Networks of Volunteer Social Capital: A Comparative Case Study of Sport and Non-Sport Member-Based Community Organizations

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Management - Volunteers (Community Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Thursday, June 7, 2018  
8:30 AM  
Room: Acadia A

When individuals and groups work together over time, trust, reciprocity and shared values – or social capital – may develop (Bourdieu, 1986). These “resources” may have important implications for individual, group, and organizational performance (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Payne et al., 2011; Putnam, 2000). In voluntary associations such as grassroots community organizations and sport clubs, volunteers working closely together may be expected to generate social capital (Putnam, 2000). The resulting strength of ties maybe an important resource for those individuals and their organizations to draw on for the effective delivery of programs and services to their members. Related research in the community sport club context highlights evidence of relational (trust, reciprocity), cognitive (shared understanding) and, to a lesser extent, structural (access to resources) forms of social capital, and their impact on volunteer attitudes and perceived performance, and volunteer board performance (Doherty et al., 2015, 2016, 2017; Misener et al., 2015). Building on that qualitative and quantitative research, a comparative case study approach (Campbell, 2010) is used here for an in-depth examination of social capital among the networks of volunteers serving a member-based community sport club and serving a member-based non-sport (arts) organization. The purpose of the study is to uncover the prevalent form(s) of social capital in the network of volunteers within each of these organizations, and the perceived impact of social capital as a resource for individual volunteers and the organizations as a whole. A comparative approach enables the generation of further insight into a particular case (such as a sport club) by comparing it to a referent (such as an arts organization). Discovering contrasts, similarities and patterns across cases may contribute to understanding and theorizing about a phenomenon (Campbell, 2010). However, Stake (2005) notes that the richness of each case should not be compromised for the sake of the comparison.

The first case focuses on a youth sport club that has been in existence for 20 years and has 30 participant members. Volunteers are largely comprised of the athletes’ parents. The second case is an arts organization known as a “guild” that has been in existence for over 35 years and has approximately 170 members. The volunteers in this organization are drawn from the members themselves. Both organizations exist in the same city in Southwestern Ontario and both have central mandates to serve their members’ interests and needs through programs and services. In-person semi-structured interviews have been conducted with up to two-thirds of volunteers within each organization, representing all aspects of these associations (board governance, team/program support, events). During the interviews, participants were asked to identify other volunteers who are or have been particularly meaningful to carrying out their role. They were then asked to describe their connection with up to five of those other volunteers, relating why and how each relationship was established, what both parties bring to the connection, and what resources or benefits they accrue from it, as well as any further impact on the organization. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and made available to each participant for verification. Analyses include (a) quantitative analysis of the density and centrality of the social network of the volunteers in each organization based on mapping the connections identified by each interviewee, using UCINET software (cf. MacLean, Cousens, & Barnes, 2011), and (b) open and emergent coding to identify sub/themes around social capital and outcomes (cf. Patton, 2015).

Analyses are currently being conducted and preliminary findings reveal evidence in both organizations of relational, cognitive and, to a far lesser extent, structural forms of social capital. In the sport club, social capital is found within what appear to be moderately dense clusters of volunteers who are centralized around the Board or particular club team they are aligned with. In the arts organization, social capital appears to be evident within dense clusters of volunteers centralized around the Board, one of the major committees, or ‘drop in’ volunteering settings. In both
cases, certain individuals (predominantly Board members) serve to link the clusters. Relational capital appears to be particularly meaningful to the volunteers’ commitment to the organizations, and ultimately their efficient operation. A key contrast appears to be greater cognitive social capital among volunteers in the arts organization. This may be a function of their need to sustain the organization’s own facility and desire to grow its programs through external fundraising, which relies on a common vision and shared ideas, in addition to relational support. Contrasts and similarities between the cases will be discussed during the presentation.

The connectedness of the volunteers within the member-based community sport club and the arts organization, and the nature of social capital generated through their relationships, will have implications for maintaining and building “social energy” (Bourdieu, 1986) among the respective organizations’ critical human resources. The findings of the comparative case study will also contribute to the growing body of research and theorizing with regard to volunteer social capital and its implications for individual and organizational performance.