

# **Social Capital: A Multidimensional Binding Link in the Sport Communities**

**Akbar Heidary (Ph.D)**

Educational Organization, Zanjan, Iran

**Mojtaba Amiri (Ph.D)**

Member, Department of Management, University of Tehran, Iran

**Mohammad Ehsani (Ph.D)**

Member, Department Of Physical Education, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran

**Bita Asadi Kenari (M.Sc)**

Student, University of Shomal, Iran

## **Abstract**

The past decade has witnessed the rise of social capital as an important concept in academic and policy debates. Social capital is not necessarily a static and un-changing concept, and will vary considerably across space and time. The purpose of the present article was to consider social capital implications in different aspects specifically in the sport domain. It was systematic literature review and has taken archival and internet-based online materials into consideration. Obviously, Sport plays an important role in creating 'social capital' and helping communities develop trust, openness and respect for different individuals and groups. This can lead to greater cooperation and a higher level of unity and social cohesion within those communities.

Keywords: Social capital, trust, sport

## **Introduction**

The past decade has witnessed the rise of social capital as an important concept in academic and policy debates. While the term has a long history, its recent use is often linked to the writings of political scientist Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, and 2000). He argues that social capital is about the connections between individuals and refers to the "features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1995, pp. 664–665). In a similar vein, Cox (1995, p. 15) describes social capital as the "social fabric or glue" that ties members of a given place to one another. At the heart of the concept lie norms of trust and reciprocity (Field, 2003). The networks and social norms associated with social capital are created through various forms of engagement in associational and civic activities that involve personal interaction, thereby producing greater disposition towards trust and reciprocity (Mohan and Mohan, 2002). Social capital is not necessarily a static and un-changing concept, and will vary considerably across space and time. Indeed, this is a theme taken up by Mohan and Mohan (2002) who argue that in attempting to understand the nature of social capital it is important to recognize that its form will vary considerably depending on geographical and social context (see also Onyx and Bullen, 2000). One element of this is the difference between what Putnam (2000) has called bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive) social capital (see also Black and Hughes, 2001; Woolcock, 2001). Bonding social capital refers to trust reciprocity

within dense or closed networks. It tends to be inward looking and reinforces exclusive identities and homogenous groups (e.g. the bonds within a closely knit sporting club). By contrast, bridging social capital refers to wider overlapping networks that generate broader identities and reciprocity (e.g. links between people from other social groups which may differ in religion, ethnicity, or socio-economic status).

During the last ten years, the concept of social capital has been invoked almost in every field of social science research, and has been used to explain an immense range of phenomena, from political participation to the institutional performance, from health to corruption, from the efficiency of public services to the economic success of countries. However, despite the immense amount of research on it, social capital's definition remains elusive and, also due to the chronic lack of suitable data, there is neither a universal measurement method, nor a single underlying indicator commonly accepted by the literature. From a historical perspective, one could argue that social capital is not a concept but a *praxis*, a code word used to federate disparate but interrelated research interests and to facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplinary boundaries (Durlauf and Fafchamps 2004). As pointed out by Brown and Ashman (1996), one of the primary benefits of the idea of social capital is that it is allowing scholars, policy makers and practitioners from different disciplines to enjoy an unprecedented level of cooperation and dialogue.

The concept of social capital initially appeared in the field of sociology. Bourdieu (1985) formally proposed the term with the definition of "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition". With the development of the theory, the concept of social capital has become increasingly popular in a wide range of social science disciplines such as sociology, political science and economics and organizational studies (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

### **Social Capital Defined**

Social capital, although a somewhat contested concept, is often defined as the "features of social life - networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1995:664-665). In broad terms, social capital relates to the resources available within communities as a consequence of networks of mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation (ABS, 2000). Social capital has been noted as a force that can help bind society together by transforming individuals into members of a community with shared interests and assumptions about social relations (Newton, 1997). The report provides much evidence of links between sport and social capital. In the early 1990s, Putnam (1993) claimed that the strengthening of communities could be achieved if a virtuous circle of civic trust, norms, networks and reciprocity was facilitated and sustained. He also explained that choral societies, sports clubs and community organizations were important vehicles through which such strength was developed, and that these organizations were good indicators of strong communities (Putnam, 1995). He believes that there are two main mechanisms which allow the creation of social capital through participation in the arts and sport. The first is the bonds and connections made between people who participate in an activity together, for instance members of a sports team or a band. The second is the bonds created between supporters of a local sports team or fans of a band (Putnam, 2005).

