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Tacon, Richard (2016) The organizational embeddedness of social capital: a comparative case study of two voluntary organisations. *Journal of Economic Issues* 50 (1), pp. 23-42. ISSN 0021-3624.

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# **The organisational embeddedness of social capital: A comparative case study of two voluntary organisations**

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## **Abstract**

Social capital is a popular, but contested, concept. It draws attention to the way in which social relations and constructed forms of social organisation can produce outcomes on individual and collective levels. However, it is often founded on individualistic, rational-choice models of human behaviour, which neglect its embeddedness. This article explores the embeddedness of social capital through a comparative case study of two voluntary sport organisations in the UK. Through close analysis of in-depth interviews and longitudinal observation, it looks at the processes of social capital development and at how socio-organisational context and identity shape these processes.

## **Introduction**

The notion of social capital draws attention to the way in which social relations and constructed forms of social organisation can produce outcomes on individual and collective levels. It is frequently invoked by academics, politicians, policymakers and others, yet it remains highly contested. This contestation relates to the way that social capital is conceptualised, the way it is empirically investigated and the models of

social action that (often implicitly) underpin it. While some have claimed that developing social capital offers a means of positive social change within societies, others are much more dubious. This article investigates these issues in the context of voluntary sport organisations in the UK. In particular, it demonstrates the embeddedness of social capital within particular organisations and explores the implications of this for social relations and people's access to resources.

The article is structured as follows. The first section examines dominant versions of social capital, including Robert Putnam's, which remains highly influential. It offers a concise conceptual and empirical critique of these dominant versions and, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others, it identifies alternative ways of understanding social capital that emphasise its embeddedness. The second section provides the background for the study. It explains the choice of voluntary sport organisations as a context for exploring social capital and provides some insight into the institutional structures of sport in the UK. The third section outlines the methods used in the study, namely interviews and observation within a comparative case study design. The fourth section provides the empirical analysis, which focuses on how and why people form social ties, how people access resources through their ties and how social identity shapes these processes. The fifth section sets this micro-analysis in its broader institutional context, examining the possibilities for social change through membership of voluntary organisations. The final section draws conclusions.

### **Dominant versions of social capital: A concise critique**

It is now more than 20 years since Putnam's original study of social capital and democracy in the Italian regions (Putnam 1993). During this time, his conceptualisation of social capital and his empirical work (in Italy and the U.S.) have been subject to numerous critiques (e.g. Edwards and Foley 1998; Fine 2001, 2010; Foley and Edwards 1999; Jackman and Miller 1996, 1998; Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 2000). Nevertheless, Putnam's version of social capital remains highly influential – in academic work and, even more clearly, in politics and policy-making. Fine (2001, 18) discussed this somewhat counter-intuitive situation more than a decade ago and labelled Putnam's work a 'benchkin', a phenomenon he described as follows: "Theory, not necessarily original, is put forward to explain what subsequently proves to be false empirical evidence. Paradoxically, when this is revealed, far from the original contribution being rejected, it grows in stature, appearing to draw strength and support from the considered criticisms that are levelled against it." This is not the appropriate place to embark on another lengthy critique of Putnam's work. However, since his version of social capital remains influential, and since it shares several elements with other dominant (economic) versions, it is important to summarise some of the key criticisms of it and to sketch out alternative conceptions of social capital, including that which underpins this study.

First: operationalisation. Putnam and others in what Stolle and Hooghe (2003) call the "attitudinal tradition" have tended to investigate social capital through quantitatively analysing various proxies, often drawn from large-scale surveys, and assessing statistical relationships with other macro-level phenomena. As noted above, these empirical investigations have been subject to thoroughgoing critiques, which have

questioned the validity and reliability of the statistical indicators, the tautological reasoning and the claims and counter-claims of path dependence. However, it is the *conceptualisation* of social capital that informs these empirical investigations that is of more immediate concern here. Fundamentally, this aggregation of individual survey responses means that Putnam and others tend to conceptualise 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 is inherently problematic, as it ignores the embeddedness of social capital in social relations and particular socio-organisational contexts (Coleman 1988; Field 2003; Small 2009).

Many dominant versions of social capital, especially those prevalent in the economic literature, are also underpinned by individualistic, rational-choice models of human behaviour. As Christoforou (2013, 720) notes, these “treatments of social capital tend to overlook the collective content and context of human interaction.” Furthermore, as many critics have argued, these individualistic, rational-choice accounts of social capital tend to ignore, or stand outside, issues of power and identity (Fine 2001, 2010; Smith and Kulynych 2002). Putnam again, with his vision of voluntary associations as “learning schools for democracy,” is influential in advancing a neoliberal-inflected view of social capital as apart from cultural hegemony and unequal distribution of resources (Edwards and Foley 1998). Although in his later work Putnam acknowledges the “dark side” of social capital, by pointing to the socially undesirable functions of certain social groups (Putnam 2000), he still underplays the way dominant groups in society act to maintain existing power relations, including through access to voluntary associations (Blackshaw and Long 2005; Fine 2010).

