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**Social capital and sports clubs**  
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**Introduction**

To reach immediately for a sporting metaphor, sport scholars have, in the last decade or so, picked up the social capital concept and run with it. There have been two edited collections (Collins et al., 2007; Nicholson and Hoye, 2008) and a host of books and articles examining the subject. But why, beyond the general fascination with social capital seen elsewhere, has this particular interest in sport and social capital emerged? There are at least four reasons. First, perhaps superficially, there is the title and image of *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). As Field (2003: 4) noted, ‘the picture of bowling lanes peopled by people playing on their own...neatly captured the idea of people’s steady disengagement from a common public life’. This vignette of the lone bowler, it has been argued, has coupled sport and social capital in the popular (and academic) consciousness (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008). Second, there is the emphasis in much of the social capital literature on voluntary associations. This has led to a focus on sport, simply because sport organisations are often the largest part of a country’s voluntary sector (Bergsgard et al., 2007).

Third, there is the lengthy tradition of attributing to sport a series of social benefits: teamwork; tolerance; cohesion; moral development; and so on. Social capital has increasingly been drawn into this tradition and is now often used as an umbrella term for many of the social benefits that sport is presumed to bring. Although academic reviews have noted that this tradition is based largely on assertion, rather than rigorous sociological analysis, it nevertheless remains strong (Coalter, 2007). Fourth, there is the increasing political interest in sport. Comparative international policy research has demonstrated how sport has recently risen up the political agenda in many countries (Hoye et al., 2010). This has partly been driven by an explicit contention, following Putnam, that sport can help develop social capital. Again, reviews have suggested that the policy claims made for sport are often nebulous and not well supported by research evidence. Still, this political interest, along with the other reasons, means that politicians, policy makers, academics and practitioners are all increasingly interested in the relationship between sport and social capital.

*Voluntary sports clubs*

Within this general interest, there has been a particular focus on voluntary sports clubs. These institutions can be defined as ‘membership-based not-for-profit organisations that provide opportunities for community members to participate in organised sport’ (Nichols and Collins, 2005: v). In many countries, they are the main way that people participate in sport across their life course and they are run largely by volunteers. Following Putnam’s emphasis on grassroots voluntary associations, these factors have meant that voluntary sports clubs are often seen as the central institutions in the sport and social capital debate. As Adams (2011: 85) says, the ‘assimilation of Putnamian social capital allows voluntary sports clubs...to be

interpreted as key architectural structures that impact positively beyond the mutual boundaries of club membership in wider society’.

Empirical research in the Putnam vein has sought to explore the relationship between voluntary sports clubs and various presumed indicators of social capital. For example, Delaney and Keaney (2005) analysed data from the 2002 European Social Survey and found that, after controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, membership of a voluntary sports club had a small, but statistically significant, effect on political engagement and trust in civil institutions and a substantial effect on meeting socially with friends. In Canada, Perks (2007) drew on the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating and found a weak, but significant, relationship between youth participation in organised sport and various indicators of community involvement. In Norway, Seippel (2006) found that membership of a sports organisation had a significant, positive effect on generalised trust and significant (but weak) effect on general political interest and voting.

Research in this tradition has also sought to compare voluntary sports clubs with other types of voluntary organisation. For example, Seippel (2006), in the study above, found that the effect of membership of a voluntary sports club on generalised trust and political commitment was weaker than for voluntary organisations in general. However, Brown (2008) found that members of sport and recreation organisations scored significantly higher, or certainly not lower, than members of other types of community organisation on measures of social and political trust, tolerance and connection to neighbours. Seippel (2006; 2008) also found that sport organisations were less likely to promote bridging social capital than other types of voluntary organisation, something that Stolle and Rochon (1998) and Paxton (2002) also found. However, Coffé and Geys (2007a; b), in their Flemish study, found that sports clubs were among the most bridging organisations.

Overall, then, the picture is mixed. Quantitative, survey-based research has suggested that there is a weak but significant relationship between membership of a voluntary sports club and various presumed indicators of social capital. As to whether this relationship is stronger or weaker than for other types of voluntary organisation, the evidence is equivocal. Yet notwithstanding this somewhat patchy empirical support, the view of voluntary sports clubs as ‘key architectural structures’ in the development of social capital remains strong. It is present in numerous policy statements in a number of different countries (Hoye and Nicholson, 2008) and it is implicit in much of the academic work on sport and social capital.

In this chapter, I seek to subject this view to critical examination. First, I provide a brief conceptual critique, arguing that the Putnamian version of social capital suffers from a number of conceptual problems. Second, I provide a brief methodological critique, highlighting some of the problems of empirical research in the Putnam tradition. I argue that social capital needs to be examined through intensive research, which takes account of the mechanisms through which it develops and the socio-political contexts in which they operate. Third, I seek to apply these precepts in an analysis of the micro processes of social capital development in voluntary sports clubs. Drawing on my own recent case study research and

other in-depth studies, I show how social capital is embedded within organisations and how individual and organisational identities play a key role in social capital development. Fourth, I set this micro-analysis in its broader social, historical and political context, explaining the changing role of state institutions and the current pressures affecting voluntary sports clubs. Finally, I draw conclusions from these various critiques and analyses and offer a critical (re-)interpretation of the relationship between sport and social capital.

### **Conceptual critique**

There is now a widely accepted distinction in the social capital literature between ‘network’ and ‘attitudinal’ approaches. The former, influenced largely by Coleman (1990) and Lin (2001), tends to focus on actors within networks and various elements of social structure. The latter, associated mainly with Putnam (1993; 2000), tends to concentrate on values and attitudes, such as trust and reciprocity. Of course, all research does not fit neatly into one approach, but the distinction is one that has been drawn in several reviews (e.g. Foley and Edwards, 1999; Jackman and Miller, 1998; Stolle and Hooghe, 2003) and it is useful in illustrating key differences in the way that social capital is understood.

