SOCIAL CAPITAL AND YOUTH BASEBALL: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF PARENTAL SOCIAL TIES

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Sean Fredrick Brown

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Participation in youth sports entails a variety of commitments from the children who engage in them, but they also require parental participation as well, encompassing both temporal and financial commitments. The commitment of parents may be thought of as distinct from the participation of the child, and may encompass a wide variety of tasks requiring differing levels of effort and energy. As the character of parental participation in youth sports should be treated distinctly from the participation of their children, it is thus productive to examine the potential benefits parents may derive through their participation, especially as it pertains to the formation of relationships with other parents participating in a given league. Further, these relationships often carry with them the possibility for resource exchange, or social capital. Parents who participate in youth sports may find themselves embedded in a network rich in social capital benefits.

The central purpose of this study was to examine the formation and uses of parental relationships in the context of a youth baseball league. Utilizing the theoretical framework of social capital, I examined the processes by which parent relationships formed and were utilized for benefit. I examined both the individual and organizational processes by which relationships were utilized for benefit, as well as the specific types of benefits typically exchanged in such a setting. I utilized several strategies for data gathering, including (1) participant observation, (2) casual conversations with parents, coaches and league officials, (3) in-depth interviews with parents, coaches, league, and city officials, and (4) document analysis, which served as a check on the memories and interpretations of events by both parents and league officials, such as members of the Board of Directors. This research touches on a number of areas relevant for sociologists, including social network theorists, urban and community scholars, and scholars of
youth and families, and I have relied on pieces of those literatures to inform both my data-gathering strategies as well as my analysis of the primary data.

The results of the study encompass several distinct areas united by the theme that recurred throughout my conversations, interviews, and observations: the children (or, as they were usually referred, “the kids.”) The central element tying the sometimes disparate threads that run through Chapters 4, 5, and 6 is that children have a substantial influence on parental relationships in ways that may not seem obvious at first glance. Children influence their parents’ social capital indirectly, through their participation in youth sport (which leads parents into social contexts they would have no reason to enter otherwise), and directly through their own friendship choices, which may not always follow predicted patterns. Children also affect the mechanisms by which social capital is exchanged, and they may alter the relationship between donors and recipients in unique and interesting ways. Finally, when league administrators get together in Board of Directors meetings, “the kids” can be used as a rhetorical device to justify many activities that are not actually beneficial to the league or, by extension, the kids themselves.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people told me in the beginning that writing a dissertation was a solitary act. Literally, those people were correct. I (usually) observed by myself. I read by myself. I wrote passages, chapters, and drafts by myself. However, in my situation – and I suspect this is the case in the writing of many if not most dissertations – I could not have created this product alone. Qualitative research could not take place without the generosity and trust of those whose stories are rendered within. To them we owe a debt of gratitude that is difficult to fully express. Thank you to the parents and officials of the Valley City Little League. They tolerated my presence, answered my questions, and gave of themselves far above and beyond what the project called for. They let me onto their teams and into their homes and lives. For that, I am grateful and humbled.

My dissertation committee has been an invaluable resource as we took this project from conception to completion. They have guided my thinking, read my drafts, calmed my insecurities, pushed me intellectually, and encouraged me even when I wasn’t sure what to do next. Arnie Arluke has served on more than one committee of mine, and has always made time to answer my questions and provide both timely and constructive feedback any time I have asked. Mario Small has taken an inordinate amount of time from an extremely busy schedule to advise a student with no ties to his department. That is a level of generosity that I have rarely run across in all my time in academia. Shelley Kimelberg provided the line-by-line readings that my work seriously needed, but never lost sight of the larger issues that I needed to address. To the extent that my work reads clearly and concisely, she deserves much of the credit.

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cantankerous, and he demands a certain independence from his students. But he’s also an excellent referee of my work, a wonderful advisor, and a good friend. He stood by me when I had to take my paternity leave of absence between my first and second years. He did not complain when I told him I was moving to New Mexico and would complete my degree from afar. He encouraged my dissertation ideas, even as they changed with my living situation. And he has never brushed me off when I have called or emailed him asking for advice, for a sounding board, or just to talk so that I could remind myself that I did in fact have a home department. I always finish my conversations with him more inspired to work harder and better, which is the highest compliment I can pay to a fellow scholar. He has forced me to think deeper and work harder than I ever would have on my own. And he has forced me to work independently and develop self-motivation, highly underrated skills that graduate students must nurture in order to be successful. I am eternally enriched by my association with Alan. Together, this committee made this work immeasurably better through their critiques and their counsel.

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I became an academic nomad during my graduate education. While this has been difficult at times, it has exposed me to many new groups of wonderful people who have helped me along the way. At The University of Chicago, John MacAlloon and Boria Majumdar turned me on to the idea that sport was a viable and enticing area of study. I was fortunate enough to work for John for a year or so after graduation, and his friendship is something I cherish. Boria was my Master’s thesis advisor and has been my benefactor since the first day we exchanged ideas in Pick Hall during the winter of 2004. His encouragement of my thinking and his faith in me as a scholar and as a person has sustained me through some of the tough times that characterize any dissertation. When I moved to Northeastern in 2005, I became a part of the most wonderful graduate cohort I could have imagined. From Day 1, we pushed each other, encouraged each
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Chapter 1: Introduction

YOUTH SPORT – A CENTRAL PART OF MANY FAMILIES

Youth sport is an increasingly ubiquitous feature of family life (Theokas 2009), with up to 41 million participants in the United States alone (Frankl 2007). With children’s participation generally entails parent participation as well. Parental participation can take on many forms, but, “…minimally involves parents arranging transportation for children to and from weekly practice sessions and competitions, but parents are also encouraged to attend games to ‘support’ their children and to assist with more or less time-consuming fundraising activities. A child’s ability to participate in community sports without some degree of parental support and participation would be severely constrained” (Dyck 2002:108). Also important is the financial aspect of youth sport participation on families. At their highest levels, such financial commitment can reach 12% of a family’s annual income (Turman 2007). It would be short-sighted to think of youth sport participation as a simply youth-oriented phenomenon. Participation requires coordination at the lowest levels of participation (and a minimal financial commitment) and a substantial portion of parents’ time, energy, and money at higher levels of participation. It would not be out of line then to wonder if the perceived benefits of youth sport extend to parents, whether they might enjoy their own unique benefits to participation, or if they are truly and merely conduits for their children’s efforts and successes.

