Examining Social Capital Development Among Volunteers of a Multinational Sport-for-Development Event

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Much sport-for-development (SFD) research has focused on the impact initiatives have on participants, and not on other stakeholders such as volunteers. Some research suggests volunteerism enables social capital gains, while other scholars have been skeptical, with even less known about how volunteers are impacted by working for SFD events rather than for ongoing programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how, if at all, a large, multinational SFD event contributed to social capital development of volunteers. Findings revealed volunteers experienced social capital development through building relationships, learning, and enhanced motivation to work for social change and reciprocity. As very little research has examined the efficacy of SFD events in contributing to social capital development, the findings extend the literature on SFD events. It would be prudent for SFD events to target programming to impact the experience of volunteers to retain them and contribute to social capital development.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of a nonprofit organization (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). Specifically in the field of sport, volunteers have been recognized as a valuable resource to help achieve organizational objectives (Cuskelley, 1998). While there has been an increased amount of research on volunteer motivation in sport (Coyne & Coyne, 2010; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013a; Wollebæk, Skirstad, & Hanstad, 2012), there have been far fewer efforts to evaluate the impact of the experience on the volunteers themselves. Within the sport-for-development (SFD) field, and in particularly with SFD events, which rely heavily on volunteers to achieve objectives, there has been even less attention paid to examining the impact of volunteering on the volunteers (Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011).

Sport for development is the concept of using sport as a development engine for achieving positive impact on society through intercultural exchange, conflict resolution and peace building, assisting marginalized populations, or focusing on public health (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schwery, 2003). Over the last 20 years, interest and research in SFD has grown exponentially, with a number of very high profile initiatives and events promoting the perceived success and effectiveness of SFD initiatives (such as Beyond Sport, Laureus, and Score 4 Africa; Kidd, 2008, 2011; Levermore, 2011). In addition, the United Nations Office on Sport-for-Development and
Peace works in an international sphere to facilitate sport-based development policies and agendas (Darrell, 2012).

Most of the emerging research in SFD has centered upon investigating the impact of these events and programs on their actual participants, not volunteers. The literature suggests that SFD events and programs, if designed and managed well, have the capacity to use sport positively to affect issues of social injustice, inclusion, and peace. For example, researchers have found that the Homeless World Cup and Street Soccer USA have effectively used the sport of soccer to help homeless participants increase bonding and bridging social capital through reducing social exclusion, and enhancing self-esteem, trust, and a sense of belonging (Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Welty Peachey, Borland, Lyras, & Cohen, 2013). However, Magee and Jeanes (2013) found that among young male players from the U.K. at the Homeless World Cup, the stressful and pressurized atmosphere reinforced failures and lack of competencies for the players, calling into question the efficacy of the event in fostering social capital. Nevertheless, other scholars found sport can help build bonding and bridging social capital among urban youth and in underprivileged communities (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Spaaij, 2009); enhance bonding and bridging social capital in ethnically divided Sri Lanka (Schulenkorf et al., 2011); and that sport can play a vital role in peace-building efforts among youth historically in conflict (Lyras, 2012; Sugden, 2008). These outcomes speak to the social relevance of SFD events and initiatives.

However, it must be acknowledged that the efficacy of SFD is contested terrain among scholars. For instance, Coalter (2007, 2010) raises important issues such as the difficulty in proving long-term impact of SFD initiatives, the challenge of isolating the contribution of sport to development from other educational and cultural development activities, and the neo-colonial view of importing SFD initiatives designed in the Global North to the Global South with little input from local stakeholders. Other scholars have also criticized the functional and neo-colonial policies of many SFD initiatives (Hayhurst, 2009; Kidd, 2008; Levermore 2008, 2009) along with the neo-liberal philosophy, explicating that the efficacy of sport as a development tool is constrained if SFD simply helps participants better themselves in an inequitable system while ignoring the inherent structures of inequality (Darrell, 2010).

Notwithstanding these criticisms of SFD, volunteers are integral to many SFD events and programs, carrying out key functions and advancing the mission of the organization. Some limited research notes volunteering has the potential to produce a form of engagement and social participation, which creates social bonds and contributes to social capital (Baum et al., 1999; Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013b). Wilson and Musick (1999) suggest one of the most prevalent outcomes of volunteeringism includes the increased development of social capital. However, other authors contend greater empirical evidence is needed to support claims that volunteering can positively impact social capital development (Baum et al., 1999; Brown & Ferris, 2007; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). While work has begun to look at the contribution of SFD initiatives to social capital development of volunteers (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b), very little research has examined how volunteers are impacted by working for SFD events, in particular, with multinational SFD events comprised of stakeholders from many countries and cultures. As such, the purpose of this preliminary study, and the central research question, was to investigate how, if at all, a large, multinational SFD event (i.e., the World Scholar-Athlete Games [WSAG]) contributed to social capital development of its volunteers.

Social Capital

Social capital has been advanced in various contexts for more than a century, having been first articulated by Marx, and it remains a contested term with multiple theoretical perspectives (Adams, 2011). The three most important theoretical interpretations have been attributed to Bourdieu (1984, 1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1995, 2000). Pierre Bourdieu first formulated thoughts on social capital in the 1980s based upon the class struggles of the disadvantaged, unequal access to resources, and unequal distribution of power (Coalter, 2007). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships and mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). Social capital is unevenly distributed and predicated upon the resources individuals have access to within their networks, and is the exclusive property of elites who use it to secure their positions (Field, 2003). Thus, Bourdieu focuses on actors engaged in struggle and is skeptical about altruistic actions free from the constraints of individual interests (Sisiiäinen, 2003). Some sport and leisure scholars have adopted Bourdieu’s concept of social capital to guide their investigations. For instance, DeLuca (2013) found that sport club membership created socially segregated boundaries among different classes as middle class families preserved their social capital through membership, while Fulton (2011) discovered that boxing in England was instrumental in developing social capital.