First, there are differences in operationalisation. Studies in the network approach tend to operationalise social capital as access to resources in networks and examine it on a relatively small scale, in relation to groups or individuals. By contrast, studies in the attitudinal approach frequently employ statistical indicators of social capital, such as generalised social trust, which are quantified through survey research and then analysed in relation to macro-level data. More fundamental, however, are the differences in conceptualisation. By aggregating individual survey responses in order to measure the social capital of a region or nation, attitudinal studies tend to treat social capital as ‘an individual attribute that constitutes a fully portable resource, the value of which does not fluctuate as the individual moves in and out of numerous social contexts’ (Foley and Edwards, 1999: 149). This contradicts the original, sociological conception of social capital, in which it is seen as embedded in relations, not borne by individuals wherever they might go.

The issue here, as many critics have noted, is that by conceiving of social capital as a set of attitudes, attitudinal research often fails to take account of the contexts and social structures in which norms and attitudes are embedded and in which they might facilitate access to resources. There are strong arguments, then, to suggest that the network conception of social capital is more theoretically coherent. However, there is also criticism of the network approach, where it relies either explicitly or implicitly on rational actor models of social action (see Christoforou, 2012). Bourdieu, for example, might be considered within the general network approach on social capital, as he conceptualises social capital as access to resources in networks and examines it in relation to groups or individuals. However, he is critical of rational actor models and explicitly recognises the context-dependency of social capital.

Within the network approach, certain scholars have explored the mechanisms, or processes, through which social capital is presumed to develop. In a seminal article, Portes (1998) identified four such mechanisms, namely reciprocity exchanges; enforceable trust; value introjection and bounded solidarity. The mechanism of reciprocity exchanges refers to ‘an accumulation of “chits” earned through previous good deeds to others, backed by the norm of reciprocity’ (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1998: 130). This has its roots in social exchange theory and is the main mechanism proposed by social capital theorists in the rational action school, such as Lin (2001). Enforceable trust shares with reciprocity exchanges a strong instrumental orientation, but it refers specifically to the embeddedness of social exchanges within groups. This mechanism operates via group members subordinating their present desires to the wishes of the collective, in anticipation of good standing within that group.

Value introjection refers to the way in which value imperatives are learned during processes of socialisation. For example, value imperatives may encourage people to pay their debts on time or obey traffic regulations because they feel an obligation to do so. According to Portes and Sensenbrenner (1998: 129), this functions as ‘a source of social capital because it prompts individuals to behave in ways other than out of naked greed; such behavior then becomes a resource appropriable by others or by the collectivity.’ Bounded solidarity is similar to value introjection in that it involves an element of moral obligation. However, it relates to ‘*situational* circumstances leading to the emergence of principled group-oriented behavior quite apart from any early value introjection’ (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1998: 130, emphasis added). I discuss these mechanisms in more detail later in the chapter, in relation to the empirical work.

One final issue is that attitudinal research often emphasises the positive aspects of social capital. Although Putnam discussed the ‘dark side’ of social capital in *Bowling Alone*, his subsequent treatment of social capital was largely positive, highlighting its productive elements, and this trend has continued in attitudinal research. In network research, scholars have long recognised the ‘dark side’ of social capital. As Portes (1998: 15) noted in his seminal article, ‘the same mechanisms appropriable by individuals and groups as social capital can have other, less desirable consequences’. He identified four such negative consequences, namely: exclusion of outsiders; excess claims on group members; restrictions on individual freedoms; and downward-levelling norms (see Portes, 1998: 15-18, for further explanation).

Where attitudinal researchers have explored the ‘dark side’ of social capital, this has tended to be in the form of discussions around ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’, terms coined by Gittell and Vidal (1998), but popularised by Putnam (2000). In these discussions, bonding has often been viewed negatively, as exclusive and inhibitive of common progress, whereas bridging has been viewed more positively. Such discussions again highlight the importance of context. As Foley and Edwards (1999: 148) point out, all such distinctions, like that between bonding and bridging, should be seen as ‘extensions of the insight that the value of social capital at any given level depends on the larger context, including the insertion of the individual or group in question into networks of relations at higher levels’.

## **Methodological critique**

In addition to its conceptual weaknesses, attitudinal research on social capital often suffers from a number of methodological problems. First, several authors have noted serious flaws in the way that associational membership is measured in large-scale survey research. For example, de Ulzurrun (2002) shows that question wordings have a substantial impact on responses; that multiple memberships and 'political' memberships are regularly underestimated; and that error measurements are much more common than expected. In addition, Hooghe (2003) argues that the conventional measure of associational membership (a very few questions on the number of associations a respondent is currently involved in) is insufficient, as it provides no information on intensity of involvement or the goals of the organisation and is subject to strong temporal influence. He argues that a valid measure of associational membership should take into account a respondent's entire 'membership history', just as the conventional measure of education takes into account a respondent's entire educational history.

Second, critics have noted how some studies in the attitudinal approach rely on single-item measures. Reviewing such work, Schuller et al. (2000: 26-7) argue that 'social capital is a prime example where social scientists deploy techniques that the quantity or quality of the data available cannot sustain'. Although there are now many examples of more sophisticated statistical analysis (e.g. Letki, 2008; Narayan and Cassidy, 2001; Paxton, 1999; Sabatini, 2008), there are still many studies that suffer from these kinds of validity issues. Third, attitudinal research often suffers from problems of aggregation. That is to say, researchers often bundle up indicators without careful consideration. Although it is not necessarily problematic to conceptualise social capital as having effects at multiple levels, doing so raises a series of questions that are often completely ignored in empirical studies. As van Deth (2003: 87) asks, 'do aggregate survey data about individual trust really measure the amount of trust available as a collective good for all citizens? And what is measured if we simply count the number of voluntary association memberships of each respondent and compute the average membership in voluntary associations in a society?'

These and other methodological issues have led a number of commentators to conclude that quantitative research on social capital within the attitudinal approach is insufficiently attentive to issues of context and process. Szreter (2000: 58) sums this up when he says:

Social capital is an abstract property of relationships and is multidimensional. It is manifest through certain kinds of attitudes and dispositions towards fellow citizens and civic institutions, through networks of contact and association and through participation in civic and public institutions. Empirical work which aims to measure and quantify can observe social capital, indirectly and inferentially, through examining the character and incidence of these phenomena. But ideally considerable contextual knowledge is required for unambiguous interpretation.