So, what of other conceptions of social capital? The strong conceptual and empirical critiques of Putnam's version suggest that earlier, sociological formulations of social capital are more conceptually coherent. For example, Coleman (1988, 1990) explicitly discussed the embeddedness of social capital in social relations and discussed the way that constructed forms of social organisation could function as resources for those who were able to use them as such. This "network tradition" of social capital research (Stolle and Hooghe 2003), which also encompasses Lin (2001) and others, tends to conceptualise social capital more as access to resources in networks and tends to examine outcomes for individuals and small groups, rather than outcomes on a macro level. Conceptualising social capital in this way, by stressing its embeddedness, overcomes some of the problematic assumptions in the attitudinal tradition, including the implicit notion of "portability." However, Coleman and Lin's versions are still underpinned by rational-choice models, which, critics argue, fail to capture key elements of human behaviour, such as a sense of shared identity and commitment to social values (Christoforou 2013, 721).

Bourdieu, another key theorist of social capital, but one largely ignored in the economic and policy-related literature, also broadly conceptualised social capital as access to resources in networks. He defined it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, 248). However, unlike Coleman and Lin, Bourdieu is critical of rational-choice models of human behaviour in much of his writing and recognises the context-dependency of social capital (Field 2003). In addition, he explicitly addresses issues

of social structure, class and power, arguing that social capital can be understood as a construct through which certain individuals and groups gain status and reproduce class-based social and economic structures (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). Such a conceptualisation of social capital retains the notion of embeddedness, but allows for a more ‘socialised’ account of motivation (Field 2003).

This whistle-stop tour of social capital theorists highlights several key issues. First, the most coherent conceptualisations of social capital see it as embedded in social relations. This implies that in order to understand social capital we need to understand how and why people form social ties; how people access resources through these ties; and how such processes are shaped by the socio-organisational contexts within which they take place. Second, given this socially embedded view, we need to take account of the role of shared identity and social values that “derive from aggregate processes of social and political participation” (Christoforou 2013, 721). Third, specifically on identity, we need to consider how individuals’ reflexive understandings of their own behaviour, in particular their group roles (Davis 2003), influence social relations and the way they access, or enable access to, resources. Finally, more fundamentally, we need to examine more carefully the interaction between agency and structure and the way that “such interaction is influenced by the institutional context within which individuals are embedded.” (Christoforou 2013, 729)

This article seeks to address these issues through an explicitly embedded notion of social capital. Specifically, social capital is defined here as “the ability of actors to secure resources by virtue of membership in social networks or larger social structures” (Portes and Landolt 2000, 532) – a conception in line with Bourdieu’s

original formulation. The article investigates social capital through a micro-level analysis of social interaction and social ties within two voluntary sport organisations in the UK. This permits insight into the processes involved and the influence of key contextual elements on these processes. Before describing how this research was conducted, the next section provides further background on the institutional context surrounding voluntary sport organisations and explains why they offer a potentially valuable insight into the processes of social capital development.

### **Institutional context**

Sport and social capital have been linked in the popular consciousness ever since Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone*. As Field (2003, 4) put it, "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." More than the image itself, though, it was Putnam's focus on voluntary associations that drew attention to sport, as voluntary sport organisations constitute the largest part of the voluntary sector in a number of countries (Bergsgard et al. 2007). As such, these institutions, which 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) are potentially important foci for understanding how social capital is developed and maintained.

In fact, this coupling of sport and social capital is the most recent example in a long tradition of ascribing to sport a series of social benefits – teamwork, tolerance, moral development and so on. This "cognitive institution" (Meyer and Rowan 1977) extends



all the way from the promotion of sport in English public schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and from the Muscular Christianity movement, wherein sport was deemed “character building” (Holt 1989). Many of the benefits ascribed to sport, e.g. trustworthiness, co-operation and cohesion, chime with aspects of social capital, hence the latter’s often uncritical adoption within sport policy and management discourses (Nicholson and Hoye 2008). In this regard, Coalter (2007, 9) refers to sport’s “mythopoeic” status, that is, its capacity to evoke vague and generalised images, based on popular and idealistic ideas produced largely outside sociological analysis.