I set out to study the potential, actual, and unrealized benefits of parental participation in youth sport by examining evidence of parental relationships forged through their participation. My line of thinking on the matter originated in recollections of my own parents’ countless hours sitting on hard metal bleachers in the often uncomfortable North Texas climate. While I made several friends while playing youth baseball and soccer, my parents had their own social life on
the teams I played for, and their experiences later informed my own initial thinking on this project. I decided to link those relationships to the concept of social capital not only because it was a scholarly interest of mine, but also because it was how I remembered and experienced my parents’ social relationships on my teams. My memories of their relationships largely center on the benefits exchanged between my parents and my former teammates’ parents. The story of parent relationships experienced through youth sport – Little League, in this instance – deserves to be told, as it enlightens our understanding of participation, commitment, and how social capital is built in a time when pundits mourn its modern-day decline (see especially Putnam 2000). Youth sport takes up precious little space in social capital accounts, perhaps falling under the rubric of sport spectatorship. Sport spectatorship is often viewed as passive consumption rather than participation (Wann et al. 2001). However, it would be wrong to suggest, as Putnam (2000) seems to do, that spectatorship of youth (in his case, high school) sport is merely spectatorship. The bleachers of a Little League baseball or softball game are absolutely not filled with passive spectators, but active parents, who are participants in the experience whose own commitment to the endeavor often outpaces their children’s. It would be foolish to ignore the social aspect of such participation, the relationships that inevitably grow out of such participation, and the benefits that are the natural byproduct of relationship-building. I sought out to capture a slice of that participation, of those relationships, and of those benefits.

Valley City is a rural/suburban town in the Rio Grande Valley of the southwestern United States, located within an hour of a mid-sized metropolitan area and with a population of approximately 15,000. Valley City is a changing town, as the older, rural areas have been joined in the past decade and a half by newer housing developments, predominately on the western edges of the city. This has altered the political structure of the area as well, with an influx of
suburbanites has paved the way for big-box retailers and fast-food chains to make their way into the area. When one exits from the freeway, Valley City seems like nothing more (or less) than a typical Southwestern suburb, with mid-sized to large stucco homes in planned developments in plain view. However, a short drive east into town reveals the older core of the town, with more independent and family-owned establishments. A little further east, the farmlands begin to dot the landscape, leading to a curious mix of newer housing stock and farmland. According to the 2010 Census, nearly 58% of the population of Valley City self-reported as Latino. While the composition of the city changes from rural to suburban, this percentage does not differ prominently from the percentage self-reporting Latino in 2000.

Beginning in the spring of 2010, I began my investigation into the Valley City Little League (VCLL), which lasted until August of 2011. During that time, I utilized participant observation and in-depth interviewing to gather information about one slice of social practices taking place between and among parents of Little League players. I was particularly interested in how parents created, maintained, and exchanged social capital benefits. I define social capital as the ability to call upon social relationships for instrumental benefit. This could involve something as simple as giving a player a ride to and from practice, or could involve something as significant as providing food and shelter to a family who has suffered a substantial loss (both scenarios were recounted to me during the course of my interviews). Along the way, I became enmeshed in the machinations of the VCLL Board of Directors, which offered a new angle to study social capital, namely its negative aspect (the attempt to damage parties in negative relationships). In all forms and practices, a central theme began to emerge as parents and board members recounted their actions and justifications. Prior to that revelation, however, it might
help to recount a day in my research that encapsulates the distinctions between the positive and negative interactions that characterized different aspects of the league.

AN AFTERNOON IN THE VALLEY CITY LITTLE LEAGUE

June is New Mexico’s least pleasant month. The weather, for the most part, is hot and dry. At times, the spring winds persist and the sand blows into any crevice and crack it can find. July and August bring relief in the form of the monsoon rains and slightly cooler temperatures. In 2010, during my time with the Mariners¹, the monsoon storms came early. With lightning in the near distance and the wind picking up, the Mariners took the field for practice. I was convinced that practice would be cancelled because of the weather, but with the district tournament coming up it went as planned. The parents sat under the aluminum awning and made jokes about the weather, but no one complained.

The mothers on the bleachers talked about the weather, about the upcoming tournament, but mostly they talked about the boys’ hair. One of the boys on the team had dyed his hair in the colors of the Valley City Little League organization (VCLL) and other boys were contemplating doing the same. Others had tried to start a trend of mohawks among the team, but some of the mothers had intervened. Team mother Rita, a short, affable Latina in her early 40s told me, “I can always dye it back before school starts.” As the lightning got closer, I began to notice worried looks on the mothers’ faces. Each crack of thunder drew concerned glances around the bleachers. The coaches noticed the weather events as well. However, instead of ending practice, they switched from aluminum to wooden bats.