Such an argument suggests that alternative, qualitative approaches may be better suited to the empirical investigation of a multidimensional, context-dependent phenomenon like social capital.

Indeed, several authors have expressed such a belief. For example, in reviewing the measurement challenges posed by social capital, Schuller et al. (2000: 27) make a 'conventional, but nonetheless crucial, plea for an appropriate mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches'. Likewise, van Deth (2003) argues that social capital researchers ought to make much more use of multi-method and multi-level strategies. Devine and Roberts (2003), building on such arguments, make an extremely convincing case for the benefits of qualitative research on social capital. They argue that 'a consideration of the *processes* by which social capital is formed and constantly reformed is central to empirical research' (Devine and Roberts, 2003: 94, emphasis in original). This relates to the discussion of mechanisms earlier in the chapter. In considering the role of voluntary associations, the authors advocate various qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, which can take account of the experiences of association life and the different, and conflicting, norms and values that might arise from them.

### **The conceptual and methodological critique in sport**

The conceptual and methodological critique sketched out above applies in general to research on social capital. However, as this chapter focuses on sport, I will situate the critique accordingly. To start with conceptual issues, while Putnam's version of social capital has dominated policy discussions of sport, it has certainly not been privileged in academic discussions of sport and social capital. For example, in one of the most fine-grained analyses of sport and social capital to date, Blackshaw and Long (2005) take particular issue with Putnam's work, criticising its communitarian foundations and its structural functionalist perspective. They argue for a sociological understanding of social capital, returning to the work of Bourdieu, which, they say offers more productive lines for analysis and enables a clearer focus on how social capital within sport is affected by social class divisions. More recent work (e.g. Adams, 2010) has re-emphasised this view.

In addition, analysis of social capital within sport has frequently included recognition of its 'dark side' and the theoretical distinction between bonding and bridging (Blackshaw and Long, 2005; Coalter, 2007; Auld, 2008). Indeed, it could be argued that these issues have been taken up more energetically here than in many other disciplines. This is perhaps due to prevailing views of certain sports clubs (e.g. tennis and golf clubs) as cliquey and therefore resonant with Putnam's description of bonding social capital. However, it should be noted that not everyone has accepted such theoretical distinctions uncritically. For example, Blackshaw and Long (2005: 245) argue that 'the 'like us/unlike us' presumption that lies at the heart of the distinction between bonding and bridging is hard to appreciate given the multi-dimensionality of any individual (sex, age, class, occupation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political belief, abilities, interests)'.

Turning to methodological issues, a number of researchers have noted the problems inherent in much of the attitudinal work on sport and social capital. For example, referring to work that seeks to identify the ‘social capital effects’ of sports participation, Nicholson and Hoye (2008: 9) point out quite simply that ‘there are different types of participation and it is likely to be positive, or negative or even neutral given different contexts and circumstances’. Furthermore, Seippel (2006: 171), in the study of voluntary sports clubs in Norway discussed above, notes that ‘a fruitful understanding of how social capital actually functions must move beyond simply identifying sets of black-box correlations...The challenge is to identify the generative processes behind these correlations’. He identifies three social mechanisms from earlier research that he considers might operate at voluntary sports clubs, namely provision and facilitation of information; influence of social ties; and reinforcement of identity and recognition. Although the survey data do not allow him to explore them in detail, this kind of plea for mechanism-based research is an important step towards a deeper understanding of how social capital develops within sport. Similar pleas have been made elsewhere (e.g. Adams, 2012; Coalter, 2007; Tacon, 2007).

In sum, then, many researchers are now emphasising the importance of understanding the mechanisms through which social capital develops and the contexts within which these mechanisms operate. In sport, this implies that we need to understand in more detail the micro processes through which interaction within voluntary sports clubs might lead to the development of social capital. As Hooghe and Stolle (2003: 9) put it, commenting on voluntary associations in general, ‘[w]e need to know which types of social interactions cause the development of social capital and how’. At the same time, we need to understand the socio-historical context of voluntary sports clubs and other key institutions within the sporting landscape. It is to these issues that the chapter now turns.

### **The micro processes of social capital development within voluntary sports clubs**

In recent case study research, I sought to examine how social capital developed within three voluntary sports clubs in the UK. This responded to the calls in the literature, discussed above, for more empirical research on the mechanisms and contexts of social capital development. In particular, the research examined the principal mechanisms of social capital development outlined by Portes (1998). The research itself involved observational work at a cricket club, a football club and a tennis club over 15 months and in-depth interviews with club members and club organisers. There is obviously not sufficient space here to explain the research in full (see Appendix for more information and Tacon, forthcoming, for a fuller explanation). However, an analysis of some of the key findings from the case studies, set alongside the findings of other intensive studies, will enable a critical examination of the micro processes of social capital development within voluntary sports clubs.

First and most simply, the case studies illustrated that through their involvement in voluntary sports clubs, people were able to access a range of resources. That is to say, they developed social capital. The type and scale of the resources varied considerably: from joint property purchases to job information, to relationship advice, to counter-signed passports. However,

the processes through which people developed this ability to secure resources were remarkably similar. One key finding here was that people often discussed the non-material, identity-based resources that they had accessed. For example, one member of the cricket club said,

I am more myself at [the cricket club] than I am at work, 'cos I can relax more and doss about more and that's part of, maybe that's part of what I get out of [the cricket club] is the ability to relax and behave as I am myself without worrying. That's part of the trusting other people – you can behave yourself and know that people aren't gonna have a strop.

This finding supports previous empirical work on social capital in leisure contexts. For example, Crossley (2008: 486) undertook ethnographic research on social capital development within a particular group in a private health club and found that: '[The group] created a space wherein its members could enjoy an identity which was both valued by others and distinct from whatever other identities they enjoyed elsewhere in their life.' As Crossley pointed out, many authors (e.g. Honneth, 1995; Goffman, 1959; 1961; Simmel, 1955) have argued that such 'spaces' are central to self-esteem, agency and psychological well-being. Here, the important finding was that social interaction and many of the normative and cognitive institutional practices at the clubs were shaped by members' 'leisured' social identities (more on this below).