This recent interest in social capital and the longer-held belief in the ‘social power’ of sport mean that voluntary sport organisations have been put under the research and policy spotlight. As Adams (2011, 85) puts it, 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, however, which has sought to assess this, has so far been equivocal. Studies in the “attitudinal tradition” have found small but significant effects of voluntary sports club membership on political engagement and trust in civil institutions (Delaney and Keaney 2005), general political interest and voting (Seippel 2006) and community involvement (Perks 2007). However, studies have also shown that voluntary sports clubs might be less likely than other types of voluntary association to develop bridging social capital (Paxton 2002; Seippel 2006, 2008; Stolle and Rochon 1998). As discussed above, though, the findings of these studies are open to question, given the conceptual and empirical problems that afflict the attitudinal tradition. Indeed, a number of researchers have called for more in-depth, qualitative research, drawing on alternative conceptions of social capital, in order to

understand how the *processes* of social capital development operate within voluntary sports clubs (Adams 2012; Coalter 2007; Nichols et al. 2013; Tacon 2007).

It is important at this point to consider the broader institutional context around sport. Until recently, in most countries, sport took place mainly in the voluntary and informal sectors. As such, voluntary sport organisations tended to operate at a distance from central governments, organising their own activities and, importantly, setting their own membership policies. Nevertheless, state institutions have always played a role in shaping, or responding to, basic socio-political attitudes towards sport. For example, in Britain and elsewhere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, politicians and policy makers, driven by concerns over public ill health and social instability in cities, promoted “rational recreation” among the “masses” (Holt 1989). This involved legislating against certain “unsavoury” (working-class) sports, while ignoring or protecting certain “traditional” (upper-class) sports. As Houlihan (1997, 93) argues, therefore, sport can be seen as one means by which dominant groups in society have long asserted their interests over others.

This shapes the way we should understand involvement in voluntary sport organisations. Indeed, Bourdieu (1978, 835) recognised this almost 40 years ago, arguing that “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 throws into sharp relief the claims made by Putnam and others that voluntary sport organisations can be seen as “learning schools for democracy.” Indeed, as Sugden and Tomlinson (2000, 318) argue, drawing on

Bourdieu's insights, "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." In this respect, it is interesting to note that in *Distinction*, Bourdieu's study of taste among the French middle classes, his sole quantitative indicator of social capital was membership of golf clubs (Bourdieu 1984).

Within this broad institutional context, recent political developments have started to reshape voluntary sport organisations and the way that people understand and experience participation within them. Since at least the late 1990s, central governments and particular sport agencies in many countries have, in return for public funding, sought to exercise greater control over voluntary sport organisations. In particular, through successive "modernisation" reforms, they have sought to oblige clubs to 'open up' and become more "business-like" (Harris et al. 2009). This has led to conflict in many cases and has created a complex and dynamic institutional setting. As Adams (2014, 567) argues, "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." The following analysis does not engage directly with these broader institutional developments, as it focuses specifically on micro-level interaction. However, it is important to recognise that, over time, these changing understandings of sports clubs

may influence members' perceptions of the organisations and their actions within them.

## **Methods**

Research on social capital to date has been predominantly quantitative. As noted above, those in the attitudinal tradition have often relied on statistical analysis of large-scale data sets in order to assess the relationships between social capital and various (macro-level) social and economic outcomes. Yet critics have noted a number of flaws with such research, including the validity of particular indicators (de Ulzurrun 2002; Hooghe 2003), the use of single-item measures (Schuller et al. 2000) and inappropriate aggregation of individual responses (van Deth 2003). Moreover, critics have argued that quantitative research in the attitudinal approach has paid insufficient attention to process and context. As Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003, 331) note, social capital studies "use predominantly quantitative data from large-scale surveys and other studies to seek to understand a phenomenon which inheres in small groups in very particular contexts." Alongside the conclusions of the brief conceptual critique earlier, this suggests a need for in-depth, qualitative case study research, attentive to the embedded nature of social capital.

The current research sought to address this need through a comparative case study of two voluntary sport organisations in the UK: a small cricket club and a large tennis club. The cricket club was founded around 40 years ago. It is a one-team club, which does not own its own facilities, and 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 and some training and friendly matches in the run-up to the season. 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. Members participate in various ways, playing in: self-arranged matches; mixed-ability “drop-in” sessions; the “ladder” (a rolling, internal club competition); occasional club tournaments; one-to-one or group coaching sessions; and/or in the club teams.