Although there is no universally accepted definition of social capital, it is argued that social capital implies the capability for obtaining various benefits through the relationship with social

networks or other social structure (Baker, 1990; Burt, 1992; Putnam, 1993; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1997). And it includes three core factors, namely network, trust and norms (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

### **Theoretical Foundation**

With deepening the research, the theory of social capital developed from individual level (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1985; Portes, 1995) to national level (Burt, 1992; Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995), and to firm level (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Leenders and Gabbay, 1999; Yli-Renko et al., 2001; Landry and Amara, 2002). In organizational studies, the concept of social capital is gaining currency. It proves to be a powerful factor explaining actors' relative success in a number of arenas of central concern to organizational researchers, such as inter unit resource exchange, product innovation, the creation of intellectual capital, cross-functional team effectiveness, supplier relations and so on.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1997, 1998), as well as Ghoshal and Tsai (1998), made a series of research on social capital, intellectual capital and value creation of firms. And Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1997) defined it on firm level as the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit.

Leenders and Gabbay (1999) proposed the definition of corporate social capital as the set of resources, tangible or virtual, which accrue to an actor through the actor's social relationships, facilitating the attainment of goals. Corporate social capital consists of internal and external ones. The former one is called bonding forms, which focuses on collective actors' internal characteristics. The latter one is called bridging forms, which focuses primarily on social capital as a resource that inheres in the social network tying a focal actor to other actors. The behavior of a collective actor such as a firm is influenced both by its external social capital to other firms and institutions and by the fabric of its internal linkages: its capacity for effective action is typically a function of both (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

According to Fukuyama (1995a), societies endowed with generalized trust enjoy a form of social capital, that— complementary to traditional factor endowments like labor and capital— contribute at least as much to their success in modern economic competition.

Generalized trust is based on a set of ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalized by members of a community (Fukuyama, 1995a). High trust societies can make do with fewer regulations and coercive enforcement mechanisms. In this view, trust is seen as a substitute for contracts. But when an institutional system functions properly, the function of trust should be seen in the light of the facilitation of complex transactions.

One of the mechanisms through which social capital impacts economic efficiency is by enhancing the prevailing level of trust. In high social capital communities, people may trust each other more because community's networks provide better opportunity to punish deviants (Coleman (1990), Spagnolo (1999)). At the same time, in high social capital communities people may rely more on others keeping their promises as a result of a moral attitude imprinted with education (Banfield (1958)). Since financial contracts are trust intensive contracts par excellence, social capital should have major effects on the development of financial markets. In fact, financing is nothing but an exchange of a sum of money today for a promise to return more money in the future. Whether such an exchange will take place depends upon not only the legal enforceability of contracts, but also the extent the financier trusts the financee. Since social capital is an important determinant of the level of trust, it should also affect the level of financial

development.

### **Is Social capital a 'capital'?**

Some academicians have questioned the use of the word 'capital' to capture the essence of social interactions and attitudes. Indeed, social capital exhibits a number of characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of capital. First, unlike physical capital, but like human capital, social capital can accumulate as a result of its use. Put differently, social capital is both an input into and an output of collective action. To the extent that social interactions are drawn on to produce a mutually beneficial output, the quantity or quality of these interactions is likely to increase. Second, although every other form of capital has a potential productive impact in a typical Robinson Crusoe economy, social capital doesn't (at least not until Friday emerges from the sea); creating and activating social capital requires at least two people. In other words, social capital has public good characteristics that have direct implications for the optimality of its production level. Like other public goods, it will tend to be under produced because of incomplete collective internalization of the positive externalities inherent in its production.

Social capital shares several attributes with other forms of capital, however.

Foremost, it is not costless to produce, as it requires an investment—at least in terms of time and effort, if not always money—that can be significant. The trusting relationships among the members of a sports club or professional organization often require years of meeting and interacting to develop. As Putnam shows in his analysis of civic associations in Italy, embodied social capital can take generations to build and to become fully effective.