Another major social capital theorist is Coleman (1988), who views social capital as a more ubiquitous resource instead of as a positional good, property, or asset belonging to a social class as articulated by Bourdieu (Coalter, 2007). For Coleman, social capital is “the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person” (Coleman, 1994, p. 300). Coleman (1988) references the mostly neutral aspects of social structure...
and social relationships, where social capital is a way of elucidating how people cooperate through the social processes resulting from free choice to further one’s self-interests (Coalter, 2007; Field, 2003). While not used as frequently as Bourdieu or Putnam, Coleman’s lens was employed by one study to examine the impact of school sports on participants and nonparticipants, finding that athletic programs could reduce the rate and number of disturbances among students (Langbein & Bess, 2002).

The third principal social capital theorist is Robert Putnam (1995, 2000), who places less emphasis than Bourdieu and Coleman on kinship relations and instrumentalism, and more on social capital as a public good that binds communities together (Coalter, 2007). Putnam (1995) defined social capital as the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that can facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 66). For Putnam, the key elements of social capital are trust, networks, and reciprocity. Once personalized, generalized, and institutionalized trust is developed, social networks can be created. Within these networks, an exchange process can then occur (reciprocity), where the concept is “I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor” (Putnam, 2000, p. 20).

Putnam articulated that increased social connectedness will bring about greater social solidarity and social cohesion for the benefit of society, particularly through the mechanisms of bonding and bridging into a larger, collective whole. Bonding social capital delineates social networks between homogenous groups, such as kin, neighbors, or close friends. Because of the close interaction and familiarity with each other, individuals acquire resources that allow them to “get by” or cope with situations. By contrast, Putnam posited that bridging social capital is formed when relationships are developed with individuals who are different from oneself (between socially heterogeneous groups), where social ties and bonds may be looser and more diverse in nature. As a result of these bridging relationships, individuals acquire potential to leverage a broader set of resources than what can be provided through bonding social capital alone.

Whether bonding or bridging, these formal and informal networks based upon reciprocity can lead to enhanced trust and greater benefits for society (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Putnam’s version of social capital as a foundation for a more productive, supportive, and trusting society has garnered increased support among policy makers (such as the new Labor agenda about community renewal in the UK—see Coalter, 2007) and academicians (Jarvie, 2003; Schulenkorf et al., 2011; Spaaij, 2009; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b). Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital informed the current study as his focus on trust, network development, reciprocity, and civic engagement are key aspects of volunteering and behavioral change (Coalter, 2007), which are of principal interest to the current study. In addition, other scholars have used Putnam to guide research on the social capital development of SFD volunteers (Welty Peachey et al., 2013b), to study the potential of SFD events to develop social capital (Schulenkorf et al., 2011), and to examine the connection between SFD initiatives and social capital development (Welty Peachey et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009).

Sherry, Karg, and O’May (2011) and Smith and Westerbeek (2007) argue that sport can provide an environment for the development of relationships within communities that could lead to an increase in social capital. Further, Burnett (2006) and Jarvie (2003) claim that sport has the potential to provide connections between diverse groups and facilitate social network development. For instance, Sherry et al. (2011) found that spectators experienced attitudinal change at the Homeless World Cup, which they claim signifies bridging social capital through the development of relationships with different individuals. Sherry and Strybosch (2012) also found that participants in the Australian Street Soccer program developed bonding and bridging social capital over the long term through enhanced social inclusion and self-identity, which led to better access to community support for housing, job attainment, and education. Other sport and leisure scholars have studied the contribution of sport to the social mobility of the disadvantaged among urban youth in the Netherlands, where modest increases in bonding and bridging social capital were uncovered (Spaaij, 2009); how soccer can serve as a conduit for making positive life changes among the homeless by fostering bridging relationships with disparate others which can lead to other community and social supports, and by encouraging reciprocity by way of volunteering to help sustain a sport-for-homeless initiative (Welty Peachey et al., 2013); and how sport can potentially reproduce and regenerate community social capital, although certainly not in all instances (Jarvie, 2003; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002; Smith & Ingham, 2003). Within the SFD event context, Schulenkorf et al.’s (2011) study with an intercommunity sport event in Sri Lanka found that the event enhanced bonding and bridging social capital and developed norms of reciprocity among various stakeholders.

Despite the positive social capital outcomes found in the literature, it must be acknowledged that a potential danger exists within Putnam’s (1995, 2000) conceptualization, whereby individuals are only linked with similar others (bonding social capital) and do not build bridging relationships with individuals different from themselves. If this transpires, social capital may impose conformity and social division instead of tolerance and acceptance (Blackshaw & Long, 2005) which can constrain engagement in wider society and diminish the positive effects of social capital development (Portes & Landolt, 1996). Unfortunately, just like other community-based organizations, SFD initiatives can promote insular norms and behavior that may engender strong bonding social capital without the requisite bridging relationships (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008).
Sport-for-Development Events and Social Capital

While scholarship is beginning to examine the efficacy of SFD initiatives to facilitate social capital development, very little research has examined how an SFD event may foster social capital in stakeholders and communities (Schulenkorf et al., 2011; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). The ability of SFD events to generate social capital may be quite different from longer running SFD programs and initiatives due to the temporal nature of events. Sport-for-development programs generally have scheduled activities that take place over a given length of time, whereas SFD events are short-term, intensive activities that last only a few days or a week, and thus, their efficacy in effecting positive outcomes could be constrained (Schulenkorf et al., 2011). In general, emerging research has shown that sport events can “enhance individual and collective capacities, improve efficacy, create social capital and, where poverty is implicated, promote social and economic justice and wellbeing” (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012, p. 380). Sport events may also positively influence community spirit and pride, intercultural learning, attitudes, beliefs, and values, as well as facilitate social inclusion and identity (Kidd, 2008; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). However, there are also potential negative impacts of sport events, such as the worsening of intergroup relations that reflect issues in the broader society (Armstrong & Giulianiott, 2001; Schulenkorf et al., 2011), and the potential to increase antisocial behavior (e.g., violence, criminal activity), which can lead to the accentuation of historical and prejudicial stereotypes (Armstrong & Giulianiott, 2001; Schulenkorf et al., 2011).