Second, the case study research re-emphasised that social capital development was intimately bound up with processes of social tie formation. This supports Small's (2009) findings from his study of social capital within childcare centres in New York. As he put it there, 'how a person forms and sustains a tie can affect the social capital to which she has access. That is, many of the obligations people feel and the resources they feel willing to provide others derive from the contexts that gave rise to and sustain their relationships.' (Small, 2009: 10) The immediate implication of this is that researchers interested in how social capital develops within voluntary sports clubs need to pay attention to how and why people join these clubs in the first place.

Previous research suggests that people are motivated to join voluntary leisure organisations primarily through 'interest' or 'relational' recruitment. As Fine (2003: 167) says, 'Although the line is often hazy between these two categories...the distinction is between a focus on the objects of interest and a focus on social rewards'. At the voluntary sports clubs, the vast majority of members suggested that they had joined primarily because of a focus on the 'objects of interest'. As one member of the tennis club said, 'It's a very interesting question, because, with hindsight, I don't think I've joined something *for* the social side of it. I've joined it *for* a specific reason. You know, I want some exercise, or I want to get back to something that I haven't done for a long time. The social side is, um...is the bonus.' These findings suggest, *prima facie*, that people join voluntary sports clubs with the global purpose of playing sport and end up forming social ties non-purposely. Over time, the case studies revealed that members acted purposely to maintain the social ties they had formed. However,

the vast majority insisted that social tie formation, initially at least, was largely non-purposive.

As noted above, the line between ‘objects of interest’ and ‘social rewards’ is notoriously hazy, as is that between purposive and non-purposive action. Indeed, the findings on this were much more nuanced than the crude summary above can possibly illustrate. Yet I stress the fact that social tie formation appears to be at least partly non-purposive for two reasons. First, it provides a corrective to theoretical accounts of social capital that argue, implicitly or explicitly, that social capital emerges from deliberate investments on the part of rational actors. Second, it sensitises us to the importance of socio-organisational context. If people are forming ties non-purposely, as a by-product of organisational involvement, it is likely that the socio-organisational context has a significant impact on those processes. Indeed, as I go on to show below, the research found that socio-organisational context did play a key role in shaping not only processes of tie formation, but also the broader mechanisms of social capital development. It is to these I now turn.

#### *The principal mechanisms of social capital development*

As discussed earlier, Portes (1998) identified four principal mechanisms of social capital development, namely reciprocity exchanges, enforceable trust, value introjection and bounded solidarity. He classified these mechanisms according to their accounts of social behaviour: reciprocity exchanges and enforceable trust as deriving from instrumental motivations; and value introjection and bounded solidarity as deriving from consummatory motivations. The case study research permitted empirical exploration of these mechanisms in specific organisational settings. This, in turn, enabled a critical reflection on the accounts of social behaviour that are presumed to underlie such mechanisms.

At a basic level, the research found that all of these principal mechanisms operated, to some degree, at voluntary sports clubs. For example, reciprocity exchanges were common at the tennis club, which was the largest of the clubs I studied. As Portes and Sensenbrenner (1998: 129-30) explain, this mechanism suggests that ‘social life consists of a vast series of primary transactions where favors, information, approval, and other valued items are given and received’. I repeatedly observed this and members repeatedly identified it to me. For example, one tennis member, referring specifically to the exchange of favours and employment opportunities at the club, said:

Another person here, he runs his own public relations company, he wrote the brochure for my start-up company, he did it *all*. All for me, everything, completely free of charge...And so there’s a lot of that going around all the time. And I’ve employed people from here as well, for my building work and so on.

Perhaps more common, given the embeddedness of people’s social ties within the clubs, was enforceable trust. As Portes (1998: 8) says, this mechanism operates like reciprocity exchanges, except ‘the expectation of repayment is not based on knowledge of the recipient,

but on the insertion of both actors in a common social structure'. Enforceable trust was most evident at the team sports clubs (i.e. football and cricket), due to their emphasis on mutuality and commitment to the group. In fact, it can be argued that this mechanism operated most clearly in the ongoing functioning of the clubs themselves. For example, one member of the cricket club said,

I think a quite interesting value that some people are more obsessed with than others is the idea of commitment. Loyalty. Like for example, I know that when I went away for a year and when [another member] went away for a year and stuff like that, you get some, there's negative commentary.

As he and other members of the football and cricket clubs made clear, a member's standing within the group was affected by his adherence to the norm of commitment (to turning up and playing for the team regularly). This process was facilitated by what Portes and Sensenbrenner (1998: 135) term the 'internal sanctioning capacity of the community', which, according to Coleman (1988), emerges from closed social structures, i.e. dense, interlocking networks of social ties. In this sense, enforceable trust operated as a mechanism of social capital development by helping to ensure that members who provided resources (in this case, simply their regular participation in the sporting activity of the club) were repaid by other members providing (the same) resources.

Like enforceable trust, bounded solidarity is predicated on common membership of some form of group. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1998: 133) describe it as 'an emergent sentiment of "we-ness"' which leads to 'forms of altruistic conduct...that can be tapped by other group members to obtain privileged access to various resources'. Researchers who have explored the social psychological roots of this mechanism (e.g. Kramer, 2006; 2009) have drawn on social identity theory and self-categorisation theory to explain the ways in which individuals psychologically identify with a collective and how this enhances their willingness to engage in collective behaviours. Again, while this mechanism operated at each of the clubs, it was most evident within particular teams at the football and cricket clubs. As Fine (2003) noted in his ethnography of mushroom collecting clubs in the U.S., one important way that groups develop and maintain collective identities is through 'shared narratives'; and these were ubiquitous, especially within the team sports clubs. For example, members of the cricket club repeatedly referred to themselves as a family. As one member said, 'The club is sort of a family club, everyone is...I say there for you, if you know what I mean.' He then directly linked this collective identity to the social support and everyday favours that members could access through their involvement. Other members at each of the clubs made similar comments.