Together, these clubs enabled investigation of social capital across dimensions that previous research had suggested were important, namely: formality (Cuskelly et al. 2006; Nichols and James 2008); size (Small 2009); type of sport (Fine 1987; Walseth 2008); and diversity of membership (Coffé and Geys 2007a, b; Seippel 2006). 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 tennis club was located in a prosperous part of North London, with a large proportion of its members being wealthy, white, well-educated, middle or upper-middle class, middle-aged or retired. The cricket club was more of a mix, certainly in terms of age (16-60s) and background (some working class, some middle-class). Of course, the socio-organisational context of each club was much more complex than these brief sketches indicate (see Tacon (2013) for more details). Nevertheless, these differences provided a *prima facie* basis for cross-case comparison (Thomas 2011).

Within the case studies, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews – with members, organisers and partners of certain members. Interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 84; with eight females and 16 males; and with members who had spent between one month and 38 years at their respective clubs. I also conducted participant observation at the clubs – around 80-100 hours at each over a 15-month period. I adopted what Adler and Adler (1998, 85) refer to as a “peripheral-member-researcher” role, i.e. one in which researchers “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.” This description captures how I behaved at the clubs: I observed the focal activity (cricket and tennis matches); chatted with members; drank and ate with them; watched sport on television with them; and observed them as they did all these things with each other. I made fieldnotes immediately after each site visit, according with methodological advice (Lofland and Lofland 1984) and, along with my fieldnotes, I kept a research journal, which included more general reflections and notes on analysis and interpretations (Spradley 1980).

The interviews and observations enabled insight into the processes through which social capital developed; the ways in which it was embedded within the organisations; and the role of identity in shaping these processes. Coding and data analysis was largely based on the constant comparative method, which is a key technique within grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). As Myers (2009, 106) points out, this kind of analysis is very useful in developing context-based, process-oriented descriptions and explanations – precisely the aim of this research.

There is not sufficient space here for a full explanation of the analysis process (see Tacon (2013) for more details). However, the analysis involved interpretation of: the outcomes members experienced through their involvement; the social ties they formed; the types of resources they exchanged; how regularly and over how long a period they interacted; institutional practices at the clubs; issues of hierarchy; the balance between co-operation and competition; the ‘voluntariness’ of participation; and perceptions of member diversity. In what follows, I offer a concise account of some of the key findings in order to illuminate the issues discussed in the article so far.

## **Findings**

If we see social capital as “the ability of actors to secure resources by virtue of membership in social networks or larger social structures,” (Portes and Landolt 2000, 532), it is first important to understand how people become part of social networks, or larger social structures. That is to say, how people form social ties. At the clubs, this process of tie formation was rooted in regular social interaction. As one of the cricket club members said,

Yeah, so it’s just playing and getting to know the people and then meeting the people and the family and then [my wife] would come along and that helped as well, ‘cos you were meeting the families...But you started to meet those people and it’s just a relaxing Sunday afternoon and you bring your kids along and they talk to other people and it’s just a slow process.

Social interaction went on in all areas of club life: during the sporting activity itself, immediately before and after the sporting activity, at specific club social events and

sometimes simply *at* the club, when no sporting activity was taking place (e.g. in the bar at the tennis club). This is a straightforward finding – people formed ties at the clubs through regular social interaction. However, as Nee and Ingram (1998, 24) point out, the significance of focusing on social interaction lies in “locating the emergence of informal norms and their monitoring and enforcement by reference to mechanisms built into ongoing relationships.” This re-emphasises the dynamic nature of social capital and thus the importance of seeking to understand it over time.

The other reason to focus on social interaction within organisational settings is that it allows us to see how processes of tie formation are embedded within, and shaped by, specific elements of the socio-organisational context. For example, as one of the club organisers at the tennis club explained, people tended to form ties through specific club routines and activities:

Often people start by coming down, they join in this club period, which is this period we have at weekends, between 2 and 5 on Saturday and Sunday, where everyone just joins in, as a club organiser and so on. So, it's a really good way of people who haven't, who don't know anyone, maybe new even to London, they join a tennis club, you can come down and they start playing with different people and they're then mixed in. And then they, then they develop, you know, they find people, maybe, of their similar standard and they say to them, you know, 'You want to knock sometime?' So that's the way it works, I think, and then gradually you develop a group of people, you know, who you play with.

This reinforces the notion of embedded social capital. As Small (2009, 87) concluded, in his study of social capital development at childcare centres in New York, social tie formation is “made possible by something rarely considered in conventional models,



that organizations can institutionally perform much of the “work” required to sustain strong friendships.”

