The Role of Network Density in the Creation of Social and Human Capital: Identifying the Consequence of Volunteering at a Mega Sport Event

Alex C. Gang, Indiana University Bloomington
Juha Yoon, Indiana University Bloomington
Juho Park, Indiana University Bloomington
Sang Keon Yoo, Sangmyung University
Zack Pedersen, Indiana University Bloomington
Antonio Williams (Advisor), Indiana University Bloomington
Paul M. Pedersen (Advisor), Indiana University Bloomington

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A considerable body of research has indicated that social capital may produce a variety of positive outcomes beyond economic advantage (Darcy et al., 2014). The potential for information that is inherent to social relations is an important form of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Scholars across various disciplines, in acknowledging the role of social capital in rousing elements of human capital (e.g., increased human skills and knowledge outcomes), have stressed the importance of bridges in networks to identify conditions that enable the information transfer embedded in social ties based on network density and information types (Lin, 1999). In sport management there has been a void in examining how volunteerism in sport serves to impact one’s human capital (Wicker, 2017). By investigating the experiences of volunteers at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games, this study examined the density of network ties developed among volunteers, whether their experience led to the creation of social capital, and ultimately, and whether elements of human capital were developed.

A qualitative research design using purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Twenty six domestic volunteers (n=26) were interviewed in the last week of the event and again four months after. Semi-structured interviews with focus groups were conducted, in which the interview questions were drawn from the literature on volunteerism and social capital (e.g., Welty Peachey et al., 2014). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In accordance with Creswell’s (2013) guidelines, an inductive reasoning process was used with the coding (i.e., open, axial, and selective), allowing for identifying, comparing, and examining the themes extracted from the data.

The findings indicate that the uniqueness of the volunteer experience at a mega sport event enabled participants to build new social ties. In addition to broadening their social networks, participants developed trust and reciprocity (Portes, 1998) via the opportunities that encouraged them to carry out group work and their interaction with other volunteers. The post-event interviews indicated, however, that social ties among the volunteers were maintained in more of a sparse form, with reduced interpersonal interaction and communication. The analysis revealed the following themes as the outcomes of human capital: An active exchange of information related to 1) volunteer opportunities, 2) forms of civic participation, 3) language acquisition, and in case of students, 4) developing extracurricular careers. All of the themes were revealed as actual behavioral changes after the event.

As Glanville and Bienenstock (2009) identified, the present study found that the density of a social network structure and level of resources available within the social ties served to significantly shape the outcomes associated with forms of human capital. While the volunteers utilized their experiences to broaden their networks of friendship, they also actively used newly established social ties in order to exchange information beneficial to their career development. This result has significant practical implication as the types of information transferred through the dispersed network are regarded as low resource. By providing high resource, the organizing committee can serve a crucial role in terms of the efficient management of volunteer activities.