Specifically with regards to SFD events, as mentioned earlier, Schulenkorf et al. (2011) examined an intercommunity sport event in Sri Lanka, and found that bridging and bonding social capital were developed among various stakeholders through socializing, enhanced trust, reciprocity and solidarity, expanding networks, and learning and development. However, it was also found that stakeholders had differing attitudes toward organizers, participants, and spectators that were not conducive to social capital development. Furthermore, communication and management issues detracted from the event and its ability to foster social capital. In addition, as reviewed above, Sherry et al. (2011) found that spectators at the Homeless World Cup developed bridging social capital through the relationships formed with different individuals. However, Magee and Jeanes (2013) discovered that the stressful and pressurized atmosphere of the Homeless World Cup limited the efficacy of the event in fostering social capital. This limited literature suggests that SFD events, under certain conditions, may have the potential to develop social capital, but much more research is needed to investigate this possibility (Schulenkorf et al., 2011). The present study aims to address this gap.

Volunteerism and Social Capital

Sport volunteering can yield benefits for individuals and communities, such as increased social capital development through heightened levels of active citizenship and prosocial behavior (Eley & Kirk, 2002; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). Kay and Bradbury (2009) note two broad outcomes of social capital within a sport volunteerism context: fostering personal and skill development for individuals and social connectedness. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), in the U.S., it is estimated that 64.3 million individuals, or 26.8% of the population, volunteered at least once between September 2010 and September 2011. Volunteering for sport-related events and programs is highly popular; in fact, Cuskelly (2008) estimated that nearly 18–27% of volunteers worldwide volunteer within a sport context. Thus, the importance of fully understanding the volunteer experience in sport, including impacts of the experience on the volunteers in the SFD event context, is paramount. As with many constructs, scholars have yet to agree upon a universal definition of volunteerism. This difficulty in specifying one common classification is noted by Carson (1999), who states “defining what is meant by volunteering and what activities are included is not an easy task. . . . These definitional questions become more difficult when volunteering is recognized as a cultural activity that is conditioned by multiple factors” (p. 68). One definition of volunteering that has been used by numerous scholars, including those in sport management (Burgham & Downward, 2005; Downward, Lumsdon, & Ralston, 2005; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b), has been proffered by Davis Smith (1998): volunteering is “any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit (individuals and groups) other than or in addition to, close relatives, or the benefit of the environment” (p. 10).

Research has recognized individuals volunteer in an effort to satisfy a variety of motivations (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996; Welty Peachey et al., 2013a). Thus, different volunteer opportunities in sport attract and satisfy different volunteers. For example, large-scale events such as the Olympics provide volunteer roles for people who may simply want to be part of the event or travel to an exotic location (Fairley, Green, & Kellett, 2007). Others have noted that events or festivals can provide an outlet for volunteers to meet new people or experience social gains (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). In regards to SFD events and initiatives, studies have shown volunteerism provides a platform to combine one’s passion for sport with desires of altruism while receiving personal gains (Welty Peachey et al., 2013a). As with many sport organizations, SFD events and programs rely on volunteers to carry out their missions. While there is scant research that has examined the impact of volunteering on the volunteer with SFD events or programs, or even in the general sport environment, scholars have suggested that one of the prominent impacts of volunteering is the development of increased social capital (Wilson &
Musick, 1999). Through the active participation required during the act of volunteering, the experience can build trust, norms, and networks to improve society and foster a more active engagement and citizenship. Putnam (1995) echoed this contention, arguing that volunteering in sport contributes to the social capital of communities and helps strengthen civic society.

Welty Peachey et al. (2013b) examined volunteer impact with an SFD program called Street Soccer USA, which uses soccer as a means to help homeless individuals make positive changes in their lives. They found that the experience of volunteering with the organization increased both bonding and bridging social capital among the volunteers by building relationships with the homeless and by fostering reciprocity where volunteers were motivated to work actively on behalf of homeless issues in their communities and to give back to Street Soccer USA through ongoing volunteer engagement. Despite these potential positive contributions to social capital development through the act of volunteering, it must be cautioned that volunteering does not automatically guarantee positive impact or increased gains in social capital—these ideas remain in contention (Kay & Bradbury, 2009). The link between social capital and volunteering may be dependent upon context, the mission of the organization, the people involved, and the work that is being asked of the volunteers (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Wilson & Musick, 1999). In addition, individuals who volunteer with SFD events and organizations may develop more bonding social capital than bridging due to their personal connection to sport, and thus become more insular than altruistic in focus (Cuskelly, 2008). Kay and Bradbury (2009) also state that the capacity of volunteers to possess and use resources to access networks is critical to social capital formation. Darnell (2012) highlights that sport volunteerism is often accessible to young and generally successful people. They are drawn to perform service, but are in power positions over those they serve. Sport-for-development events and programs also have challenges with attracting and retaining volunteers, in adequately training them (Welty Peachey et al., 2013a), and in overcoming issues of power and privilege (Levermore, 2008).

Therefore, as demonstrated above, little is known about the efficacy of developing social capital through the SFD event volunteer experience. Perhaps due to the missions and social agendas of many SFD events and initiatives, and the potential for close connections to form between the volunteers and participants, the impact of the SFD event volunteer experience could be different from volunteering for other types of sport events or programs. This study aims to address this gap by examining how a multinational SFD event may contribute to social capital development among its volunteers.

Research Context

The setting for this research was the 2011 WSAG, which was held in Hartford, Connecticut. The WSAG is a large, multinational SFD event with a mission to bring together young people, ages 15–19, from around the world in an inclusive environment to promote understanding, peace, development, and social change (WSAG, 2012). The WSAG’s goal was centered upon developing community, relationships, and activism among its young participants, not necessarily its volunteers, as seen in the mission statement:

To encourage individual growth and the development of human potential in young scholars throughout the world. To develop global awareness in future world leaders. To use sport and the arts as mediums of peace. To develop a large network of Scholar-Athlete Games graduates who act as peace brokers in their respective communities and countries (WSAG, 2012).