The first step is to consider the two words making up the concept. First, 'capital' is something that might give a future benefit. Capital combined with 'social' then leaves us with social relations of a special kind – containing and, potentially, generating resources – which, in the future, might have implications for actions in and postures towards other social actors or arenas. In this context, the social relations will be those emerging from participation in voluntary sport organizations; the implications are social trust and political interests.

Beyond this very basic understanding of what is implied by social capital, some of the more consequential controversies in the conceptual debate indicate what is at stake. A first consideration is whether social capital is an individual or a collective asset. Both possibilities are of potential sociological utility and interest, but in a context where the focus is on how individuals participating in one social arena differ – because of the social relations established within this arena – in their approach to other arenas (trust, interest), the most fruitful approach is to say that social capital is an individual asset based in social relations.

### **The problem of measuring social capital: a critical perspective**

Despite the immense amount of research on it, the definition of social capital has remained elusive. Conceptual vagueness, the coexistence of multiple definitions, the chronic lack of suitable data have so far been an impediment to both theoretical and empirical research of phenomena in which social capital may play a role. In this regard it is possible to observe that the problems suffered by empirical studies of social capital are, at some level, endemic to all empirical work in economics (Durlauf, 2002). Heckmann (2000) states that the establishment of causal relationships is intrinsically difficult: 'Some of the disagreement that arises in interpreting

a given body of data is intrinsic to the field of economics because of the conditional nature of causal knowledge. The information in any body of data is usually too weak to eliminate competing causal explanations of the same phenomenon. There is no mechanical algorithm for producing a set of 'assumption free' facts or causal estimates based on those facts' (Heckman 2000: 91).

However, according to Durlauf (2002) 'The empirical social capital literature seems to be particularly plagued by vague definition of concepts, poorly measured data, absence of appropriate exchangeability conditions, and lack of information necessary to make identification claims plausible' (Durlauf 2002: 22). In his article, the author reviews three famous empirical studies, concluding that they do not help in understanding the socioeconomic outcomes of social capital. Durlauf's critique is one step forward in respect to the position of some prominent economists, who doubt the possibility of providing credible measures, and question the opportunity itself to consider the concept as a useful analytical tool for economics.

### **Sport increases social capital**

Sport plays an important role in creating 'social capital' and helping communities develop trust, openness and respect for different individuals and groups. This can lead to greater cooperation and a higher level of unity and social cohesion within those communities.

Social capital is an umbrella term used to describe the institutions, relationships, attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contributes to economic and social development. Broadly speaking social capital is comprised of three core components — norms, networks and trust.

Putnam (2005) explains that there are probably two main mechanisms which allow participation in the arts and sport to create social capital. The first is the bonds and connections made between people who participate in an activity together, for instance members of a team or a band. The second is to do with identity. The bonds created between fans of a band or supporters of a local team are unlikely to be as strong as those who meet regularly to participate in an activity together. However it still creates a feeling of belonging and identification with a group which is defined by its support for that particular team. This is particularly strong in sport which tends to be defined by identification with a particular team. Also the success of a local team can generate an enormous sense of civic pride. However compared with the first mechanism, the amount of social capital this provides is probably quite small (Putnam, 2005).

### **Sociology of sport and social capital**

Looking to a more specific sport sociological discourse, not explicitly occupied with how social capital or civil society works or operates, we find, supporting Uslaner, arguments strongly in favor of participation in sport as conducive to various social competencies (though not very clear exactly which) that seem close to social capital and that should, by all means, have positive social and political implications: 'Sports can teach. Sports can shape. Sports can unify.

Sports can comfort. Sports can uplift' (Gough, 1997: xv) or 'Sport trains young people to become independent, self controlled, resolute, responsible, and communal in their outlook' (Papp and Prisztoka, 1995: 375). This is in accordance with a traditional upper-class view associated with 'English sport', emphasizing that sport is an activity that involves building of character through social cooperation (Elias, 1971; Mandell, 1984).