¹ The Mariners (a pseudonym, as are all team and individual names contained herein) were one of the four teams I followed during my time in the Valley City Little League. A more complete explanation of the four teams can be found below.
Around this time, I saw the president of the VCLL (Joshua) arrive. I did not want to leave practice early for a conversation with him, but I did want to know why he was there, so I sent him a quick text message. He replied back that he was around for a managers meeting. I resolved to attend after practice was finished. Finally, after a particularly loud crack of thunder, the Mariners’ manager (mercifully) called the boys together and they all took shelter under the awning. I figured that the players and their mothers would disperse, but they stood around, obviously waiting for something. I saw team mother Rita pull out her phone and call another mother (Maria), asking about her status. She hung up and told everyone that Maria would arrive in 20 minutes, and that they could wait if they wanted to. As the rain had finally started, many of the mothers chose to go and wait in their cars. The boys mostly stood under the awning conversing among themselves, chasing each other around, and generally passing the time. As I had missed the previous practice, I asked Rita what they were waiting on. I felt like I was missing out on something. Rita informed me that Maria was bringing dinner for the team and parents. They had decided that, since the team was practicing 5 nights a week until they were eliminated from tournament play, the parents had gotten together and decided that they would take turns feeding the team and the parents by providing dinner at the end of every practice. Maria was providing tonight’s dinner, but was going to be “late” on account of practice ending early. Twenty minutes later, Maria arrived with a pot full of spaghetti, some flat bread, utensils and plates, and a cooler packed full of bottled water. The players and some of their parents dug in. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, talking with one another, laughing, planning for the tournament, watching the kids, and sharing a meal together.

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2 In the VCLL, head coaches were usually referred to as “managers,” while their assistants were “coaches.” I stick to this distinction, and where I refer to coaches, I am speaking specifically about assistants to the manager.
Joshua called all the coaches together and headed upstairs to the VCLL conference room above the concession stand. I followed them all up. By this time, I had been observing the VCLL for nearly 4 months and had recently been elected to the Board of Directors, so no one questioned my presence at these meetings anymore. Joshua’s tenure as president had been tumultuous at best, as he fought what he believed to be the major concern of the VCLL: adults. Joshua was built like a teddy bear, with a public image to match. He had a large, friendly personality and wanted desperately to be liked. He spoke often about his belief that adults were taking Little League from “the kids,” and using it to further their own agenda. In some cases, that agenda consisted of ensuring that their own children got the coaches they wanted, made the All-Star team, or that they as coaches got the players they wanted, the practice fields and times they wanted, and policies that ensured their continued dominance of the league. In other, more nefarious cases, this involved using the league’s coffers as a petty cash box, and Joshua was both the originator as well as the target of these accusations during his time as president of the league. This time, however, Joshua was addressing a lack of enthusiasm and participation from his all-star team coaches. The District’s Opening Day ceremonies for the upcoming tournament had been held the previous weekend, and Joshua was disappointed in the turnout from the VCLL teams, especially in the older divisions. Meanwhile, other teams had outstanding paperwork issues, and others had outstanding financial issues. In other words, the league was not functioning as it should; it lacked cohesion, respect for leadership, community, integrity, and image (in Joshua’s words). It was truly a stark contrast from the scene that was still underway below, as the Mariners and their parents continued to enjoy their meal and their time together.

In many ways, the story of the VCLL is one of contrasts. The coinciding, yet almost paradoxical scenes described above illustrate disconnect between how the league ran “on the
“ground” and how it ran “from on high.”³ Where the children played and parents watched and got to know one another, the social scene was characterized by a spirit of togetherness that was nearly always felt, even if it was not outwardly manifest. At the level of league operation, where the board worked to comply with as well as construct regulation for the league, divisiveness nearly tore the entire league apart during the 2010-2011 seasons. Anyone who spent time exclusively in one realm would hardly recognize the other. Those parents who spent extensive time in each realm simply learned to separate them from one another. For much of my time with the league as a researcher, I was befuddled at how differently the situations operated. When I would sit down to look over notes and interviews, I did not know how these contrasting situations might be tied together. One phrase, however, kept sticking out to me. Over and over, I read this phrase as parents talked about why they invested the time and money into the league that they did, and as board members talked about why they persisted on a board whose meetings they often characterized as miserable and unprofessional. Simply put: it was “for the kids.” Providing meals for 12 families on practice nights was done for the kids, the same as accusing the president and/or league secretary and concession manager of embezzlement was done for the kids. All manner of action by parents and board members⁴ could be – and regularly was – justified by that simple phrase: for the kids.

Actions justified in the name of the kids led parents to extraordinary kindness as well as callousness. I witnessed parents helping one another out when necessary as assistant coaches, as