As such, the WSAG can be classified as a SFD event, as it has a primary purpose of using sport, packaged with cultural and educational programming, to work at conflict resolution and peace building between youth from disparate countries and cultures (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schwery, 2003). This event was initiated in 1993 and has been held every four or five years since. To date, the WSAG has accommodated more than 10,000 participants from over 200 countries. The WSAG platform consists of a wide range of sports, fine arts, educational, cultural, and social activities, with the sports and fine arts programs coached or instructed by volunteers. Normally the event attracts close to 2,000 participants from 160–170 countries, but due to the economic climate and an unavoidable last-minute venue change, only 525 participants from 40 countries took part in the 2011 program. The WSAG was targeted at academically, athletically, and artistically gifted young people. The rationale articulated by organizers for targeting these talented youth was that they could one day be in key leadership positions in their respective countries in government, education, business, and other sectors. By gathering these youth together, issues of cultural acceptance and peace building could be addressed. The relationships formed and ideas shared could one day benefit society when the youth move into leadership positions. Participants were recruited through mailings to coaches, fine arts instructors, and principals at public and private secondary schools around the world, and through working directly with the governments of some nations to identify possible participants. Based on need, some international participants were provided with scholarships to attend the WSAG, which were funded by private and corporate donations. Even though some of these young people, but certainly not all, came from more privileged positions in society, this does not necessarily mean that they did not need to work at conflict resolution and peace building. While some were not disadvantaged socially or economically as are many participants in SFD programs, these young people could still have prejudiced attitudes or misunderstandings about individuals from different cultures and countries. Addressing these issues of
conflict resolution, peace building, and prejudice would be important if these young people are to move into leadership positions within their countries (WSAG, 2012).

At the 2011 event, approximately 150 volunteers led sports, arts, workshops, and extracurricular activities, along with assisting in operations and event management tasks. As the WSAG was targeted at gifted young people, this necessitated having a talented core group of volunteers to lead activities and mentor the international participants. In addition to skills instruction, volunteers were also responsible for guiding small group discussions with WSAG participants revolving around salient issues addressed by various keynote speakers. Some of these topics included conflict resolution, the global environment, technology, and ethics and sportsmanship. Different from many international sporting events, the WSAG platform does not consist of nation versus nation competition. Rather, young people from various countries and cultures, in particular participants from areas of the world that are in conflict, are strategically placed on the same sports teams or fine arts activity groups to use these mediums as vehicles to work at stereotype reduction and conflict resolution. Thus, volunteers experienced a unique environment focused on social change and not just sport competition, and had many opportunities to interact with and learn from participants and volunteers from diverse countries and cultures.

Methods

The current study is part of a larger project and partnership between the authors and the WSAG to assess its long-term impact on key stakeholders. The current study is also exploratory in its attempt to “gain a holistic overview” of the WSAG from “the local actors” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6) on how, if at all, social capital was developed, and thus, a qualitative mode of inquiry was employed. In addition, qualitative methods were well suited for providing a more robust picture of potential social capital development among WSAG volunteers than use of standardized instruments, as the researchers were able to explore the experiences of the volunteers in great depth and ask clarifying and probing questions to provide for rich data (Creswell, 2012). Further, qualitative methods were adopted, as other researchers have also used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of volunteers and impact on volunteers from volunteering in a sport context, specifically within SFD (Burnett, 2006; Frisby & Millar, 2002; Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b).

Participants and Procedures

Four members of the research team attended the 10-day event to conduct personal interviews and focus groups with a wide range of WSAG volunteers, and to engage in direct observations. Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012) was used to select 21 WSAG volunteers to serve as study participants. Participants were recruited through the use of a gatekeeper, a member of the WSAG staff involved in the operation of the event. The lead researcher worked with the gatekeeper to provide information about the research study to all volunteers. From those who indicated a willingness to participate, the researchers purposively sampled a diverse group of participants who could best inform the research and answer the central research question. Study participants ranged in their involvement with the WSAG from first-time experiences to veteran volunteers who had been involved upwards of 15 years. More long-term volunteers were included in the sample so that impact over time could be ascertained. The sample also represented volunteers from various countries and activities to adequately reflect the diversity of the event.

Table 1 provides further demographic information about the volunteer sample. The research team conducted personal interviews with nine volunteers to allow for more in-depth conversation on their experiences (Creswell, 2012). The personal interviews occurred throughout the 10-day event to best accommodate schedules of the volunteers. In addition, the researchers facilitated two focus groups on the last day of the event. Focus groups were used because this method gives researchers the ability to explore topics that may not be understood well or fully developed in the literature (Morgan, 1997), thus learning from interactions among participants. These interactions also enhance data quality because participants can serve to check each other’s interpretations (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Each of the two focus groups consisted of six volunteers, a number recommended by Creswell (2012) to allow participants adequate time to share and reflect. Holding focus groups on the last day of the WSAG allowed participants to talk about their full range of experiences during the entire event and permitted the researchers to build off the relationships that the volunteers had developed with each other during the event.

Personal interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min in length, whereas focus groups lasted approximately 90 min. All interviews were digitally recorded, and then transcribed verbatim by two authors. Pseudonyms were assigned to all study participants to aid in maintaining confidentiality. The interview guides were semistructured, allowing participants to expand on topic areas and for the researchers to ask additional follow-up questions as needed. Sample personal interview and focus group questions, which revolved around impact of the WSAG and were drawn from the literature on volunteerism and social capital, included the following: (a) How has being involved in the WSAG impacted you personally?; (b) In what ways has volunteering at the WSAG influenced your desire to continue volunteering?; (c) In what ways has volunteering at the WSAG influenced your desire to become involved in social issues?; and (d) In what ways have you expanded your social network through the WSAG?