Value introjection, i.e. the process through which people internalise certain norms that promote co-operation, was, understandably, difficult to explore. However, interviews did enable me to examine members' perceptions of their own socialisation experiences. The picture here was mixed. Some members were adamant that club involvement had not changed them at all. For example, one tennis club member said, 'In my own case, it hasn't made me

more co-operative at all...I don't get involved in organising things here very much, 'cos that's not the sort of person I am, I'm very kind of driven by certain goals.' Others felt that it had. For example, one cricket club member said that he felt club involvement had instilled in him an attitude of tolerance and developed his ability and willingness to co-operate: 'Yeah, I think so, yeah. I would say so...I think learning to deal with different people...I think it definitely has an impact on your interactions with adults as you move into like the world of work and stuff like that, definitely.' One key finding here was that most members considered that value introjection was much more likely to operate as a mechanism of social capital development among youth members. This tallies with recent research that stresses the significance of youth socialisation experiences in the development of social capital (Stolle and Hooghe, 2004).

### *The influence of the socio-organisational context*

Overall, then, the case studies, set alongside other research, suggest that each of Portes's (1998) four principal mechanisms of social capital development operates at voluntary sports clubs. More pertinently, however, the research found that key elements of context affected whether, how, and for which groups and individuals these mechanisms operated. We saw this above in the basic finding that enforceable trust and bounded solidarity were more likely to operate within small, close-knit, regularly interacting sports teams, than across entire clubs. However, the case studies provided much more fine-grained evidence than this concerning the ways in which context and mechanisms interacted to produce outcomes. Although there is not sufficient space to discuss these 'context-mechanism' interactions in detail (see Tacon, forthcoming, for further discussion), a couple of examples will illustrate the point.

First, the case studies demonstrated how the nature of a focal activity can shape social interaction (Feld, 1981). For example, one cricket club member explained that he had formed a number of close social ties through his involvement at the cricket club, yet had not done so at a golf club where he was also a member. He attributed this to differences in the activities themselves:

The physical interaction of team sport and the reliance of you on everybody else in your team makes a huge difference to the way you then interact with people – for me, it does...So, if we were playing cricket together and I – sorry – *you* bowled a ball that I took a catch off, we'd celebrate that together...If you got a hole-in-one [in golf] and I didn't, we'd be celebrating your success, not our success...but you wouldn't get the same camaraderie going.

On his account, he had not sought to make social ties at either club, but the nature of the focal activity at the cricket club had meant that he had done so almost in spite of himself:

I think I'm quite introverted when I'm not at work, 'cos I spend a lot of energy at work, and I'm quite happy just to not make any effort. I imagine if I made the effort, I'd get to know lots of people at [the golf club]...But I don't make the effort. And I

didn't really make the effort at [the cricket club], but it just happened. 'Cos you go along and it's a group of eleven people. And it's the *same* eleven people [that] you spend eight hours with – and you're all relying on each other. In golf, you can not talk to your playing partner an entire round, he'd think you're a bit rude, or you can say ten words to him and he'll think you're a bit rude, but not hugely rude. But at [the cricket club] you're forced together and you have to throw the ball to each other, you have to help each other just by playing.

This again provides a corrective to social capital accounts that assume that social ties result from deliberate investments on the part of rational actors. Indeed, it illustrates how voluntary sports clubs, like many other types of organisation, can 'broker' ties between people, something that Small (2009) found in his study of childcare centres. I discuss these issues in more detail below.

Second, the case studies illustrated that some members experienced their club participation as more or less voluntary than others. That is to say, some considered that their participation was entirely voluntary and conceptualised their ongoing involvement as a conscious choice. For example, one tennis club member, explicitly comparing his participation in the tennis club with his involvement at other voluntary associations, said:

The organisations I've been involved with in a voluntary way, outside of tennis, have [had] very specific objectives, things to pursue – um, structures, agendas. So, I think of them predominantly as being the world of committee meetings and tasks to be performed. A bit like work, in a sense. Whereas the tennis club, I see as completely me deciding what I like doing, what I don't like doing. And I suppose the voluntary thing, the voluntary work in organisations is still me choosing to do things. Um, but it was with a social conscience more, I suppose, where this seems like pure and utter, er, indulgence [laughs].

Others, on occasion, experienced their participation as an obligation. As one of cricket club members said: 'They [the other members] are very keen for everybody to turn up week in, week out. And you do get this pressure, like you may want to play three weeks out of four, but on the fourth, you feel bad if you don't go. It's very similar to pulling a sickie.' This should not be over-emphasised, because, as several authors have noted, voluntary leisure organisations have relatively low 'exit costs', so the people who remain in membership tend to experience mostly positive outcomes. Nevertheless, this restriction of individual freedom is evidence of the possible negative consequences of social capital discussed earlier. It is also an instance in which the distinction between work and leisure, so evident elsewhere in members' discussions, was much reduced.

The research suggested that the different ways in which people experienced participation (i.e. as more or less voluntary) shaped the context of interaction and thus the development of social capital. For example, one tennis club member, summing up the experiences of many, said:

You come here to relax. So, the initiation and the development of relationships is much easier in many ways, than, say, if I'm looking for work, you know, at a psychology conference or meeting. There, it's much more difficult, because there's always the elements that you're trying to sell something to the other person – they're trying to get work from you and you're trying to get work from them. So, it's less, it's much less relaxed. And a little bit more difficult, I guess, to have that easy intro into a social network.

At the cricket club, on the occasions when some people felt their participation as a burden, it could negatively affect their willingness to interact and co-operate and hence negatively affect the social capital available within the group. For example, one member, who explained that he tended to experience participation as a burden only when the team, or he himself, was performing poorly, described one such occasion: 'So, I was really annoyed and I just packed my bag and went straight home, couldn't entertain anyone, 'cos I was just so pissed off with the attitude of the team, and my attitude in a way, that I just didn't want to be around anyone.' Again, as mentioned above, this notion of participation-as-burden should not be taken too far in the voluntary sports club context. Nevertheless, this brief example illustrates how aspects of personal and socio-organisational context can shape interaction and social capital development.