The research also suggested that other elements of the socio-organisational context, beyond the specific routines and activities of the clubs, shaped these processes. For example, one of the cricket club members explained the process of “acceptance” at the club:

It’s not just judged – like most cricket clubs you just go and turn up and people will judge you on how good you are at cricket [laughs] and that will pretty much be it, um, you know, and then after a while, if you were a bit of a shit bloke, might start to say, ‘Oh, he’s a bit of a shit bloke,’ but frankly it wouldn’t – um, I think with *us* it’s a bit more complex. I think there were people there who would say, ‘Um, yes, I want,’ you know, someone turns up and they’re really good, they’d be like, ‘Yes, yes, yes, he should play every week,’ but then I think there’s a slight side to [the club] as well, which is there are people within the scenario who would say, ‘Well, hang on a second, you know, is he, is he the kind of guy that we can do *business* with every week,’ you know, ‘Is he the right sort of person for [the club]?’ So, I think that *period* of time where you’re kind of establishing yourself as someone who can be accepted and also that you can *accept* the scenario yourself can be quite long in comparison to other kinds of sports clubs.

Such findings demonstrate the way in which repeated social interaction leads to the emergence of norms and social values that then shape social relations, including future processes of tie formation (Nee and Ingram 1998). They also remind us that social networks can exclude, as well as include. Indeed, as another cricket club member said:

It's funny. I think it's like, it's always had this kind of inclusive thing of like it doesn't really matter whether you're that great at playing cricket, but can you *fit into*, it's almost like a challenge thing, like can you *fit into* this kind of slightly strange sort of scenario, you know, this kind of strange culture? And I can't really put my finger on what that means, but I remember when I was growing up people talking about, 'Ah, you know, they just weren't a very sort of [club] person,' you know...there was quite a lot of like piss-taking, mickey-taking...And it's like, but that was almost like the thing of like, if you can deal with that, if you can deal with like the having fun poked at you, then you were like a [club] person and you could stay and play and you would kind of put up with it. And I remember we had a few like quite good players come and play for us, guy who used to teach [another member] clarinet [laughs] bizarrely, this guy, who, um, was a really good player, really good batsman, and he came and played for us, but he was quite like, he was quite a soft, kind of sensitive kind of guy, and he got like basically bullied out of the scenario from what I understand of it, you know, which you might kind of find a bit weird, you know.

This emphasises what some social capital scholars discuss as the potential for 'exclusion of outsiders' (Portes 1998). Although Putnam and others have noted the 'dark side' of social capital, their communitarian focus on the positive societal outcomes of associationalism tends to gloss over these negative consequences (Blackshaw and Long 2005).

Such findings also shift our analytical focus to another key element that shapes how and why social ties are formed and, ultimately, how and why resources are exchanged – namely, *identity*. As noted above, previous research has pointed to the way that individuals' reflexive understandings of their own actions and group roles influence processes of resource exchange (Davis 2003; Kramer 2009). The case studies allowed close exploration of this. As one of the tennis members said about playing at the club, "tennis is a bit like meditation, hitting the ball, you know...it's pretty

relaxing...When you play tennis, you're not thinking about anything else. Once you get into a rhythm, hitting the ball, you don't think about the work anxieties or whatever, so there's that element." This meant that people at the club tended to adopt a kind of "relaxed, leisured identity."

Likewise, one of the cricket club members reflected very carefully on why he participated in the club:

What do I get out of it? [Long pause] That's put me on the spot. Stops you thinking about death for about eight hours every Sunday. Which isn't bad [laughs]...Um, just takes your, just, takes your mind off things. It does, you can *relax*. So the only two times I can really do it is when I'm playing golf and playing cricket. 'Cos even when I'm with the kids and stuff, you're still, there's other stuff going on there. But when you're running about in the field, waiting to bat, or even batting, you don't think about anything else. It's just that ability you have to switch off from everything else. So, it's a good stress relief. But, I don't go and do it because, 'Oh, I've had a hard day, week at work, I need to go and play cricket.' It's just one of the by-products of it. That's not why I do it. Why do I do it? Because I enjoy it, *actually*. Despite the stress I get, you still get a sense of satisfaction, even though we're playing at the lowest level of numpty cricket, er, you still get a sense of satisfaction when you *win*. And I still get a huge sense of satisfaction when the team wins and I do well. And it makes you feel better about yourself. Um, why do I go, though? That's not why I go, that's a result of going. I don't go because if we win I'll feel good about myself, 'cos that's stupid. Um [laughs], I go because it's habit now. 'Cos I play golf. I could go and play golf a lot. But cricket also gives me time where the family can come along, so it's a bit more of a family event than golf. But, why do I go to cricket? Other than because I have before and I can't stop going? [Long pause] It's 'cos it's a laugh. You enjoy it. And I think it does boil down to that. You enjoy it and it's quite relaxing. You can switch off and stuff. And you enjoy it.

