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The Role of Social Capital in the Organizational Capacity of Community Sport (2017)

Project Summary

Social capital is the trust, reciprocity, and shared understanding that may be produced and reproduced in a social connection. When generated among individuals and within groups in an organization, this 'social energy' may be an important resource for goal achievement. The objectives of this project were to investigate the nature and development of social capital among volunteers in community sport organizations (CSOs) or clubs, and its impact on the capacity of CSOs to achieve their sport development goals. CSOs provide accessible pathways for children, youth and adults to take part in a range of sport participation contexts. Volunteers are unquestionably the lifeblood of these nonprofit grassroots membership associations, and are responsible for the organization, governance and delivery of quality recreational and competitive sport programs and services. It is important to understand how the volunteer experience may impact the capacity of these organizations to achieve their goals. Four studies were conducted to address the project objectives.

We conclude from the findings that social capital is evident among CSO volunteer coaches and board members, in three forms. "Relational" capital (trust, mutual respect, support, and give-and-take) and "cognitive" capital (shared understanding and open exchange of ideas) are most prevalent, with limited evidence of "structural" capital (access to resources through others). Social capital is generated in both "bonding" and "bridging" connections among volunteers that are characterized by similar or different personalities, approaches to work, and lifestyle, respectively. However, not all connections between volunteers generate social capital and some are viewed as "just work," with no indication of mutual support or shared understanding. Social energy is most likely to be produced when volunteers work together at least weekly and bring valued skills, ideas, and energy to the connection.

Importantly, social capital makes a difference to the volunteers, the CSO board, and the club itself. A combination of trust, mutual respect, support, exchange of ideas, and shared understanding (relational and cognitive capital) is particularly satisfying and motivating for volunteers and they believe it makes them more efficient and effective. They also perceive that the social energy generated among volunteers is critical to a well functioning club overall. Notably, the structural form of social capital, in terms of gaining access to other resources, information and individuals through board member connections, is most impactful to the boards' effective performance as a governing body for the club.

CSO volunteers should have the opportunity to generate social capital in their connections, including volunteers who see themselves as different from each other. All three forms of social capital can make a difference to the effective organization, governance and delivery of sport in Canadian communities.

Research Methods

Study 1: We explored the nature, development, and perceived impact of social capital through semi-structured interviews with 30 volunteer board members and coaches from CSOs in different sports across Ontario. Volunteers identified other club volunteers with whom they have important connections for their role, and then described those connections with up to five other volunteers.

Study 2: A field survey instrument was developed to measure social capital uncovered in Study 1. A total of 127 volunteer coaches and board members of CSOs from different sports across Ontario completed the survey online. Participants reported on their connection with two other “important” volunteers. Frequency of interaction, contribution of individual assets, and perceived volunteer and club effectiveness were examined.

Study 3: The online survey was adapted to measure social capital within the context of CSO volunteer boards specifically. A group-level analysis was possible with the boards of 42 clubs (minimum 3 board members responding) of different sports across Ontario. Participants reported on connections among members of the board. Frequency of interaction, contribution of individual assets, and perceived volunteer, board and club functioning were examined.

Study 4: A comparative case study approach was used for an in-depth examination of social capital among volunteers serving a member-based CSO and a member-based community arts organization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 volunteers in each organization. They identified other club volunteers who are important to their role and described connections with up to five. The social networks of those volunteers were generated, and volunteer and club benefits were examined.

Research Results

Study 1 revealed that relational, cognitive and structural forms of social capital were evident among CSO volunteer coaches and board members. This social energy was more likely to be produced when volunteers interact at least weekly. Volunteers perceived themselves to be more motivated, ambitious, efficient and effective in their club work as a result of these connections.

Studies 2 and 3 revealed that trusting and helping one another aligns closely with shared thinking and exchange of ideas. These were significantly more prevalent and impactful forms of social capital to volunteer attitudes and perceived performance than volunteer connections that provide access to other people and resources. Social capital was significantly more prevalent among volunteers who interacted more frequently and when the “other” volunteer brings valued assets to the connection. Within volunteer boards, equally high levels of relational/cognitive and structural capital were evident, and this was a function of board members bringing knowledge, experience, ideas and energy to the table. Structural capital was most impactful to perceived board performance for the club.

Study 4 revealed that the sport club and arts organization were quite similar in their volunteer social capital, where relational and cognitive capital were most prevalent and structural capital was very limited. Social capital was not identified at all in almost one-fifth of the volunteer connections. Cognitive capital – the exchange of ideas and shared understanding – appeared to be substantially more prevalent in the CSO, which may be a function of the sport or the much smaller size of the CSO where volunteers serve several roles. The study also uncovered social capital generated in both bonding (between similar individuals) and bridging (dissimilar individuals) connections, with personality, approach to work, and lifestyle identified as the basis of the perceived similarities or differences.

Policy Implications

The Canadian Sport Policy (2012) acknowledges that “sport is best developed at the local level” and thus policy pertaining to sport development is focused on community implementation. This project provides valuable insight into how and why social capital among CSO volunteers is a potentially critical resource for clubs and their capacity to deliver quality sport programs aimed at “enhanced participation.”

Sport policy may be well served by community sport club volunteers who trust, respect, support, and exchange ideas with each other for shared understanding of the focus, function, and management of their club. This may be particularly critical when clubs are addressing initiatives around inclusion of underrepresented groups (such as Women and Girls, Indigenous Peoples, Persons with a Disability represented in current Canadian sport policies, and groups to be considered in the CSP renewal).

The findings highlight implications for the structure and management of volunteering in CSOs to ensure volunteers have an opportunity to work together frequently enough, with others who bring valuable assets, so that they may generate relational, cognitive and structural capital together. Structural capital in particular appears to be deficient in the CSO context, yet represents the potential for “enhanced interaction and collaboration” (CSP, 2012) that is a goal of the Canadian sport system. There is great potential for harnessing this form of social energy at the community sport level.

Next Steps

- Intensity of engagement may be a factor in the generation of social capital and should be explored to further understand volunteer social capital in CSOs with implications for its effective management for sport delivery.
- Building on the preliminary insights uncovered in this project, research should continue to explore the phenomenon of people who see themselves as different volunteering together in bridging connections in sport – What is the nature and extent of that diversity? Is it unique to sport, or to certain types of sports or clubs? The social impact of sport in Canada may extend beyond the playing fields to the sidelines and boardrooms where people come together to deliver that activity.
- Given the dependence on volunteers throughout the Canadian sport system there is merit in examining volunteer social capital at the provincial and national sport organization levels.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

- CSOs can benefit from understanding and ensuring the cultivation of social capital among their volunteers for effective volunteer, board and club functioning.
- Provincial/territorial sport organizations can benefit from acknowledging the potential role of volunteer social capital in the community delivery of P/T sport initiatives, and incorporating principles for social capital generation into volunteer management guidelines. Quality connections among volunteers should garner attention alongside the focus on recruitment, training/screening, and recognition.

- National sport and multi-sport organizations can benefit from recognizing that volunteer social capital in CSOs may be critical to the implementation of their national level initiatives.