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³ Literally, in this case, as the conference room used by the Board for their meetings sat on the second floor of the clubhouse, which housed the concession stand and storage shed on the first level.
⁴ In reality, nearly all board members were also parents of players in the league. However, I employ the term parent for any parent of a player that does not serve any additional formal capacity. Coaches are also nearly always parents in the league as well, but I will refer to them as coaches to distinguish them.
umpires, as impromptu child care and limo service, as information brokers, and as emotional sounding boards. At the same time, I witnessed the worst form of gossip and intrigue at the board level, and coordinated campaigns to damage the reputation of other members. These efforts, both positive and negative, are actually two sides of the same coin. Both the attempts to help one another as well as the attempts to harm one another are part of the social capital spectrum. Social capital has an incredibly turbulent history for a concept that has only been studied seriously and systematically for nearly 30 years, since the appearance of Pierre Bourdieu’s “Forms of Capital” (1985a). Its scope has expanded. It has been applied to countless social situations and contexts. However, its core remains relatively undamaged: social capital represents the ability to utilize expressive (social) relationships for instrumental gain. The goal of this research is ultimately an exploration of how social capital operates in the Valley City Little League. The theme that runs throughout the analysis is that children have a great impact on the social capital of their parents. The can serve as bridges that connect parents through their participation in Little League as well as through their own specific network of friends they construct while their kids play on teams. Because of their presence in the league, they also impact the motivational structure governing both donors and recipients of social capital in relationships. Their presence can create a reserve of potential resources and benefits that parents can take advantage of but often do not. Finally, when league matters take place away from the direct presence of the players, and their concerns become fodder for rhetorical and ideological claims by league officials – specifically board members – then they can be used to justify harmful or destructive acts within the league, with ramifications spreading outside the league’s insular borders. In these cases, parents and board members consistently act upon what they think (or claim) to be in the best interest of the kids.
I spent two full regular seasons in the VCLL, one all-star season, and one full off-season. I observed countless practices, games, and meetings. I traveled with teams, I helped coaches, I umpired games, kept score, joined the board, and helped with any number of less formal chores around the fields. I spoke with parents and board members constantly, both formally in interview settings and informally, joining in their conversations, listening to their opinions and offering my own. I saw the league thrive, and I saw it struggle mightily against its own turmoil. When I left, the league was still in a state of flux from which it may take years to recover. All the while, however, the kids played and the parents watched while the board ran its business. While there was certainly overlap between the two spheres, they operated by distinct sets of rules. I believe the kids were, on the whole, very well served by the “on-the-ground” volunteers such as team parents, umpires, coaches, and assistants. The ability of coaches and parents to call on others to help fulfill the mission of the league was considerable, even when it was not necessarily needed. The board experienced the opposite problem. It was often a struggle to find coaches and volunteers for the simplest league events. The perceived machinations of many board members by parents kept them from becoming more involved. In general, the kids were often not well-served by members of the board, even those who were in all likelihood well-intentioned.5

In the remainder of this introduction, I explain the structure of the league and introduce the reader to the teams I followed through my two seasons: the Twins, the Wildcats, the Mariners, and the Cubs. In Chapter 2, I also situate this research project in the larger scholarly context of sport, the community, and social capital. I then explain how children’s issues have been underdeveloped in the study of social capital, and how sport can provide a particularly

5 Daniel Frankl writes in “Youth Sport: Innocence Lost” (2007): “Years of observation and systematic studies support the notion that most parents, coaches, and administrators get involved with youth support programs for the right reasons and approach their new responsibility with their best intentions” (p. 1).
useful site for the augmentation of this literature. Chapter 3 deals with the methods of data gathering and data making. I attempt to situate myself within the research and explore how the details of my own biography affect how I have viewed and analyzed what I have seen. Since the knower and the known cannot be legitimately separated, the researcher must be firmly grounded in the setting, and must acknowledge their active role in constructing the data that forms the foundation for the project. In chapter 4, I lay out the case for children in Little League impacting the social capital of their parents. I first present a typology of parents based on their social involvement with rest of the team’s parents and their involvement in their children’s sporting experience. I then explain the particular situations that arise in a baseball season that are particularly conducive to the building and mobilization of social capital, including practices and games, all-star participation, and the children’s networks themselves. I conclude with an exploration of the particular benefits available and typically exchanged during the course of a baseball season and how the various classes of parents are positioned to be both benefactor and beneficiary based on their levels of participation. Chapter 5 deals with another understudied element of social capital research: an examination of donors and recipients as active social agents. I draw upon help-seeking literature to explain how recipients’ motives may not be as simple and unproblematic as they have been made out to be by social capital scholars. I then explore the motives driving both the building and the mobilization (or lack thereof) of the specific benefits described in Chapter 4. I conclude the chapter by introducing the idea that in some cases – especially where children are prominently involved – the motivational context actually flips, and parents find themselves with difficulty in taking on the recipient role rather than the donor role, which they embrace wholeheartedly. This situation results in what I call a reversal in the “burden of motivation” between potential donors and recipients in parental
relationships. Chapter 6 deals with the particular issues brought about when children are removed physically from the social context, but remain present as rhetorical devices. Specifically, this occurs in the VCLL boardroom. When children and their needs are considered from this perspective, there is more room for the development of antagonistic relationships and destructive behavior. This results in negative social capital, or relationships which exist and persist not to the benefit of the parties involved, but to their detriment. Negative social capital relationships are characterized by a mutual desire for the parties involved in the relationship to damage one another in the eyes of others. Finally, in chapter 7, I discuss the implications of the findings from this project, both in terms of policy recommendations for local and national Little League organizations as well as for the study of social capital in general.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VCLL

The Valley City Little League consists of players, parents, managers (and their assistants), assorted volunteers, a board of directors, and a city worker who acts as a liaison between the city and the league. Its mandate as an organization affiliated with Little League International is to uphold the principles and procedures of Little League International (LLI). The Mission Statement of LLI explicitly mandates that the organization as a whole is founded on principles of human – rather than athletic – development:

Through proper guidance and exemplary leadership, the Little League program assists youth in developing the qualities of citizenship, discipline, teamwork and physical well-being. By espousing the virtues of character, courage and loyalty, the Little League Baseball and Softball program is designed to develop superior citizens rather than superior athletes

(http://www.littleleague.org/learn/about/historyandmission/mission.htm).

While Little League International provides a great deal of guidance and rules about how to implement a league, local leagues are left with some amount of autonomy in the actual administration of the league. The creation of teams, the selection of All-Star teams, the
scheduling of games, the selection of coaches, league fundraising opportunities, and the
construction, makeup, and administration of the Board of Directors are among the areas where
local residents can influence the atmosphere within which the local league operates. Thus, the
Board of Directors is more than a mere enforcement arm of LLI. Their policies set much of the
tone for the way a league operates and, critically, how money is both raised and spent within the
league.

