Collective Social Capital in Community Sport Boards

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Management - Volunteers (Community Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2017-183  
Friday, June 2, 2017  
1:50 PM  
Room: Harvard

This study is part of a larger research program investigating volunteer social capital within community sport organizations (CSOs) or clubs. Social capital is resources such as trust, reciprocity and shared values that 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). The social capital generated among sport volunteers working together may be an important resource for CSOs to draw on for the effective delivery of community sport programs for club members. The first phase of the research uncovered, through personal interviews with volunteer coaches and board members, the multidimensional nature of social capital in CSOs and its development and maintenance there (Authors, 2015). The second phase involved the development and administration of a survey to volunteer board members and coaches in CSOs in Canada (Authors, 2016). The findings assisted with development of a scale of volunteer social capital and provided further insight into the nature and extent of social capital in this context, as well as its impact on sport volunteer attitudes and behavior. The current study extends this work by administering the survey to a new sample of volunteer board members for the purpose of examining group social capital. The volunteer board of directors of CSOs is largely responsible not only for the governance of the clubs, but also their day to day operations (Cuskey, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Smith, 2000). Thus, social capital generated among board members may be a critical resource for these groups and the larger organizations they serve. The preceding studies examined social capital at an individual level, based on individuals’ perceptions of their own meaningful connections. The current study examines social capital as a group level phenomenon - collective social capital - where the connections within the group – among group members – may be an important resource for the group.

The framework for the research program is one that conceptualizes social capital as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising relational (e.g., trust, reciprocity), cognitive (e.g., shared understandings), and structural (e.g., access to others) resources that are generated over time (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The development of social capital is purported to vary with frequency of engagement (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998) and the human capital that individuals bring to the connection (Adler & Kwon, 2002); propositions that have been supported in previous research in the community sport volunteer context (Authors, 2016). The proposition that social capital positively impacts individuals’ attitudes, behavior and performance ((Payne et al., 2011) has also found support in the CSO context (Authors, 2016). Extending the framework, collective social capital is contended to impact the group and its performance (e.g., Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004; Oh, Labianca, & Chung, 2006).

Several research questions guide this study: (1) What is the nature of collective social capital among volunteer board members of CSOs? (2) What factors explain any variation in that social capital? (3) What is the impact of the collective social capital on perceived individual, board and club performance? From the framework and previous research phases we hypothesize that: (1) Social capital will be more prevalent in boards whose members interact more frequently; (2) Social capital will be more prevalent in boards whose members bring valued human capital to the board; (3) Relational and cognitive social capital will be more strongly associated with individual, board and club outcomes than structural social capital.

To address these research questions and test the hypotheses, quantitative survey data is being collected from a sample of volunteer boards within CSOs in Canada. Members of the boards constitute the study participants. The survey used in the previous research phase (Authors, 2016) is being administered to the new sample, with some adjustments to questions and items to reflect the slightly different research focus. The survey in this study includes measures of board performance (Slesinger, 1991) and club performance (Doherty & Cuskey, 2015). Within the multi-item online survey, participants are asked to think about their board and indicate their perceptions of the nature of the connections among the members. They are also asked to indicate what their fellow board members bring to those connections, their perceptions of the performance of the board and the club, and their own attitude toward the board and their perceived performance there. Background information is also being collected in order to generate a profile of the participants, their board, and their club, and to examine any variation in the reported social capital. The group-level analysis that frames this study of collective social capital is enabled by a coding system that allows the investigators to combine data from board members from a given club. Data analysis will include scale testing in this context and confirmation of group-level aggregation (cf. Dixon & Cunningham, 2006), followed by descriptive, correlational, and multivariate (regression) analyses.
The findings are expected to provide insight into the development, extent and impact of collective social capital and, in doing so, will contribute to the growing body of research on social capital in the organizational setting in general, and in the CSO volunteer context in particular. Understanding the nature and impact of community sport board social capital will have implications for building that capital among the critical group of volunteers who make up these boards through cultivating and effectively managing their connections for positive outcomes.