### *The significance of social identity*

We noted early in the chapter how voluntary sports clubs offer members a space in which they can express a relaxed, leisured and (according to the members themselves) authentic identity. In this respect, many voluntary sports clubs function like 'third places', defined by Oldenburg (1989: 16) as 'a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work'. The brief examples above re-emphasise this point and illustrate how certain contextual elements (e.g. the nature of the focal activity) can 'trigger' the expression of this leisured identity and how this can influence how and why people are willing to make resources available to others within a particular setting.

As discussed, several researchers have explored the social psychological roots of social capital and have linked it to a form of collective identification. For example, Kramer (2009: 242) argues that individuals have three relatively distinct psychological identities – individual, sub-group and collective – and that 'one's behavior is driven by the interactions between the type of identity that is most important at the moment, and the specific situational factors'. This suggests, once more, that research which treats social capital as a 'fully portable resource' (Foley and Edwards, 1999: 149) is conceptually flawed and is unlikely to be able to explain how, and in what circumstances, people are able to access resources through their social networks.

At a basic level, the analysis above suggested that, *ceteris paribus*, team sport might offer greater opportunities for collective identification than individual sport. This tallies with previous research, such as Fine's (1987: 190) study of small group culture within Little League baseball, in which he found that 'sports teams, with their emphasis on the socioemotional side of shared activity and with their clear and explicit task goals, seem particularly likely candidates to develop collective traditions and shared meanings.' In addition, the case studies and other research have highlighted a host of other personal and socio-organisational factors beyond the team sport/individual sport dimension that influence collective identification.

As just one example, a tennis club member who had become a club organiser explained how this had changed his perspective and behaviour:

Now I'm a bit more involved about what goes on behind the scenes, clearly it changes your perspective. And probably it helps you be more sort of club-focused, rather than individual-focused, because you come to realise that there's so many competing interests that it's quite important to have an understanding of these competing interests and to make a judgment or a decision that does its best in terms of some form of compromise, whereas if you're not part of, say, the administration of the club, you wouldn't see that. You'd only see it in terms of your own vested interests.

This suggests that, in certain circumstances, a higher level of involvement within a voluntary association can trigger a shift from 'personal identity' to 'collective identity' (Kramer, 2009). Other researchers (e.g. Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1998) have noted how a sense of adversity can heighten collective identification, through making members' sacrifices for the group more salient. In the research, one of the cricket members described just such a process:

You'll get people who are getting beaten all the time, who won't enjoy and will just drop out, where the people who are prepared to stick at it, you know, whether we're getting beaten or whether we're doing well, or whatever it happens to be, it's much easier to form a bond, I think, when they do that, you almost feel like they're doing it for you.

These are just brief examples, but they illustrate the significance of a social identity perspective on social capital. They also re-emphasise the point discussed earlier, namely that social capital processes are highly context-dependent.

### *The rational choice 'reading' of social capital*

The analysis so far has suggested that individualistic, rational choice theories, such as those drawn from neoclassical economics, are often misguided in how they conceptualise, and account for the formation of, social capital. Several authors have noted this and have provided detailed critical analyses of the neoclassical perspective on social interaction, in general, and social capital in particular (see, e.g., Christoforou, 2012; Davis, 2003; 2009).

These analyses emphasise individual actors' capacity for reflexive behaviour and the significance of social identities that emerge through social interaction (Davis, 2009). They also stress the social embeddedness of individuals within institutional contexts (Christoforou, 2012: 11).

The case study research provided empirical support for these kinds of analyses. One basic finding, as noted above, was that voluntary sports clubs often acted as 'brokers', fostering social ties between individuals. This contradicts standard rational choice accounts, which tend to see social ties as resulting from deliberate investments on the part of rational actors, and demonstrates the importance of an embeddedness perspective. Small (2009: 87), who found something similar in his study of childcare centres, put it quite simply; he said: social ties and social capital formation 'were made possible by something rarely considered in conventional models, that organizations can institutionally perform much of the "work" required to sustain strong friendships'.

Another example illustrates the importance of considering the 'exchange context' when analysing social capital formation. As discussed above, Portes (1998), drawing on social exchange theory, argues that the mechanism of reciprocity exchanges extends from instrumental motivations. At first glance, some of the case study evidence would seem to support this reading. For example, a cricket club member explained how, through repeated social interaction ('just playing and getting to know the people'), he had acquired abundant information about other members' preferences and likely behaviour, which had led to the development of trusting relations ('Oh, *yeah*, oh, yeah, everybody I would trust') and a willingness to provide resources to others in the group. This indicates an information-based conception of trust and a mechanism of social capital development underpinned by instrumental behaviour.

Yet it might also be read another way – as an 'emotional' process. Lawler and Thye (1999: 229) have explained how affect control theory, which is based on the idea that emotions signal the self, suggests that 'emotions experienced in exchange are contingent on the actors' identities'. So, while certain identities, such as corporate executive, usually involve norms that require a person to control his or her emotional displays, other identities, such as friend, husband, or team-mate, 'normatively allow or generate richer emotional experiences' (Lawler and Thye, 1999: 229). As discussed above, the vast majority of sports club members discussed how their involvement allowed them to be 'more themselves'. In line with affect control theory, this suggests an emotional content to reciprocity exchanges. As Lawler and Thye (1999: 229) explain, 'One implication [of affect control theory] is that as the exchange context changes from purely instrumental to partially expressive, the salience of certain identities will shift, resulting in a wider range and greater depth of emotions'.

In particular, the case studies showed how particular normative and cognitive institutions shaped interaction at the clubs and affected people's willingness to exchange resources. For example, as discussed above, there was a strong cognitive institution at the cricket club that the club itself was a family. As one member said, 'There's this certain rhetoric around [the

club], you know, you're almost already told, you almost already know what you're getting out of it, because people *talk* about how it's like a family club...and stuff like that. Um, in a sense, your meaning, the kind of the meaning you derive from it is like already laid out for you.' This strong, spoken culture helped to create and maintain bounded solidarity, which, in turn, enabled people to access resources. As another member said, 'That's the thing that I guess the club kind of perceives itself as, you know, it's like this kind of family scenario where everyone's kind of involved, everyone's pitching in and stuff like that.' This illustrates the direct connection between the emotional tone of the exchange context and the ability of members to access resources.