At the heart of any Little League must be the players. Without the players, Little League
would, obviously, cease to exist. Boys and girls are eligible to begin playing in sanctioned VCLL
activities by age 4 in the Pre-T-Ball division and may play continuously until they are 18 years
old in the Senior Division. In the VCLL, participation begins to decline in the Minor Division (9
am 10 year olds) and there are not enough players to support even a single team in the Senior
division. Further, there are not enough players to support a Junior Division team (13-14 year
olds) until the middle school season has been completed, and they play a truncated schedule.
Participation is greatest in the Pee-Wee division (7 and 8 year olds). Gender segregation begins
in the T-ball division (5-6 year olds) as teams are either all-boy or all-girl. However, at this age,
girls’ teams still play against boys’ teams. Separation into baseball and softball teams is
completed in the Pee-Wee division and continues throughout.

*Age Divisions and Team Construction*

Team construction is largely a function of age. For all Tee Ball divisions, including Pre-Tee Ball,
children are randomly assigned teams except for the following conditions: all coaches’ children
will play on their parents’ teams, and all parent requests for particular coaches are honored as
long as they do not numerically imbalance the teams. The reason for this is twofold: first, talent
disparities usually do not show up by the time players are 4 years old, so there is not an issue
with team stacking (the practice of loading many or most of the best players in a division on one team); second, the players are then enticed to continue playing, because honoring requests is one of the best ways to ensure a happy first experience for both the player and the parent. As it was explained to me, “If some, if a coach gets 10 requests, they can have all 10 of them, cause there’s no 4-year old that’s just gonna be this great star, that’s gonna dominate… So we don’t mandate the 4 year old. Like, ‘Whatever. You have 10 requests, take them all.’ Cause that’s gonna suck them into wanting to play here anyway…” (Javier, former V CLL League President). At this age, teams are kept small enough that no player ever sits on the bench in the dugout unless their team is batting. The ‘games’ consist of two innings with all players batting in each inning. No score is kept, and the main goal of the game is to teach the kids to run to the proper place when the ball is hit, to field the ball and to throw it to the proper place, and for the amusement of parents and spectators, who generally find the whole spectacle incredibly entertaining.

Beginning in the Pee-Wee division, nominal limits are placed on the number of parent requests for coaches that will be honored by the league. The league will accommodate seven parent requests. The remainder of the teams are filled out randomly with a corresponding attempt to balance teams with roughly equal numbers of 7 and 8-year olds. The restriction on parent requests coincides with the widely held belief that talent disparities begin to manifest at this age. Likewise, this division marks the point when competition begins to play a prevalent role in parent behavior at games and coach behavior at practices, as it is the first division where score is kept. It is not, however, an All-Star division. Finally, it is the first experience the kids will have with “live” pitching, though in the VCLL, this is accomplished by a pitching machine (in some other Little Leagues, coaches pitch to their teams).
At age 9, kids move up to the Minor division. The move to this division represents a major shift in the way the game is played, from the way teams are constructed (through a tryout and draft), to the game played on the field (where kids are pitchers for the first time), to the stakes involved (All-Star teams). At the tryout, players are led through a series of drills that showcase their skills at fielding grounders, pop-ups, throwing, and batting. While they are led through these exercises, managers and coaches take sometimes-detailed notes about players they want to target (or avoid) in the draft. After the tryout, the coaches head upstairs into the boardroom to conduct the draft. Though LLI rules forbid it, the draft is a place where there is a lot of deal-making between coaches involving players that coaches simply “have” to have for various reasons. Many of these reasons are social as well as competitive. Managers are only guaranteed their own kids and the kids of their assistants on their teams. All other players are theoretically available. Once all the players are chosen (and all players are eventually chosen), trades are allowed for a brief window of time. Generally, there are few trades, with players changing teams mostly for non-competitive reasons. Perhaps a coach made a promise to a player’s parents that they would try to pick the player, or perhaps a coach wants to get rid of a player with a bad attitude or parents who are less-than-cooperative. In these cases, trades can be made. Trade requests for social reasons are often met with unreasonable offers that will help one team competitively over the other. Such offers are usually met with rolled eyes, laughter, or shouts of “Bullshit!” After the initial offer, the coaches are usually able to reach an equitable solution.

The Minor division is also the first “All-Star division” in Little League. This element raises the stakes considerably for the players, their parents, and the coaches who feel as though they might be involved in the All-Star process. While there is a prevalent notion is that parents
often have unreasonable expectations of their children based on irrational evaluations of their
own skill, the parents I got to know in the VCLL were, on the whole, very reasonable in their
evaluations of their own child’s ability, and very fair in their expectations for their child,
particularly playing at the “next level,” which for these players, would be the middle school
teams. Ruth was a long-time resident in Valley City who grew up in the Midwest and thus did
not necessarily consider herself an insider in the community. She was in her early 40s, and the
mother of a first-year Major softball player, explains:

So she was really looking forward to going to the middle school and doing it. And then I
heard you have to try out and it, and tryouts were pretty tough. We’re like “Oooohhh”
‘cause she wasn’t playing that well, and… and so we thought there’s no way she’s gonna
make it. So, I know she wanted to, and… so, Harry [her husband] was really trying to get
her to where she could at least maybe try out, and maybe do well over there.

While her daughter Caroline struggled in her first year in the Major division, she continued to
improve and won an All-Star spot in her second season. Her parents, however, were still very
realistic about the prospects of her playing for her middle school Team, and never mentioned the
possibility of college scholarships, often considered the height of athletic achievement within
Little League.