Later, he re-emphasised this sense of relaxation:

It's a relaxation thing, so I can be more of myself at [the club] with these people that I know really well...I am more myself at [the 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 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 was a sentiment expressed by many members across the case study clubs. Indeed, many used exactly the same formulation, i.e. that they could be “more themselves” at the club.

This finding supports several previous empirical studies of social capital. For example, Crossley (2008, 486), in his ethnographic study of social capital in a private health club, described it as follows: “[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. It is relevant in this sense that a number of group members, on different occasions, expressed the view that their time spent at the gym was a time where the individual could ‘be him/herself’, dropping what by implication were portrayed as the pretences and controls required by interaction in other contexts.” Many authors (e.g. Goffman 1959, 1961; Honneth 1995; Simmel 1955) have argued that spaces in which individuals can develop distinct identities and recognition are central to self-esteem, agency and psychological well-being. The evidence from the case studies suggests that voluntary sports clubs, like the health club in Crossley's study, “played an important facilitative role in this respect” (2008, 486).

The key issue here, though, is how this expression of a more relaxed, “leisured” identity shaped people’s willingness to exchange resources. One of the tennis club members discussed this in detail. He explained how he had, over his more than 20 years of membership, engaged in repeated “resource exchange” with other members – employing and being employed (as a consultant) by others, entering into joint property purchases, and so on. He linked this directly to the relaxed identities that members adopted when interacting at the club:

I think it’s quite refreshing to come to – I mean, I think, I *do* think it’s to do with the relaxation element, more...it’s much easier to facilitate [exchanges] than, er, you know, work setting can be quite, um, particularly nowadays, now that work’s changed, if you’re like a self-employed consultant and you’re working with other consultants, in a, for an organisation, you’re cutting each other’s throats to get the work, so the friendships tend to be a bit tainted.

A similar picture emerged across the clubs. Although the *type* of resource exchange was often on a less significant scale, the influence of identity on the *process* was similar. For example, the cricket club member, who above discussed the way he was “more himself” at the club, said that this meant he was more likely to mix in, do favours for others and so on: “You say, ‘Can you just go and do this for me? Can you look after the kids? Lend us a tenner, I’ll lend you a tenner. What are you doing later, are you free to meet up?’ You do meet up. Blah blah blah.”

This repeated finding, i.e. that the expression of a “leisured” or “club” identity appeared to make people more willing to exchange resources with others in the group, directs our attention to the key question of how we should think about the models of

human behaviour that underpin conceptions of social capital. As noted earlier, many dominant versions of social capital, including those most frequently employed in the economics literature, incorporate notions of utility-maximisation (e.g. Becker 1996; Glaeser et al. 2002). Critics, however, have emphasised the way that commitment to social values and shared social identities can shape people's actions, something usually neglected in rational-choice accounts (Christoforou 2013). While it is notoriously difficult to disentangle such motivations, the case studies, in revealing the influence of "club identity" on people's willingness to trust and exchange resources with others, offered support to the latter "reading" of motivations.

Such a "reading" might be best understood by reference to affect control theory, which suggests that "emotions experienced in exchange are contingent on the actors' identities" (Lawler and Thye 1999, 229). Certain identities – workplace roles, for example – may involve norms that require control of emotional displays, whereas other identities – friend, husband, team-mate, etc. – may "normatively allow or generate richer emotional experiences" (Lawler and Thye 1999, 229). The case studies, as we saw, provided strong evidence that sports club members experienced their involvement as a way of being 'more themselves'. In line with affect control theory, this suggests an emotional "reading" of the ability to secure resources, i.e. the social capital, of club members. As Lawler and Thye (1999, 229) put it, "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."

This empirical analysis, though necessarily brief, has demonstrated that social capital was embedded in, and shaped by, the socio-organisational context within which ongoing social interaction occurred. In particular, it has suggested that social identity, deriving from people's reflexive understandings of their group roles, influences their willingness to exchange resources with others in the group. These provisional conclusions direct us to another question, namely does the willingness to make resources available to others in the club extend to those outside the club? This is what Torche and Valenzuela (2011) call the question of "the universalistic potential of social capital" and it is of paramount importance for those who are interested in the potential of social capital to promote positive social change.