A related implication of this is that accounts of social capital development that are based on neat divisions of instrumental and consummatory motivations might not be able to capture the intricate processes involved. For example, the case study analysis suggested that resource exchange at the clubs extended from both instrumental and non-instrumental motivations. Other empirical studies of social capital development reached similar conclusions. For example, Small's (2009) analysis of childcare centres in New York found that tie formation and resource exchange emerged from purposive, non-purposive, expressive and habitual action. As he notes, the model he proposes 'implicitly avoids presenting a single set of motivations for the formation of new ties' (Small, 2009: 233). The case study analysis here supports this; and provides further grounds for moving away from a purely instrumental conception of social relations.

#### *The 'universalistic' potential of social capital*

All of these issues – the context-dependency of social capital, the significance of social identity and the embeddedness of social ties – raise questions about whether social interaction, tie formation and social capital development in one organisational setting can lead to the development of social capital more broadly. As Torche and Valenzuela (2011) point out, a common response to this has been the appeal to a metaphor of extremes on a continuum. This has resulted in discussions of 'thick' and 'thin' trust, 'particularised' and 'generalised' interaction, 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital and so on. However, serious problems exist with such a continuum metaphor. For example, several authors (e.g. Burt, 2005; Kadushin, 2012) have noted that the 'closure' and 'brokerage' network structures that supposedly underlie these different forms of social capital are radically different. Moreover, others, such as Jackman and Miller (1998), fundamentally reject the idea of 'thin' or 'generalised' trust.

In mechanistic terms, as we have seen, reciprocity exchanges, enforceable trust and bounded solidarity are all predicated on the likelihood of ongoing interactions and/or the existence of bounded groups. This leaves value introjection as the only mechanism of social capital development with what Torche and Valenzuela (2011: 185) call 'universalistic potential'. Yet as the same authors go on to argue, 'in increasingly complex social contexts, where diverse sets of values coexist, the value introjection solution is at least incomplete and requires specifying how norms emerge and in which contexts they provide a strong enough basis for

the formation of social capital' (Torche and Valenzuela, 2011: 185). There is not sufficient space here to elaborate these arguments further. However, the case studies provide initial support for such a view. Moreover, as other researchers (e.g. Christoforou, 2012; Davis, 2009; Small, 2009) have noted, any analysis of social capital needs to recognise the social embeddedness of individuals and social ties.

### **The wider context of voluntary sports clubs**

As noted early on, the analysis of sport and social capital in this chapter has explicitly adopted a micro perspective. However, the micro processes of social capital development and the influence on them of various organisational factors are only part of the story. A full analysis of sport and social capital would need to include an examination of the wider social, historical and political context within which voluntary sports clubs operate and an exploration of the macro mechanisms of social capital development. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I wish to provide at least some insight into these issues and suggest how the micro analysis conducted so far might be extended through the embeddedness perspective.

First, there is the historical context surrounding voluntary sports clubs. Until recently, sport, in most countries, took place largely in the informal and voluntary sectors. This meant that voluntary sports clubs operated at a distance from state institutions, organising activity for themselves and setting their own entry requirements. However, despite the lack of consistent government intervention, sports clubs did not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, it can be argued that basic socio-political attitudes towards sport have always shaped voluntary sports clubs and people's participation within them. For example, in Britain and other countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a strong emphasis on 'rational recreation', stemming from a concern about social instability in urban areas. As Houlihan (1997: 93) notes, this was accompanied by successive attempts by national governments to 'prohibit the more undisciplined sports of the street and waste ground'. In this sense, it can be argued that sport has always been part of the process through which dominant groups assert their interests in society.

Indeed, researchers within the sociology of sport have long argued that participation in sport and, importantly, membership of voluntary sports clubs are socially stratified. For example, Bourdieu (1978: 835) has identified how 'class habitus defines the meaning conferred on sporting activity, the profits expected from it; and not the least of these profits is the social value accruing from the pursuit of certain sports by virtue of the distinctive rarity they derive from their class distribution'. This implies that, historically at least, dominant social values and power relations in society have shaped the capacity of voluntary sports clubs to function as sites of social capital development. As Sugden and Tomlinson (2000: 318) put it, 'Far from sport being an open sphere of limitless possibilities, it is a social phenomenon and cultural space that can operate...as a form of social closure, in which potential entrants are vetted and excluded as suits the incumbent gatekeepers, and the inner world of the sports culture is tightly monitored and controlled.'

Since the 1960s, state institutions have become much more involved in sport and, since the late 1990s, this process has accelerated even further. This has meant that governments in many countries, often through key sport agencies, have sought to exert greater control over the operations of voluntary sports clubs. In particular, policy makers have sought to encourage clubs to 'open up' and 'modernise'. In the UK, this has included a drive towards club accreditation, which has sought to institutionalise these policy aims of openness and modernisation. Yet, as a number of researchers in several different countries have noted, such attempts have often failed, due to the relative autonomy of voluntary sports clubs (Harris et al., 2009; Lake, 2013; Skille, 2008).

A small number of researchers have started to examine the wider institutional context around sport and social capital in particular. For example, Adams (2012) discusses the role of voluntary sports clubs in the context of modernisation and network governance. He shows how the Putnamian version of social capital is dominant within policy circles and how this corresponds, or conflicts, with the perceptions of many sports club volunteers. Interestingly, given the discussion above, Adams (2012: 18) notes:

The structure and function of voluntary organisations – mutual aid and, hence, power, control and autonomy – are crucial issues that are often ignored by policy makers in favour of a more rational approach where modernising concerns have dominated. These concerns have ramifications for how social capital and sport can be interpreted, treated and examined in a variety of global contexts, and lays bare those analyses that privilege agency over structure.