The third data collection method involved direct observations. Direct observations served to corroborate and triangulate the findings to increase trustworthiness (Creswell, 2012). Four authors attended the WSAG for its entire duration, permitting observation of numerous
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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Note: WSAG, World Scholar-Athlete Games.
sport competitions, fine arts programs, educational programming, workshops, keynote speakers, the opening and closing ceremonies, and other social and extracurricular activities. Observations were also made at free time, and during lunches, dinners, breaks, and nightly activities. These direct observations were strategic, in that the researchers targeted a wide breadth of activities in which volunteers could be observed interacting with each other and with participants. The research team also strategically selected activities to observe so that the observational data could be used to confirm or disconfirm data drawn from the personal interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2012). In all, the research team observed volunteers in action at 35 sport events and practices ranging from fencing and swimming to basketball and track and field, as well as at 15 fine arts activities including dance, choir, and symphony. In addition, the research team observed volunteers who facilitated small group discussions with WSAG scholar-athletes after the keynote presentations. The volunteers were made aware of the researchers’ presence, and while this may have impacted the behavior of participants, volunteers were assured of confidentiality of all observations and interviews. All of these observations allowed the research team to watch the volunteers relating to each other as well as to the WSAG scholar-athletes. Field notes and memos from the observations were kept by all authors.

Data Analysis

In all, there were 90 transcript pages of personal interview data, 49 transcript pages of focus group data, and 34 pages of field notes drawn from direct observations. The data reduction process began with coding to a priori themes from the literature on volunteerism and social capital theory (Putnam, 1995). The analysis practice of starting with codes grounded in the conceptual framework of the study is one well-used approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, the researchers also acknowledged that other themes would emerge from the data, or be arrived at through a more inductive process allowing for the experiences or processes that became evident in the raw data to inform the analysis (Thomas, 2006). As a result, an open coding process was performed by the first and second authors, who went line by line through the transcripts, field notes, and memos to identify data that represented various impacts of the WSAG on its volunteers. In total, 50 codes were used, a combination of 18 a priori and 28 inductive. These codes, through discussions between the authors, were then condensed into second-order themes. For example, the codes of “make friends,” “meet people from around the world,” and “meet new people” were some of the codes collapsed into the theme of “building relationships.” The first and second authors independently coded the data and then met four times to evaluate the codes, themes, and significant findings in an effort to strengthen the dependability of the analysis. If disagreements emerged as to how data should be coded the authors engaged in discussion until agreement was reached. Finally, selective coding was conducted, where the authors identified quotations, and pertinent information from the field notes and memos, that best represented the themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data saturation occurred when themes drawn from the personal interviews, focus groups, and direct observations began to reinforce each other and no new themes emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The researchers adopted Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, credibility was enhanced through triangulation of measures (i.e., observations, individual interviews, and focus groups) and extended engagement by the researchers at the WSAG. In addition, member checks were conducted as all participants were asked to review their transcripts and the data interpretations of the researchers. None of the participants had any concerns about their transcripts, and participants agreed with the interpretations. Next, the researchers developed detailed descriptions of the WSAG history and mission, as well as the event site. Although the WSAG is a unique event, the details the researchers provided allow for the transferability of the findings to other SFD contexts. Then, for the dependability criterion, the researchers used purposive sampling with informants who possessed the knowledge and experience to comment on the WSAG. The researchers also protected confidentiality through assigning pseudonyms to participants and all places identified in the data so the volunteers felt comfortable expressing their opinions. In addition, the researchers conducted an audit of data collection, management, and analysis processes (Corley, 2004). The final criterion for trustworthiness was reliability. The researchers enhanced the confirmability of the findings by utilizing a strict protocol of the transcription and coding processes and then made use of qualitative data analysis software (NVIVO 9) to assist in data management (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

Findings

The purpose of the study, and central research question, was to investigate how, if at all, a large, multinational SFD event contributed to social capital development of its volunteers. Findings revealed that the WSAG facilitated social capital development of its volunteers by (a) building relationships, (b) encouraging learning, and (c) enhancing motivation to work for social change and reciprocity.

Building Relationships

One of the most prominent impacts on the volunteers, mentioned by 16 individuals, was the strong sense that relationships were formed and sustained at the WSAG. Many volunteers had a desire to meet other people for the purpose of developing new friendships and relationships. For Michael, a longtime volunteer, this event served as an opportunity to meet likeminded individuals and build
relationships with people from around the world as he noted in a personal interview:

I’m a relational kind of guy . . . So this was an opportunity to meet and develop friendships with athletes, coaches, and volunteers from all over the world who have the same vision of hopefully making an impact on the world and maybe hoping to expand the vision and minds of young people that we work with.

Through many direct observations, the research team noted this focus on meeting new people throughout the WSAG. Whether it was instructors from different disciplines sitting together at the lunch table, or volunteers from various countries playing with the youth during downtime, the research team often saw volunteers engaged in these informal relationship-building activities. For example, Alex, a former WSAG participant and current volunteer volleyball coach, was highly energetic from the start. He joked about this when discussing his desire to return to the WSAG in the future during a personal interview: “barring any conflict of schedule, I will be here, if they want me back, because I’m a presence and I’m loud.” Throughout the entirety of the WSAG, the research team observed him making significant efforts to immerse himself with the volunteers and scholar-athletes and attempt to meet as many people as possible. It was also observed that Michael made efforts to introduce himself to first-time volunteers and offer his advice or knowledge, and he was often seen taking the initiative to sit with scholar-athletes from different countries during meals and other events to learn to know them. He went on in his interview to suggest these bonds helped drive his desire to become and remain involved with the initiative:

In terms of why I come back, I still enjoy meeting people from other cultures and the kids, building friendships with people from all over the world. That’s the same reason I started 15 years ago and the same as today but a little further down the path.