Even parents with highly skilled players tend to be circumspect when discussing the
possibility of their children receiving scholarships for their athletic achievement within baseball
or softball. Parents seem to want to acknowledge the possibility and perhaps indulge in some
speculation about it, but very few seem to have a college scholarship as part of their endgame.
Even a highly involved parent like Sierra, a diminutive yet assertive professional with long, iron-
straight brown hair, who was the wife of a manager and the mother of a very skilled baseball
player, was very measured in her assessment of her son’s college prospects:

It’d be nice if he played, but only if he can play and study, because… you know, the
reality is… that- The reality is that he, he can’t’- He’s not gonna play MLB, you know?
It’s like that just doesn’t happen, and even playing college... Yeah, he can play college, but... if it’s for fun and he keeps up with his real work, because that’s what’s gonna pay his bills. That’s what’s gonna make him a taxpayer.

However, the All-Star team still produces a great deal of tension for those involved. There is a certain amount of status that goes along with being chosen as a player for the team, and slights and omissions are often taken personally. There is also a great deal of competition between coaches to be chosen to manage the All-Star team. Because a coach’s Won/Lost record plays a significant role in the coach selection process (50%), the competition between teams during the regular season can become quite intense.

At age 11, players move up to the Major division, the most storied age division of Little League, largely because of the Little League World Series, an annual phenomenon taking place in Williamsport, PA (home of LLI) that attracts thousands of spectators, and national television coverage by ESPN and ABC. The Major Baseball All-Star team is the most important team in the minds of many in VCLL because of the chance, however minute, to “make it to Williamsport.” Because of this, the level of competition in this division is intense, even as participation amongst the players wanes significantly between the Minor and Major division. In 2011, for example, the Minor baseball division had enough players to carry 6 (large) teams. By contrast, the Major division had only 4. The loss represents anywhere between 22 and 26 players between divisions. Similar losses occur on the softball side as well.

Team construction in this division runs similarly to the procedure in the Minor division, with one significant change: property players. Property players allow a coach to “protect” up to 5 players from his or her previous year’s team to play with them on the current year’s team. On the one hand, it allows for teams to have a certain amount of continuity from one year to the next, something coaches claim is necessary for team chemistry and player enjoyment of the sport. On
the other hand, it also allows a coach to select their 5 best players from the previous year, giving them a substantial leg up on competition that has newly moved up from the Minor division, who are not allowed any property players. Though the draft procedure attempts to compensate for this by allowing all coaches without property players to select first in the draft until they have caught up in player quantity, it is widely known that teams with property players tend to be more skilled and better teams with a competitive advantage during the season. This practice, though widely accepted in the VCLL, is currently being scrutinized by LLI, and may soon be removed from the rulebook.

Once a player begins attending middle school, they are granted an additional path to play baseball or softball if they choose and if they are skilled enough: school teams. In Valley City, the middle schools have baseball and softball teams, and many kids try out for these teams. They are not able to play Little League while they are playing for their school teams, and many give up Little League altogether at that point. Some, however, especially those who have heavily involved parents, will come back to Little League at the conclusion of their school’s season and play in the Junior division. Between the school players and the players who did not try out for or make the school teams but still want to play, the VCLL usually is able to field 2 Junior baseball teams and 1 to 2 Junior softball teams. The teams in this division do not garner a great deal of attention from the board of directors, and are somewhat marginalized within the VCLL. The league only sporadically fields a Senior league team (16-18 year olds), and does so only for the All-Star season.

The Board of Directors

The VCLL Board of Directors is a fluid grouping of parents within the league responsible for adherence to LLI mandates and the administration of the VCLL outside of the explicit
procedures outlined in the LLI Operations Manual. The board is required to contain a minimum of 5 members – to fill the required officer positions – and a maximum of 25 members. Among the duties of the Board include but are not limited to: equipment needs, recruitment of coaches and parent volunteers, accounting for the league, all fundraising activity, administrative duties, presiding over the officiating of games (umpiring), operating the concession stand, and handling any issues that spontaneously arise during the course of the season, all parent complaints, player eligibility issues, and ensuring the safety of players. For the smooth operation of Little League branch, the members of the board must be able to cooperate and coordinate. Running a league is a large and involved job that requires a great deal of experience and competence in areas well beyond mere baseball knowledge.

Parent Volunteers

While the Board of Directors maintains the league at the administrative level, and plans for and is concerned with the long-term survival and health of the league, much of the day-to-day operations at the team level are handled by parent volunteers. These volunteers include all managers, coaches, team parents, and umpires, who all work together to ensure that teams are prepared to play, that they show up on time, that their games are officiated fairly, and that someone shows up at the end of the game with snacks. Managers, and sometimes coaches, are chosen before the season starts. It can be easier to recruit managers from the younger age divisions because extensive knowledge of the game is not required. As the players age, however, parents without previous coaching experience increasingly shy away from the coaching obligation. Thus, the league is dependent on maintaining its supply of coaches from its regular pool. Managers are responsible for the preparation of their team for games through regular practices, for providing trained scorekeepers to keep track of the statistical elements within the
game, and for umpiring games in other age divisions, a source of continual consternation for managers every year. Many times, managers will already have coaches in mind for their teams, but will sometimes have to recruit from the pool of available parents for their assistants. This need for coaches often drives a manager’s draft strategy, and they may select a player with lesser ability in earlier rounds if they know that the child’s mother or father is a dependable assistant.

Unless the manager’s or coach’s spouse has already agreed to be the team parent (this is a very common occurrence), then the manager will ask for a team parent to volunteer at the beginning of the season. This parent (usually a mother)\(^6\) will be responsible for administrative tasks throughout the season, the intensity and volume depending on the manager involved. At the very least, the team parent will be responsible for creating and maintaining the snack schedule for the team and planning the team party at the end of the season. Many managers also rely on the team parent to act as the communications arm of the team, reminding parents of practices, games, fund raisers, or cancellations when they arise. The time commitment is significant for the team parent, as Rita explains what all went into preparations for the All-Star season:

> We were told, you know, what needed to happen, and then we gave out the information. We needed their uniform deposits, we needed the birth certificates, the proof of residency. We need to get a t-shirt order together. We need to get a snack schedule together. Um, the first game was on the 29th, so we got it together. We decided to have a raffle. We started getting donations for the raffle. Um, Opening Day on the 27th, pictures. So, I had to get a list of things that were coming up, and, and I took it upon myself to put everybody’s phone number in my phone and send the multiple texts out. So then I did the snack schedule.