There is not sufficient space here to develop these arguments in detail, but it is this sort of analysis which will provide a more thorough understanding of the institutional context within which voluntary sports clubs operate.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to examine critically the debates around sport and social capital, with a focus on voluntary sports clubs as key institutions. It has noted the influence of the Putnamian version of social capital in academic and policy work on sport, yet has observed that this research suffers from a number of conceptual and methodological problems. In concert with a number of other analyses, this chapter has highlighted the importance of intensive research on social capital that seeks to understand the processes through which it develops and the influence on these processes of social, political and organisational contexts. The main part of the chapter sought to demonstrate the value of this type of research through an in-depth analysis of the micro processes of social capital development at three voluntary sports clubs in the UK. The analysis showed that social capital developed through certain core mechanisms, namely reciprocity exchanges, enforceable trust, bounded solidarity and value introjection. Crucially, however, it demonstrated the embeddedness of these mechanisms in the institutional context of the clubs.

In particular, the analysis pointed up several key issues. First, it demonstrated that social capital development was closely, perhaps inextricably, bound up with how people formed and maintained social ties. This re-emphasises the importance of social network analysis within social capital studies (Moody and Paxton, 2009). Second, it revealed that members' social identities were significant in how they interacted and formed social ties, re-emphasising the importance of a social identity perspective on social capital (Christoforou, 2012; Kramer, 2009). Third, it suggested that rational choice perspectives, which stress deliberate investments on the part of rational actors, are unable to account for how social capital develops. Fourth, it raised important questions about the 'universalistic potential' (Torche and Valenzuela, 2011: 185) of social capital developed within specific organisational settings.

The final part of the chapter sought to set the micro analysis of voluntary sports clubs in its broader historical, social and political context. It highlighted, in brief, the way in which sport participation and voluntary sports clubs membership have traditionally been socially stratified and it noted the increasing involvement of state institutions in the way that voluntary sports clubs are being run. Given the increasing interest of politicians and policy makers in social capital and the prominence of voluntary sports clubs in policy debates, this latter trend is likely to continue. This points up once more the value of integrating micro and macro analyses of social capital, in order to understand, as fully as possible, how social relations are embedded in organisations and how organisations are embedded in their wider institutional contexts.

## **Appendix: Research methods**

### Case descriptions

The *cricket club* was founded around 40 years ago. It has always been a one-team club, which does not own its own facilities, and it has around 12 to 15 playing members. The club used to play only 'friendly' matches, but entered a league in the early 2000s. The league season usually runs from May to September, with a match every Sunday (weather-dependent) and some training and friendly matches in the run-up to the season. The *football club* was founded in 2006, initially as an adult club. It was 'born out of the perceived lack of football coaching and playing facilities' in the local area (club website). The club has three adult teams and two junior teams – roughly 90 members overall, although there is quite a high degree of turnover in the adult teams. The teams plays league matches, usually once a week, from August to April, with training (not very well attended) once a week. The club does not own its own facilities; it leases a pitch at a local sports centre. The *tennis club* was founded more than 100 years ago and has permanent club-owned facilities, including 14 tennis courts, a bar/restaurant, a gym and a fitness studio. It has around 500 members and employs a full-time club manager. At the club, members participate in various ways: arranging matches among themselves; playing in mixed ability weekend 'drop-in' sessions run on Saturdays and Sundays); playing the 'ladder' (a rolling, internal club competition); playing in occasional club tournaments; doing one-to-one or group coaching; and/or playing in the club teams.

Together, these three clubs allowed me to study the development of social capital in socio-organisational contexts which differed in formality, size, type of sport and member diversity. The *cricket club* was very small, with no facilities and was generally characterised by a co-operative way of working – in short, a good example of an informal club. The *tennis club* was large, with business-like structures and was receptive to external assistance – in short, a good example of a formal club. The *football club* was somewhere in between, in terms of both size and formality. In addition, the *cricket club* and *football club* were team sport clubs, while the *tennis club* was an individual sport club, allowing exploration of different types of sport. In terms of member diversity, the *football club* was based in a deprived part of East London, with a large proportion of its members local to the immediate area, young (18-23), black or minority ethnic, either unemployed or casually employed; the *tennis club* was based in a prosperous part of North London, with a large proportion of its members wealthy, white, well-educated, middle or upper-middle class, middle-aged or retired; and the *cricket club* was more of a mix, certainly in terms of age (16-60s) and background (some working class, some middle-class). So, the case study research allowed some exploration of member diversity both across and within clubs. Of course, each of these elements of socio-organisational context was much more nuanced than this brief outline suggests. Nevertheless, these initial obvious differences provided a *prima facie* basis for cross-case comparison.

#### Data collection methods

In the research, I occupied what Adler and Adler (1998) refer to as a ‘peripheral-member-researcher’ role. They describe this as follows: ‘Researchers in peripheral membership roles feel that an insider’s perspective is vital to forming an accurate appraisal of human group life, so they observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership’ (Adler and Adler, 1998: 85). This largely captures how I behaved at the clubs. I observed the focal activity (cricket, tennis and football matches), I chatted with members, I sometimes drank and ate with them, I watched sport on television with them; and I observed them as they did all these things with each other. In total, I spent around 80-100 hours at each of the clubs over a 15 month period. I made notes immediately after each site visit and, along with my field notes, I kept a research journal, which included more general reflections and notes on analysis and interpretations.

Within the case studies, I conducted 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members, organisers and the wives of certain members. Interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 84; with eight females and 23 males; and with members who had spent between one month and 38 years at their respective clubs. In the interviews, I explored topics relating to mechanisms of social capital development (especially those described by Portes (1998)) and salient elements of socio-organisational context. This led to discussion of, among other things, the outcomes members experienced through their involvement; the social ties they had formed; characterisation of different types of social ties; how and why members exchanged resources; what types of resources they exchanged; how regularly and over how long a period they had interacted; descriptions of institutional practices at the clubs; issues of hierarchy; the balance

between co-operation and competition; the voluntariness of participation; and perceptions of member diversity.

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