Celena, a volunteer dance instructor from South America, shared her excitement over meeting other volunteers at the event during a personal interview: “For me, my most favorite part of the week . . . meeting some of the fantastic people that I’ve met.” Nelson, a first-time volunteer from Central America, also talked in a personal interview about his desire for his newly formed relationships to continue to grow and expand so future coaches and volunteers could experience the same impacts that he received:

It’s a very big experience for me. It was a very good conference for me. Very nice. I learned a lot. . . . I would like to see 500 or thousands of people here. And they can share the experience and what we learned. They can share the experience in their countries.

Gail, from North America, took advantage of the relationships formed at the WSAG to motivate her future philanthropic intentions and expanded on this in a personal interview:

[In] talking to other coaches who return, talking to you and finding that there are people who believe whole-heartedly in the project, who have a vision . . . it’s been completely enlightening for me right now.

Finally, during one of the focus groups, Wendy, another longtime volunteer, highlighted the correspondence that occurred beyond the event and the volunteers’ ability to communicate outside the WSAG: “Just knowing, meeting coaches . . . That kind of networking and just meeting people at other schools.” The research team observed her constantly assisting volunteers with problems they encountered in an effort to optimize everyone’s experience. She went out of her way to orient new volunteers to the event and introduce them to other longtime volunteers to help form connections.

In addition, it was observed that many volunteer coaches and instructors made efforts to interact with people outside of their respective disciplines to build and strengthen these relationships that were formed at WSAG. For example, the research team noted fencing coaches from North America collaborating with fine arts instructors from Central America, and field hockey coaches from Europe having lunch with dance instructors from Africa. Thus, while the mission of the event was focused on the scholar-athletes to encourage them to meet and work with young people from other cultures and backgrounds, a similar relationship-building effect occurred with the volunteers.

Encouraging Learning

Beyond simply meeting new people, many volunteers (13) took advantage of the opportunity to establish future collaborations and expand their knowledge. While some volunteers seemed to feel more comfortable bonding with likeminded individuals from their own discipline or culture, others made great efforts to meet as many individuals as possible and form bridging relationships, which provided broader and more diverse learning opportunities. For example, Nelson’s interview detailed the skills he learned from his fellow volunteers who provided him with resources to bring back to his home country:

I’m going to use everything I learned here in Central America in my school with my students . . . I’m going to share with my classmates and my teachers also. I hope to use everything here. I would like to come back here for another conference because I learned a lot.

Through direct observations, Nelson was seen as one of the most outgoing and friendly volunteers. Informally, other volunteers referred to him as a “sponge” due to his desire to meet as many people as possible and learn from their expertise. He was commonly observed taking notes during speeches and workshops, then approaching speakers
or other volunteers in an effort to further learn methods and training techniques. Candice, a former colleague of Nelson’s from a nonprofit initiative in Central America, spoke further on his experience during a personal interview: “The hope in bringing him to . . . this event was to realize that it would be a huge professional and personal development process for him.” She went on to discuss the impact the WSAG had on him throughout the week, and in turn, how Nelson impacted others: “I think it’s had a huge impact on him, and I think he’s had a huge impact on other people.”

Sandy, a visual arts volunteer, commented in a focus group that the WSAG helped him learn how to work better with youth: “I haven’t worked with a lot of kids at all . . . I learned all of this stuff all at once, and that was cool to experience that.” Randy, another longtime volunteer, highlighted in a personal interview how his interactions with players and coaches from various cultures were beneficial to his career:

Well, as a high school coach in North America, [getting to] deal with different cultures, people who don’t quite know the English language, it’s made me more patient and . . . more understanding. It’s helped me in a positive manner.

Randy went on to explain how the relationships he formed with the scholar-athletes provided a different learning experience than he normally had with students in the classroom setting:

You get to see another side of the student. In the classroom they come in, sit down, and do the work. Another side of the student with sports, you can talk to them, kid around with them more, you get to see another side.

In addition, some volunteers stayed in touch with each other during the intervening years between WSAG events and used this networking outlet to assist with their careers. Wendy illustrated this point during one of the focus groups:

I had no idea how to run a clinic so I emailed one of the coaches who had been here who I know does this and I said “Hey, I want to run a 90-minute clinic for little kids. Can you email me what you do?” “Here you go.” Done.

The research team also observed many volunteers from different countries who had not seen each other in years, but who had stayed in touch through technology, gather informally to catch up on each other’s lives, talk about their careers, seek advice, and learn from each other.

Thus, learning was encouraged at the WSAG through both bridging and bonding among the volunteers. With respect to the first two themes of building relationships and encouraging learning, while several volunteers made a concerted effort to learn and collaborate with as many people as possible, there were instances where other volunteers networked with a small circle of similar individuals and did not form bridging relationships or engage in learning opportunities. For instance, while Alex planned to use the resources he gained through his first coaching experience at the WSAG and valued the diverse scholar-athletes and volunteers he interacted with on and off the court, he did identify occasions where bridging and learning failed to occur during his personal interview:

Right now, all the volunteers . . . and a lot of staff are sitting together, and there are kids [too]. The [Europeans] are with the [Europeans]. The people from [North America] are with the people from [North America]. The Africans are sitting with Africans. And it’s not the ideal that the Games have in mind.

Direct observations supported Alex’s comment. For instance, a group of four volunteers from an Asian country remained to itself throughout the WSAG, eating together at meals, staying together during free time, and not extending itself to others. In another example, the large contingent of volunteers from Europe, while they did mix with other volunteers and youth to a certain extent, were observed to interact primarily within their cohort, to the extent that the group “disappeared” from one entire day of the WSAG to take an unsanctioned excursion to a Rhode Island beach. As such, bridging relationships and learning opportunities were constrained.