> And then started working on fundraising. And I kind of led the fundraising thing. And I told them this is what worked well last year, and the previous years. And we asked for other ideas, and when none came, we went with the ideas that we had, and, went with’em, and then I tried to kind of get everyone else on board, and assigned tasks. For

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\(^6\) While certainly nothing precludes fathers from taking on the role of a team parent, I never personally witnessed a father acting as one in my observations, and there is a prevailing notion when talking about team parents that it means the team mother. Most participants in the league still use that term.
the car wash, everybody brought something, everybody brought water. We asked for the water, and most everybody worked. There were a few parents that were out of town. And we, we didn’t make it a big deal.

We decided that we needed a budget. So we came up with a budget. If we don’t go to state- this is what we’ve done in the past, we did bat bags for the kids. And then we decided we didn’t need bat bags for everybody, just for half the kids. So we eliminated that item from the budget. Jackets, we thought jackets and trophies, mementos of being an All-Star. Everybody has trophies. They tend to gather dust. How many kids are gonna actually really, really enjoy the trophy? So we thought instead of using a trophy, we’d use a jacket as a trophy. The jackets we got last year were really nice…

The argument can be made – and has been made to me on occasion in casual conversation – that team parent is a much more involved and difficult job than that of a manager or coach. In my two years of experience with both, I find it difficult to argue against that position.

At all levels of organization, cooperation is essential for the continued operation of the league. Managers rely on the cooperation of the parents to have players where they need to be and when they need to be there. The managers also rely on the team parents who in turn rely again on the parents to adhere to the snack schedule and to participate in the fundraising efforts that, while cumbersome, are the life’s blood of the league, and one of the two main sources of income within the league (registration fees being the other). The Board of Directors relies on the coaches to run the teams on a day-to-day basis, to umpire many if not most of the games, and to handle parent complaints to the best of their abilities. Conversely, the managers and coaches rely on the Board to create and enforce an environment of fair competition and to support them when parents or players have complaints that come to the Board. Such cooperation should be expected, given the bureaucratic structure of the organization and the interdependence of the parties involved.

Mead was among the first anthropologists to alert ethnographers that, “…the inexplicit, the unformulated, the uninstitutionalized, is as important to an understanding of the whole, as are
the traditional institutions about which it has been customary to center inquiry” (1933: 15). Such advice was especially helpful in this study. To focus merely on the formal structure of the league would have been highly uninteresting, as it would have ignored how the league actually operated. The above description could easily have been gathered from a Little League Operations Manual, but it fails to illuminate how the league actually worked. Lost are the relations between parents that sustained teams in the face of adversity, or the role of children in the friends that their parents made as they played on the field. It ignores the often highly manipulative and unfair practices that occurred in team construction, all-star selection, or League policy. It also ignores the way that social relations structured parts of league policy, how Board members brought their professional and recreational expertise to the league to make it run better. Finally, it ignores how antagonistic relations between Board members threatened the integrity of the league, its finances, and perhaps its very existence. These processes would not have been presented to me had I not gotten involved with teams and parents “on the ground” in the league. To that end, during my two seasons in the VCLL, I found four teams whose coaches and parents allowed me to “tag along” to practices, to meetings, games, and team functions. There, the impact of the formal operation of the league collided with the exegetical implementation of those policies by the people whose job it was to interpret and enforce them.

TEAMS I STUDIED

*The Twins*

The Twins were a team of 4-year old girls and boys that played in the VCLL’s Pre-Tee Ball division. The team was comprised of a mix of parents, some of whom had been involved in the league before through older siblings and some who had never been involved in youth sports as parents. The team was coached by Lawrence a tall, Latino and young-looking detective with the
metropolitan police force with a wispy goatee, and a native of the area. He played baseball for Valley City High School and had played in college, and was highly sought after as a coach. Lawrence had plenty of experience within the league, having a 12-year old daughter playing for the Wildcats (see below) and a 7-year old son playing in the Pee-Wee division. Because scores are not kept in this division, there is no “objective” rubric by which to measure the success of the team. However, since most of the players planned to play again in 2011, by all accounts, the team was a great success. Lawrence was also heavily involved in the VCLL Board of Directors, serving at various points during my two seasons with the league as Player Agent, Chief Umpire, and Vice President. Lawrence was a highly sought-after coach in the league for those with prior knowledge, and he had several parent requests for the team. As this was a team of 4-year olds, all parent requests could be honored, and Lawrence ended up with a team of several players and parents with whom he had some level of familiarity.

The rest of the team, however, was not as well integrated. Though there were some families who knew each other through other areas of their social life, these connections were sporadic and isolated. While there were a few new relationships that were built amongst the parents through the season, these were also few and far between. Because of several factors, including the size of the teams (consisting of 6 players), the lack of time commitment required (teams practiced once per week for 45 minutes and played one game per week also lasting about 45 minutes), and the prevalence of extended family members at games (which inhibited social interaction between family groups), the parents as a whole failed to coalesce much past their initial level of familiarity. However, because most of the parents on the team planned to bring their children back in 2011, it is doubtless that a few of the parents continued to see one another in subsequent years. Given what parents repeatedly told me in interviews about the time required
to build relationships at the ball fields, there is a very good chance that relationships were built over the course of subsequent seasons.

