



## More than a sport and volunteer organisation: Investigating social capital development in a sporting organisation



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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a study that examines the development of social capital within an Australian sporting organisation, Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA). The study draws on the social capital literature across the not-for-profit sector and specific sport management social capital research. The research design incorporated an interpretive approach with data collected nationally from eight focus groups with key SLSA staff, board members and 'toes in the sand' volunteers. The findings provide fresh insights into the development and understanding of social capital within a sporting organisation. Both bonding and bridging were important social capital outcomes of the organisation's activities, albeit with important implications for antecedents and process. The data presented strong evidence for arguing that within the organisation bonding within the club comes first, which importantly provides a very strong sense of belonging and mutual support for club members, from volunteers through to the board. The strength of bonding provides a powerful base for subsequent bridging capital to the local, regional and national stakeholder communities that are associated with the organisation. Further, social capital develops in both the collective and individual, with leveraging of individual skills contributing to human capital development, which is closely connected to and inseparable from social capital. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical implications for social capital generally and social capital in a sporting context.

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This paper explores the relationship between sport and social capital. Social capital refers to "those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). A growing body of sport management literature has recognised how social capital develops in the networks of volunteers and stakeholders connected through community sport organisations (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Auld, 2008; Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Coalter, 2007; Collins & Kay, 2003; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Hoyer & Nicholson, 2011; Jarvie, 2008; Maxwell & Taylor, 2010; Nicholson & Hoyer, 2008; Okayasu, Kawahara, & Nogawa, 2010; Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011; Seippel, 2006; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Tonts, 2005). However, Coalter (2007) suggests that the development of social capital is yet to be fully categorised and empirically confirmed in sport. This paper empirically explores how voluntary sport organisations can contribute in an important way to the development of social capital in communities.

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To do so, this paper reports on a study designed to empirically investigate the social impact of a non-profit organisation, that of Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA). SLSA is both a sporting and volunteer organisation as it has the dual purpose of providing sporting opportunities, together with safety and rescue services on Australian beaches. SLSA is a well-known Australian non-profit organisation that has a high profile in the community. It operates professionally through a branch structure of national and state organisations but is run predominately by volunteers at the club level. Over the last decade SLSA has faced a series of challenges instigated by broader social issues common to all sporting organisations including pressures on the volunteer workforce, increasing levels of compliance, litigation and competition for members (Independent Sport Panel, 2009; Robinson & Palmer, 2010). SLSA was also at the centre of a significant social flashpoint, which involved a verbal and physical confrontation between two local surf lifesavers and a number of young Australians of Middle Eastern background, which served as a caution that unless SLSA embraced diversity and multiculturalism it would not be relevant in modern Australian society (Fitzgerald & Giles, 2007; Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey, & Furneaux, 2011; Poynting, 2006).

The management of SLSA recognised that the combination of these organisational and social issues required strategic responses if it were to position itself to be relevant in the 21st century (Ford, Giles, Hodgetts, & O'Connell, 2007; Surf Life Saving Australia, 2007b). These broader issues involved the way that SLSA perceived itself from headquarters through to club level, the way that others perceived SLSA, the relative level of connectedness to the constituent communities at the club level and how inclusive or exclusive an organisation SLSA were perceived to be to those surrounding communities. These issues are central for strategic planning for non-profit organisations including sport organisations. One of those strategic responses was to gain a much better understanding of the social impact and contribution of the organisation in terms of its internal stakeholders to reappraise strategic planning at SLSA. Whilst the study was designed specifically for SLSA, this research has potentially broader implications for measuring social impact, social capital and social contribution in other sport organisations, the non-profit sector generally and may prove useful in developing government sport policy.

With this introduction, the central research question examines how social capital at the organisational level develops through volunteer civic activities of saving lives on the beach and associated sporting activities. Furthermore, we seek to understand the broader individual and community social impacts of these relational connections. The paper briefly reviews the concept of social capital through the literature as it pertains to third-sector organisations. Social capital is then examined in the context of sport and sporting organisations, before the research questions are presented, and then the SLSA context is discussed prior to describing the research design.

## 1. Literature review

The literature review considers the broad theoretical underpinnings of social capital, in particular the key factors in relation to bonding and bridging social capital and the interplay between forms of capital. We consider how such theories have applied to sports organisations.

### 1.1. Theoretical underpinnings of social capital

Social capital is an important, albeit contested concept. Schneider (2009) classifies the literature on social capital into two main approaches the 'neoTocquevillians' following Putnam's (2000) work where social capital is related to community civic health and those following Coleman (2000) connecting social capital to networks and the capacity for social capital to enable opportunity and access to other forms of capital. Work by Leonard and Onyx (2003), Onyx and Bullen (2000) takes a combined view of these approaches due to empirical modelling that suggests both are significant for the development and functioning of social capital within communities. Certainly all approaches emphasise the central role of relationships within networks.

Some have attempted to identify social capital as an individual possession, to be accumulated and used like any other form of capital, essentially relating it to the 'social side' of human capital (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002). Whilst these approaches provide interesting insights into the role individuals play in the development of social capital, they overlook Burt's (1997) work that distinguishes between social and human capital as 'social capital is a quality created between people, whereas human capital is a quality of individuals' (Burt, 1997, p.339). Burt went on to determine how people use human and social capital to their own advantage using the opportunity framing similar to that of Bourdieu (1985). For Bourdieu, social capital was primarily useful because it could convert into cultural and economic capital and, hence, was one way of preserving class advantage in relatively durable networks. However, Bourdieu also recognised that social capital derived from reciprocal action within social networks. Overall, we consider the conceptualisation of social capital as purely an individual asset empirically inadequate in describing the creation of social capital. Building on the work of Schuller (2007), Onyx and Leonard (2010) posit that all forms of capital interact in complex ways, and that the value of social capital may depend or be enhanced by its relationship to other capital whether that be human, financial or natural capitals. A considerable body of research has now identified that social capital may produce a variety of positive outcomes, beyond economic advantage, such as improved health and well-being (Halpern, 2005), improved governance (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and improved human skills and knowledge outcomes (Coleman, 2000). The link between social and human capital is of particular interest, with the OECD articulating that human capital encompasses skills, competences and qualifications (Schuller, 2007). Each capital enhances the presence of the other. Extending Schuller's work, this study empirically explored the interrelationships between social and human capital within reciprocal networks.

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