**Motivation to Work for Social Change and Reciprocity**

The last salient theme, which was mentioned by five volunteers, was that volunteering with the WSAG enhanced the desire to continue working in the nonprofit industry or one’s motivation to continue working toward social change, elements of reciprocity important for social capital development. For example, during her personal interview, Celina explained how her experience gave her unique opportunities, which further influenced her desire to give back to the WSAG and work for social change:

I was able to share the stage with [U.S.] President Clinton. It was as a result of the Games that I was able to meet [former U.S. Secretary of State] Colin Powell. It was as a result of the Games that I was able to meet [former mayor of New York City] Rudy Giuliani. . . . I could never not give back to the [WSAG]. . . . Whenever I can give back my time, my energy . . . and in this subtle way, bridging the world and creating peace.

Her energy and dedication to the mission were visible during direct observations as the research team noted her spending many hours bonding with participants in her dance class outside of scheduled rehearsal times. She also collaborated with other dance instructors from different countries in an effort to choreograph a dance that would successfully educate WSAG participants and audience members on native cultures and customs of the various dance participants (e.g., Maori, Latin American, Indian).
Connor, a volunteer drumming instructor, exclaimed about the mission and his desire to give back to the organization during a one-on-one discussion. “This is the greatest thing I have ever seen planet Earth . . . if I had billions of dollars this is exactly what I would do. I have never seen anything better than this.” His willingness to give of himself to the WSAG was supported by his actions the research team observed throughout the event. Connor was a presence in nearly all aspects of the event, leading early morning motivational routines, organizing and leading late night drum circles, and telling engaging stories to participants during lunches and breaks.

Michael reflected on his experience with basketball and the WSAG during a focus group and how this motivated him to stay involved and work for change:

“This is a broader, bigger platform and vision. To give back that way, and to give other kids opportunities. I’ve been very blessed and basketball has opened up many doors . . . Now this organization gives others this opportunity. That’s why I’m involved.

Alex also stressed during a personal interview his desire to give back to the WSAG, as it provided an impactful experience for himself as a participant: “I want to give them the same kind experience I had . . . I want them to have that same impact . . . because it’s a debt of gratitude to the Games.” Another alumnus, Mitchell, also stated in his personal interview that “I will do pretty much anything they ever ask me to do . . . if they want me to contribute whatever way . . . I would continue to do so.”

Thus, as seen in a few of the volunteers, their interactions with other passionate individuals and experience at the WSAG seemed to positively impact their motivation to work for social change and a reciprocal desire to give back to the organization and help others.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate how, if at all, a large, multinational SFD event contributed to social capital development of its volunteers. Findings revealed that both bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 1995, 2000) occurred, to varying degrees, with volunteers at the event. The two most prominent themes showed that volunteers were able to forge new relationships, and that the WSAG provided an opportunity for many volunteers to enhance their learning from a diverse group of individuals. These findings support Kay and Bradbury’s (2009) contention that personal and skill development and social connectedness serve as outcomes of social capital within a sport volunteer setting. In addition, while not as prominent a theme, the findings suggest a motivation to work for social change and reciprocity. These preliminary findings are in line with the limited work on sport and SFD event volunteering and social capital development, which has found that bonding and bridging social capital, as well as active citizenship behavior and reciprocity, can be developed through volunteering (Eley & Kirk, 2002; Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009; Schulenkorf et al., 2011; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b).

While research has noted the difference between social capital gains occurring within the confines of a singular SFD event versus an ongoing SFD program due to the temporal nature of events (Schulenkorf et al., 2011), our findings support the claims of Schulenkorf and Edwards (2012), who recognize the potential of events to yield positive impact and change. Specifically, the findings suggest bonding social capital (Putnam, 1995, 2000) emerged among volunteers at the WSAG as some built close connections with similar individuals. These new relationships and networks, going forward, could perhaps provide a resource to the volunteers as they go back to their home communities and reengage in their work and life roles. In addition, bridging relationships with dissimilar others were also formed (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Volunteers learned to know other volunteers and WSAG participants from different countries and cultures. Thus, the WSAG helped to provide connections between diverse groups and facilitated social network development (Burnett, 2006; Jarvie, 2003). These findings support Schulenkorf et al. (2011), who also found that an inter-community SFD event contributed to building relationships and bonding and bridging social capital, albeit for a broader set of stakeholders than just volunteers. However, in the current study, it is not known if these new relationships will stand the test of time and contribute to long-term social capital development. Perhaps the relationships and social capital are more fleeting and will dissipate over time (Tonts, 2005).

In addition to building relationships, volunteers experienced an environment where learning was facilitated, which helped to contribute to intercultural understanding and respect, similar to Schulenkorf et al.’s (2011) findings. Through the team environment, educational opportunities, and informal networking, volunteers enhanced their skills and knowledge about issues, countries, and cultures, using the new relationships to facilitate this learning and build bridges between different individuals and groups (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manual 2003). However, the extent of relationship building, learning, and social capital development among the volunteers was not as pronounced as it likely could have been. There were potential failures in social capital gains mainly due to several strategic and programmatic aspects of the event. Volunteer interactions were more organic and not facilitated by the mission, structure, or programming of the WSAG. Very little was done from an official standpoint to orient the volunteers to the mission, encourage their network development, or to provide resources for the volunteers to work for social change in their home communities. The efforts of the WSAG in this regard were centered on the scholar-athletes (see mission in Research Context). The mission of an organization, however, can be an important bond for like-minded individuals (Cuskelly, 2008; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), and as such, could contribute to relationship building for volunteers even.
without official structure and mechanisms in place to facilitate such. While the majority of volunteers made extra efforts to form relationships with other volunteers and youth from around the globe (bridging), there were times when volunteers of a specific culture isolated themselves from the rest of the group. Although bonding with similar others is an important aspect of social capital and not necessarily negative, there is the potential that bonding social capital can be developed without the requisite bridging relationships needed to fully contribute to the enhancement and cohesion of a civic society (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Jarvie, 2003). Perhaps if the WSAG would have provided stronger orientation and programming for the volunteers, and recognized that this stakeholder group could also benefit from the mission of the event, bridging and learning could have been enhanced. In addition, it must be noted that the volunteers were working with very talented young people, likely similar in some respects to the volunteers. If this is the case, again, bridging and learning may have been constrained for the volunteers, as they were not interacting with individuals that dissimilar from themselves in terms of intellect and desire to learn from others.