### **The possibilities for positive social change**

This question of the universalistic potential of social capital might be seen as the crux of the social capital debate. While Putnam (1993) explicitly discussed how values and attitudes learned within voluntary associations "spill over" into wider society, Bourdieu (1986, 248) emphasised how access to resources was directly "linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." More recently, scholars have examined this question through discussion of "bonding" and "bridging" social capital, terms coined by Gittel and Vidal (1998), but popularised by Putnam (2000). While bonding refers to the willingness to exchange resources with others "like us," or in the group, bridging refers to the willingness to extend this exchange to others "unlike us," or outside the group. In these terms, the question then becomes whether (and if so, how) bonding social capital might be transformed into bridging social capital. As with

seeking to specify the motivations that underpin resource exchange, this is a notoriously difficult question. Moreover, the case study did not focus on this issue; it focused instead on how social capital developed within the clubs themselves. Nevertheless, it offered some partial insights that might help us start to address the question.

Most often, when members reflected on how and why they formed social ties and how and why they exchanged resources, they emphasised the role of the club in these processes. For example, the cricket club member who discussed how he was ‘more himself’ at the club and how this led to him “mixing in” more and doing favours for other members, emphasised the boundedness of these processes: “Yeah,” he said, “It’s limited to the cricket club. Just because, yeah, I associate everyone in my own mind, just with cricket.” As an example, he said, “Yeah, I don’t *phone up* someone at the cricket club and say, ‘Can you babysit for me tonight?’” Other members at both clubs made similar comments. This reinforces the notion above that the particular “exchange contexts” of the clubs trigger particular identities among members (Kramer 2009), which encourage the development of social capital, but that this process does not necessarily extend beyond the boundaries of the clubs.

This corresponds with wider analysis of voluntary sport organisations. For example, both Coalter (2007) and Auld (2008) argue that the mutual benefit nature of sports clubs means they should be seen primarily as sites of bonding social capital. In this respect, Leonard’s (2004) ethnographic study of community networks in West Belfast is pertinent. Leonard questions many of Putnam’s assumptions about the ‘spill-over effect’ and contends that moving from bonding to bridging social capital is beset with



contradictions. Where communities are already steeped in internal inequalities, any transition to bridging social capital is likely to produce unequal benefits. Moreover, these benefits may accrue more to individuals than communities.

This raises again issues of power, hierarchy and the wider institutional context around sports clubs. In fact, one of the club organisers at the tennis club touched on these issues when discussing broader social perceptions of tennis. He said:

Tennis has, perhaps, historically, the way I see it, a bit of a, a class issue, you know, and issues around whether or not they...it is, um, you know, open to everyone, whether it's more of a middle class or upper class type activity. Actually, my personal view is that I think Wimbledon unfortunately sort of carries on with that type of feeling in a much more...there's an elitist kind of, yeah, what's the word, there's an elitism around Wimbledon, which maybe sort of percolates down through the clubs.

This brings us back to the earlier discussion of sport as “a social phenomenon and cultural space that can operate...as a form of social closure” (Sugden and Tomlinson 2000, 318). The organiser explained that the club itself sought to be as open as possible, i.e. to accept anyone who wanted to become a member, but that “ability to pay” and the “type of people” who traditionally played, or wanted to play, would inevitably affect who joined the club.

Here we do try to be absolutely *open*...If you look at the website, it's pretty clear, I would have thought, that, you know, people can – I mean, I don't know whether – I mean, the difficulty is that to run a club I suppose you have to charge a certain amount, which is relevant to its maintenance. It's not like as if you can, as if you can sort of, you know, have free entry and things like that, so the fact that you have to pay might mean that you limit some people

who might want to join, you know, on the economics of actually joining, so that could be a problem, I guess. And maybe you kind of determine to some degree the type of character at the club by the fact that you do have a fee to join. I mean, if you're a full member here, it's over £500.

This reinforces an embedded, Bourdieusian notion of social capital. Indeed, Bourdieu's work demonstrated that “[s]ocial exchange is usually reciprocal with those of the same social status and exploitative with those of different status; therefore it sustains structures of unequal distribution of economic and social resources among individuals” (Christoforou 2013, 723). This suggests that social capital can develop within voluntary sport organisations and other constructed forms of social organisation without leading to reduction of, or challenge to, societal-level inequality – something that Fine (2001, 2010) and other critics have argued. As Portes and Landolt (2000, 532) put it, “given the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in society, actors may have trustworthy and solidary social ties and still have access to limited or poor quality resources.”

The question remains, though, whether, despite this embeddedness, a process of “value introjection” (Portes 1998) can still operate to instil a more generalised willingness to exchange resources and demonstrate solidarity with others outside of an immediate social network. This is the kind of possibility that Christoforou (2013, 732) discusses when she draws on the work of van Staveren (2001) and Nussbaum (2002) to argue that we might,

extend emotions and deliberations of care to a larger group of people with whom, as human beings, we share common needs for freedom and justice. In other words, this could be a point

of departure for creating generalised norms and networks of reciprocity and cooperation that combine bridging and bonding forms of social capital and create the type of synergy that supports wider development and welfare objectives.

