; 1990); it is “the connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Although research presents several examples of sport creating social capital (e.g., Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009; Walseth, 2008), it is less clear what psychological and behavioral factors within the recreational sport experience relate to the development of social capital, and how do those factors interact with each other?

Social capital is a multifaceted construct consisting of trusts, norms, networks, and obligations (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Within a recreational sport context, research has focused specifically on the networks of social capital, as distinguished through bridging and bonding social capital networks (Clopton & Finch, 2010; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009; Walseth, 2008). Bonding social capital is internally focused; it is the type of capital that connects a particular group sharing a set of experiences, background, or other similarities, and is particularly valuable in reinforcing norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). In contrast, bridging capital links individuals across networks or groups that may represent different races, ethnic groups, social status, religions, regions, etc., and is valuable at linking to external assets (Putnam, 2000). Although research suggests that sport participation may lead to both bridging and bonding social capital, little is understood about how each form of a social capital is developed (Clopton & Finch, 2010).

Research within recreation and sports settings suggests that a feeling of sense of community (SOC) may predict social capital. Similar to social capital, SOC focuses on the experience and value of social relationships within a given context. SOC and social capital, however, are conceptually different in that SOC focuses on a particular feeling, while social capital focuses on the structure of social relationships. Although these constructs are conceptually different, a clear connection exists between the two constructs that supports empirical testing (Clopton & Finch, 2010; Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Further, the relation of SOC to specific outcome variables is often moderated by additional variables (Obst & White, 2005). Within the recreational sport context, the literature suggests that social identity (ID), psychological involvement (PI), and behavioral involvement (BI) may help explain the impact of SOC. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the relation of SOC, as moderated by ID, PI, and BI, to both bonding and bridging social capital.

Method

Data were collected from 354 participants in an adult recreational tennis league in the Intermountain region. Participants completed an online questionnaire designed to assess the primary objectives of this study. Independent variables were assessed through 21-questions from the Sense of Community in Sport Scale (SCS; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013); 12-questions from the Three-Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale (TDSIS; Cameron, 2004); three questions measuring psychological involvement (Beaton, et al., 2011), and two questions pertaining to behavioral involvement (Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2014). In addition, the questionnaire included the demographic covariates age, sex, income, number of children, and tennis skill level rating. The dependent variables of bonding and bridging social capital were evaluated via the Personal Social Capital Scale-16 (PSCS-16; Wang, Chen, Gong, & Jacques-Tiura, 2014).

Results
In order to examine the impact of each potential moderator while controlling for covariates, an iterative process was followed where SOC was entered as the predictor variable, one moderator variable was entered (e.g., ID, PI, number of hours spent participating in league tennis (BI1), or number of years spent playing league tennis (BI2); and the five demographic variables were entered as covariates (Hayes, 2012). Thus, four models were created based on the regression on bonding social capital and an additional four models were created based on the regression on bridging social capital.

When bonding social capital was included as the dependent variable, results support significant associations between SOC and bonding social capital depending on the level of PI (b=.21, p=.01). This model also explained a significant amount of variance (p<.001, R²=.09). Probing of the moderation revealed that the moderation is significant at average and high levels of PI. That is, when an individual’s PI is near or above the mean score, there is a significant positive relation between SOC and bonding social capital.

Significant associations between SOC and bonding social capital were supported when the average number of hours spent participating in league tennis (BI1) was included as the moderator (b=.17, p=.02); however, a significant interaction between SOC and number of hours participating (BI1) was not supported. In other words, as SOC increases bonding social capital increases regardless of the number of hours spent participating. This model also explained a significant amount of variance (p<.01, R²=.08). Similarly, significant associations between SOC and bonding social capital were supported when the number of years spent participating (BI2) was added to the model (b=.17, p=.03); however, a significant interaction between SOC and BI2 was not supported. That is, there is a significant positive relation between SOC and bonding social capital regardless of the number of years an individual has participated in league tennis.

When bridging social was included as the dependent variable, results did not support any significant interactions. However, when each of the two measures of behavioral involvement were included as potential moderators, a main effect between SOC and bridging social capital was supported (Model 3; b=.16, p =.047; Model 4; b=.16; p=.046). Thus, as SOC increases, bridging social capital also increases irrespective of the amount of behavioral involvement.

Discussion

The results of this research provide support for a feeling of SOC within a recreational tennis league as significantly relating to bonding and bridging social capital regardless of the level of behavioral involvement. Further, the relation of SOC to bonding social capital is significantly moderated by psychological involvement. As noted, SOC emerged as a significant predictor of both bridging and bonding social capital regardless of levels of behavioral involvement. In other words, as an individual’s SOC increases, bonding and bridging social capital also increase irrespective of the number of hours he or she spent participating in league tennis each week or the number of years he or she has played league tennis. This result adds to prior literature noting both the conceptual relationship between SOC and social capital (Kawachi & Berkman, 2013) and numerous positive outcomes associated with the development of SOC (e.g., Greenfield & Marks, 2010; Peterson & Reid, 2003; Roussi, Rapti, & Kiosseoglou, 2003).

In addition, these results are consistent with prior research that has noted the inability of behavioral involvement to explain variance in other psycho-sociological variables (Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2014). Thus, the level of behavioral involvement does not appear to be a worthwhile predictor of social capital or moderator of SOC and social capital. SOC was also significantly related to bonding social capital depending on the level of PI. A body of research supports positive relations between psychological involvement and positive outcomes within recreation and sport contexts (Beaton, Funk, Riddinger, & Jordan, 2011; Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2014).

In order to increase the development of social capital, sport managers can focus on increasing SOC by providing social spaces, leadership opportunities, and administrative consideration (Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). In addition, to sustain PI, managers may wish to remain in contact with league participants outside of the league season (Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2014).