The WSAG did facilitate, among some volunteers, a heightened desire to work for social change and reciprocity in terms of giving back to the organization and wishing to share the experience with others. These elements of reciprocity also emerged in Schulenkorf et al.’s (2011) study with an intercommunity SFD event, in Sherry and Strybosch’s (2012) work with homeless soccer participants, and in other research efforts with SFD volunteers (Welty Peachey et al., 2013b; Tonts, 2005). Some volunteers discussed how the environment served as a source of inspiration toward working for social change going forward, and motivated them to continue giving back to the WSAG and bringing young people as participants. This suggests that a SFD event could yield future change agents by developing active citizenship and pro social behavior (Davis Smith, Ellis, & Howlett, 2002; Eley & Kirk, 2002). Active citizenship and motivation to work for social change constitute norms of reciprocity described by Putnam (1995, 2000), which are essential for social capital development. However, caution must be exercised with regards to the current study, as it is not known to what extent enhanced motivation to work for social change actually translated into working for social change once volunteers returned to their home communities.

As with all studies, there were several limitations that could have impacted the findings. A concern in qualitative efforts involves the possibility of socially desirable responses and bias (Creswell, 2012). It must be acknowledged that volunteers within the interviews and focus groups could have provided responses they believed the researchers or other volunteers wanted to hear. In regards to bias, the study participants’ answers could have been skewed by bias toward the event. The research team attempted to mitigate these concerns by encouraging volunteers to share honestly about their experience and by assigning pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. In addition, researcher bias could have occurred. As this is an exploratory and interpretive study, and as is commonly done in qualitative research, it is acknowledged that the authors may have brought their own biases and subjective interpretations to the study (Creswell, 2012). Still, it is important to mitigate bias; having multiple investigators code and discuss transcripts and field notes to engage in peer debriefing and triangulation of investigators was an attempt to minimize the potential for bias.

Implications and Future Research Directions

The study provides preliminary evidence that volunteers at a multinational SFD event did experience social capital development. This is not conclusive evidence, as further longitudinal research is required to ascertain the impact of this event, and other events, over time on the social capital development of volunteers. However, the current study does illuminate that both bonding and bridging social capital can be accrued by SFD event volunteers. As very little research has examined the efficacy of SFD events in contributing to social capital development of stakeholders (see Schulenkorf et al., 2011; Sherry et al., 2011), the findings from the current study contribute to and extend the extant body of literature in SFD events. In particular, the current study extends the work of Schulenkorf et al. (2011) by examining one specific stakeholder group—volunteers—and the potential for social capital development. In addition, the current work focuses on a multinational event with volunteers from a variety of countries and cultures, whereas Schulenkorf et al.’s study centered upon an intercommunity SFD event in one country with divided ethnic groups. This is an important contribution to the literature, as it is shown that large, multinational and multicultural SFD events can contribute to social capital development, specifically of volunteers in this case. Previous research has not focused on this type of SFD event or its volunteers.

One question to ask is whether SFD events and initiatives provide a better environment for social capital development than other sport or nonsport volunteer opportunities (e.g., international sporting events, charity sport events, volunteering at soup kitchens). Perhaps the structure of SFD events and programs, focusing on sport as the developmental mechanism, lends itself to greater social capital development. As has been seen, some opportunities for developing bonding and bridging relationships, and forming norms of reciprocity, emerge organically through SFD events (Schulenkorf et al., 2011). A sense of mission, social good, and utility can be sensed and experienced by volunteers with SFD events as they are often interacting directly with participants whom the SFD initiative aims to reach. In contrast, in charity sport events, the cause may be “out there” and connections with those the charity aims to serve are not direct (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Thus, sport events being used as a tool for development could help facilitate con-
nections between and among volunteers and participants, and accentuate social capital development in volunteers (Doherty & Misener, 2008; Welty Peachey et al., 2013b).

Volunteers are vitally important to the sustainability of SFD initiatives and events (Welty Peachey et al., 2013b). As with many sport events, volunteers are the lifeblood of the event, and much of the success of the event depends upon the motivation, training, and experiences of the volunteers (Cuskelly, 2008). Indeed, having a core group of volunteers that is retained by the SFD initiative and returns year after year to the SFD event can enhance the effectiveness of the initiative (Welty Peachey et al., 2013b). As such, it would be prudent for SFD organizations to provide structures and programming that could positively impact the experience of volunteers to retain them and contribute to social capital development. Examples could include organizing coaching clinics with volunteers within different disciplines and cultures, administering workshops that require diverse volunteers to communicate and learn from one another then reflect on those experiences, and designing sessions that provide volunteers with action plans and tools for working for social change in local communities (Lyra & Welty Peachey, 2011). With regards to the WSAG, strategically designed programming targeting the volunteers could have potentially helped to ameliorate instances where volunteers seemed to avoid collaborating or meeting people from different cultures, and could have also fostered a stronger desire for volunteers to demonstrate active citizenship and engagement in their local communities.

Future research should aim to examine the structures and processes of SFD events and initiatives that build bonding and bridging social capital. This stream of research would help answer Coalter’s (2007) call to begin investigating the structures and processes of SFD programs that contribute to positive impact—little is known about these structures and processes. Identifying these features would contribute to theory building as well as provide tangible recommendations for SFD organizations for administering events. Future research with SFD volunteers is also needed in other contexts and with SFD events that focus on different agendas than the WSAG. The impact of the volunteer experience could vary by context and foci. Finally, longitudinal research is needed with SFD volunteers in a variety of contexts to ascertain impact and social capital development over time. Do impact and social capital development diminish or strengthen over time? Do the relationships, learning, and engagement in reciprocity last or dissipate (Tonts, 2005)? Without follow-up after the event, benefits may erode over time (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). These and other intriguing questions would be valuable to answer.

References