Yet, the opposite view is perhaps just as commonly offered. First, on a general societal level,

based on various critical perspectives, several authors question the ability of sport to fulfil such positive visions because of its narrow and one-dimensional focus on competitive success, processes of commercialism and professionalism (Hargreaves, 1986; Lasch, 1991; Gruneau, 1993; Morgan, 1994). Still others ask if modern sport is not about to turn into the opposite of such classic ideals through cultural developments; as a place of male chauvinism, nationalism, one-dimensional instrumentalism, racism and violence (Tännsjö and Tamburrini, 2000).

If the insights from sport sociology should be given hypothetical forms besides a general pro and contra, distinctions have to be made between different aspects of sport activities: various types of activities (e.g. team sport versus individual sport), various sport, various social groups and cultures and competitive level. Our data do not allow for these kinds of analysis, so I will not proceed with such questions here, but they are important for future studies within the field.

### **Social capital and sport: Challenges**

It has been suggested that sport has an important role to play in the civil renewal agenda, in particular because of its ability to foster social capital. There are a number of ways it is said to do this: it is often a social activity and membership of sports clubs and groups is one of the key forms of associational life identified by Putnam as being important for social capital; sports groups create networks which extend beyond the participants themselves, for instance among groups of parents or supporters of a local team, or volunteers who help run an activity; finally sport plays a valuable role in building shared identities, creating a bond between different groups of people together as supporters of a national, regional or local team.

Of course not all types of sport have the same effect and sport may even in some circumstances have a negative impact. For instance going for a run alone in the local park is not going to create the same level of social capital as joining a running club, likewise the bonds between a spectator at a football match and his or her fellow supporters on the terraces are not likely to be as strong as those between team mates who play in their club at the weekend. Also the social capital created by sport can also be used for ill as well as for good, with the networks and bonds it creates being used to exclude as well as include.

For those interested in social capital, studies of sport and sporting clubs have gradually become a more serious avenue of inquiry. The associational nature of sports participation (and particularly sporting clubs) is sometimes seen as a forum for the creation of social capital (Jarvie, 2003). Indeed, a significant component of Putnam's (2000) analysis of the decline of social capital in the United States was focused on a tendency amongst a growing number of people not to participate in traditional sporting clubs (e.g. his observation that Americans are now 'bowling alone' rather than bowling as part of a team or club). At the same time, however, he notes the emergence of new sports (e.g. youth soccer) with high levels of participation and civic engagement.

The most compelling empirical evidence in support of the social capital thesis comes from household and community level (i.e. "micro") studies, drawing on sophisticated measures of community networks, the nature and extent of civic participation, and exchanges among neighbors. In the OECD countries, the most comprehensive findings have emerged from urban studies (e.g. Gittell and Vidal 1998; Sampson, Morenho and Earls 1999), public health (Kawachi, Kennedy and Glass 1999; Kawachi and Berkman 2000) and corporate life (Meyerson 1994; Burt 2000; Fernandez, Castilla and Moore 2000), the unifying argument being that, controlling for other key variables, the well-connected are more likely to be hired, housed, healthy, and happy. Specifically, they are more likely to be promoted faster, receive higher salaries, be favorably

evaluated by peers, miss fewer days of work, live longer, and be more efficient in completing assigned tasks. An increasingly large number of studies — drawing on an intellectual tradition going back to Smith and Marshall — also explore the role of “communities of practice” within and strategic alliances between firms, especially in the finance, bio- technology, and software industries (e.g. Lesser 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000). To the extent that local and regional growth performance is driven by these types of alliances, innovative policies to facilitate their emergence need to be given serious consideration.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of the present article was to consider social capital implications in different aspects specifically in the sport domain. During the last ten years, the concept of social capital has been invoked almost in every field of social science research, and has been used to explain an immense range of phenomena, from political participation to the institutional performance, from health to corruption, from the efficiency of public services to the economic success of countries. However, despite the immense amount of research on it, social capital’s definition remains elusive and, also due to the chronic lack of suitable data, there is neither a universal measurement method, nor a single underlying indicator commonly accepted by the literature.

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So, it is suggested Iranian sport communities take social capital for granted to enhance their efficiency and potentials. Unfortunately, lack of trust among sporting authorities has diminished the required cooperation for the good of sport specially professional sports. That is why, national teams members can’t achieve the expected goals. Hence, Social capital and its bonding dimensions can act a link to associate both authorities, fans and athletes together for the prosperity of the sports communities in Iran.

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