Understanding the Civic Potential of Soccer Fan Clubs: Tracing the Process of Materialization of Civic Opportunities in the Lives of Association Members

Alex C. Gang, Indiana University Bloomington
Juha Yoon, Indiana University Bloomington
Juho Park, Indiana University - Bloomington
Paul M. Pedersen, Indiana University - Bloomington

Sport for Development - Other (Professional Sport) virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Population Health/Civic Engagement

Sport organizations represent the largest category within the voluntary sector (Harding, 2016). In addition to fulfilling their fundamental functions, sport organizations serve vital social purposes as their members seize various opportunities to acquire civic skills through their involvement in associational life (Quintelier, 2008). To explain how such civic potential becomes materialized in the members’ wider civic arena, scholars have examined various dimensions of civic engagement (e.g., political engagement, types of trust, community engagement). Some studies have revealed a positive correlation between involvement in sport organizations and a higher level of civic engagement (e.g., McFarland & Thomas, 2003; Putnam, 1995; Spaaij, 2012) while other findings have indicated that participation does not necessarily rouse such democratic behaviors on participants. This inconsistency, according to Baggetta and Madsen (2018), is due to the prevalent usage of a content-based typology (e.g., political, cultural) as a proxy when analyzing civic cultures. In addition, the quantitative techniques often utilized are limited in effectively grasping the dynamics that shape civic opportunities (Baggetta & Bredenkamp, 2019).

Reflecting on these limitations and the lack of scholarly focus regarding sport fan clubs, this study explores how members of soccer fan clubs materialize the civic opportunities in their wider civic arena. Specifically, upon the identification of various civic opportunities (i.e., soft relational ties and hard skills) that are unique to these clubs, the study traces how members translate such skills in their wider civic arena outside of their fan communities. Moreover, to extend Puglin-Baker’s (2018) proposition that groups that build fandom possess the propensity to provide a pathway to first-time activists for enlarged civic participation, the current study considers the duration of associational involvement along with other critical dimensions (e.g., organizational culture, size, diversity). The investigation – with a conclusion set for April of 2020 – employs open ethnography through both in-depth observations and participant interviews and the context is confined to the fan clubs of two German Bundesliga teams in close geographical proximity (i.e., Hamburger SV and FC St. Pauli). The selected four fan clubs from each team reflect diversity in both size and culture (e.g., the left-wing politics often associated with FC St. Pauli).

The full study follows a pilot study that has been completed involving in-depth interviews with eight fan club members. The participants in the initial study were found to have experienced changes in two civic dimensions (i.e., increased generalized and specific trust; widened spectrum of social and civic engagement). The pilot study findings also confirmed Puglin-Baker’s proposition when the culture of the fan club and the fans’ personal values are highly aligned. Our preliminary analysis denotes the importance of addressing structural variability within the broad term of sport organization. Also, contrary to the perception that being a member of sport fan club is related to self-fulfillment, it possesses numerous civic values that are exuded into wider civic arena (e.g., participation in activist initiatives, building heterogenous ties) as the neo-Tocquevillian scholars attested. Following the pilot study, the full study examines in detail to see whether the preliminary findings will replicate.