If we accept that social capital is embedded within particular socio-organisational contexts and that social capital benefits, on the whole, accrue to members of the network or organisation, can we still hold to a notion of more universalised reciprocity?

There was limited evidence from the case study for such a process, although, as noted, the focus was not on this. In addition, it should be said that the nature of such a process makes it problematic, perhaps impossible, to discern through observation or through interpretation of interviewees' personal, retrospective accounts. Still, some members did tentatively raise the possibility of such a process in the course of their discussions. For example, one of the most reflective interviewees likened his involvement and interaction at the cricket club to a form of "social training." He said:

Well...I used to think, 'What's the point of practising, because I won't, I can't really feel myself getting any better?' So, it's the same thing, like, I'm hanging out with all these people, I'm doing all this stuff, like, I can't tell that it's making me any more social, but...it probably is, basically...I go to the gym, you go the gym, [you think] this is basically doing nothing, although after two years, if you hadn't gone to the gym at all in the last two years, you know your body would be different. And that's sort of what I think about the cricket. If I hadn't been going to the cricket all the time, I'd probably be...more, yeah, closed off to strangers.

Of course, much more research is needed to draw out and elaborate such notions, but they offer at least the possibility that social capital might extend beyond the

immediate setting within which it develops. This provides tentative, provisional support for accounts of social capital that identify how social exchange rooted in contexts characterised by reciprocity and mutual obligations might influence individuals' wider behavioural patterns (Christoforou 2013; Polanyi 1944).

## **Conclusions**

This article has examined social capital in the context of voluntary sport organisations. In so doing, it has highlighted several important issues around how social capital should be conceptualised and how it develops. First, the empirical analysis provided strong support for an organisationally embedded perspective on social capital. This perspective, as Small (2009, 177) describes it, "suggests, above all, that what researchers have called a person's social capital depends substantially on the institutional practices of the organizations in which the person routinely participates." The analysis suggested that the way people formed ties through social interaction was intimately bound up with the routines and activities of the organisations and that people's willingness to exchange resources was shaped by specific elements of the socio-organisational context. This highlights the context-dependency of social capital (Johnston and Percy-Smith 2003) and suggests a conception of social capital more in line with Bourdieu's (1986) original formulation than with Putnam's (2000).

Second, the analysis demonstrated that identity influenced the processes of social capital development. Specifically, the socio-organisational context triggered the expression of a 'leisured' identity among club members, which directly influenced

their willingness to exchange resources. This provides empirical support to identity-based accounts of social capital development (e.g. Kramer 2009). In discussing the influence of identity on social capital, Christoforou (2013, 732) notes Davis's (2007) notion of an obligation-based deontological principle of rationality, which explains how individuals associate within particular groups. The case studies provided evidence that such a principle underpinned behaviour within the context of the clubs, encouraging members to make resources available to others in the group.

Third, and directly related, the analysis thus indicated that a purely rational-choice model of human behaviour could not adequately explain social capital development. While dominant versions of social capital, especially in the economic literature, are based explicitly or implicitly on utility maximisation (e.g. Becker 1996; Glaeser et al. 2002), the close analysis afforded by the case studies indicated an 'emotional', or 'identity-expressive' content to social exchange. Again, the socio-organisational context within which regular social interaction took place appeared to determine the salience of particular social identities for members, which, in turn, shaped the way they formed social ties and their willingness to make resources available to group members. Such findings support more 'socialised' accounts of social capital (e.g. Christoforou 2013), which act as a critique of traditional, neoclassical accounts.

Finally, the article provided an example of in-depth, qualitative investigation of social capital processes. As a number of methodological critiques have noted, such research on social capital is necessary, given the dynamic, context-dependent nature of the phenomenon (Crossley 2008; Johnston and Percy-Smith 2003; Schuller et al. 2000; van Deth 2003). In particular, given the increasing emphasis on the role of identity in

social capital development, it is important to probe the reflexive accounts of individuals involved in particular organisations and to directly observe social interaction in concrete settings. Such small group research also holds out the promise of linking micro and macro analysis of social capital. As Gary Alan Fine puts it (quoted in Sassatelli 2010, 91), “With their ongoing, self-referential, and embedded activities, groups provide spaces in which meaning is generated, making explanations possible from which we can build our sociological explanations. As theorists, we may need to go beyond the group in our explanations, but that is where we begin.”

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