*The Wildcats*

The Wildcats were a Major softball team comprising 10 girls who ranging in age from 10-12. Because of the age of the girls involved, nearly all of the parents had some experience in the league. Thus, many of the parents had at least a passing familiarity with other, and some had formed fairly close friendships through the years. This mix, however, made full team integration difficult. The parents who had already formed close relationships through their involvement not only in Little League but through various club and traveling softball teams tended to stick together, leaving the other parents to get to know one another independently. This left the parents fragmented socially and spatially. In games, the parents were mostly spread out into their own dyads and small groups, with many parents opting to sit alone as far away from others as they could while still witnessing the action. During practices, which were often two hours long – many parents dropped their daughters off and used the time to run other errands about town, leaving practices a sparsely attended affair.

The Wildcats were coached by Alana, who was a well-respected coach who also coached a more competitive traveling team. She had a caring and outgoing personality that befitted her as a medical assistant at a small clinic in Valley City. Though she was not a native of Valley City, Alana’s tenure in the area led her to feel as though she was indeed a local. At the time of my observation, she was also a prominent board member. Not long after my arrival, her attendance at board meetings became more and more sporadic until she finally resigned formally near the

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7 The age division itself is supposed to be 11 and 12 year olds, but the Wildcats had a player whose parents had moved her up a year early. As long as this is not regarded as a safety issue, the league will allow players to move up to an older age division early.
end of the season. There was some speculation amongst the team parents that she favored her club team girls over the less experienced players during both practices and games, and this is borne out by my own observations. However, even amongst parents whose girls were negatively affected by this favoritism, she was routinely acknowledged as one of the best in the league.

In my interviews with Wildcats parents, they readily acknowledged that overall the team parents did not get to know each other very well, that there was little in the way of vocal cheering for the team, and very little in the way of overall team identification or spirit. This was noted in the interviews as unusual for a team in a more competitive age division. Despite this, the team finished second in their division, and eventually had four of their players chosen for the All-Star team. Because of the commitment to their travel and school teams, however, none of the four originally chosen for the team eventually played for the VCLL All-Star team.

**The Mariners**

One of the early themes of my conversations with parents in the VCLL was the notion that more competitive situations, such as All-Star teams, club teams, and the local football or wrestling leagues produced more coherent and closer-knit groups of parents than regular season Little League baseball teams where competition levels and stakes were (usually) lower and the atmosphere more casual and restrained. In that spirit, at the end of my first season of observations, I decided to take up with an All-Star team to get a firsthand look at the parental dynamics of such an environment. The Mariners, were an All-Star baseball team representing the VCLL at the Major level (11-12 year olds). I chose this team for two main reasons: (1) I was told by many around the league that they would have the greatest chance of advancing out of the

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8 “Club” teams here refers to teams that play in other, more competitive leagues, such as the United States Specialty Sports Association (colloquially referred to in the VCLL as “u-trip”) that are not bound by geography. That is, players can be recruited to play for any team as long as they are eligible by age. I use the term “club” interchangeably with “traveling” teams.
district tournament to the state tournament and thus have the chance to travel together, and (2) there would be a great deal of league-wide attention paid to this team because of the possibility to advance far enough to be included in the televised coverage of the Little League World Series (LLWS), which I hoped would facilitate the in-group feeling of the parents of the boys. I was otherwise unfamiliar with the parents, players, and coaches on this team, having spent all of my time with the Twins and Wildcats, but the parents were, by and large, very accommodating and very helpful to me during my all-too-short time with them. The All-Star season is very compressed compared to a regular season. Teams are announced in mid-June with practices usually beginning the next day (and, in some cases, the same evening). The district tournaments then take place near the 4th of July weekend. Teams that win the district tournament move on to state, regionals, and so forth, with the LLWS taking place beginning in mid to late August. Thus, the vast majority of All-Star teams are only together for a few weeks before being eliminated.

The intensity of the competition was mitigated (in many cases) by the lack of time that parents have to get to know one another.

The team was managed by Nelson, a tall and fit coach in his late-30s who was divorced and commuted an hour each way to coach his son during the season and the All-Star team after the season ended. Nelson had a mixed reputation among the Mariners parents when the All-Star season started. He was widely seen as a good coach, but one who also played favorites that sometimes had little to do with actual ability. One of these favorites was his son who was, against the prevailing wisdom of the other parents on the team, the starting shortstop for the team. He was assisted by Julio, a short coach in his mid-30s who looked a good 10 years younger. Julio was less vocal during practices and games, but also better thought of throughout the league. Nelson was also assisted by Juan, a board member and sometimes assistant coach.
who was known throughout the league for his smokeless tobacco habit and his proclivity for
gossip. Together, they prepared the boys for the district tournament by practicing 5-6 days per
week in the two weeks leading up to the tournament. Because the Mariners were favorites to
advance to the state tournament some 2 hours away, there was a great deal of administrative
tasks that fell onto the parents. Thus, early on the team decided on multiple team parents,
handling different aspects of planning for fundraising and logistics for the district and state
tournaments. Originally, there were four team mothers. However, they were whittled down to
two due to a lack of follow-through by two of the mothers. There was so much organization and
so many team meetings and so many late practices that several of the parents got to know each
other fairly well. Obviously, given that some of the boys had come from the same regular-season
team and some others had played together before, my casual conversations during both practices
and games revealed that there was little in the way of close relationships amongst the parents
when the team was first convened. Thus, while the relationships built between parents were not
always entirely new, neither were they dictated by past relationships.

The boys did end up winning the district tournament, which gave them an opportunity to
travel together for the state tournament. The tournament took place two hours away and during
the week, which meant that parents either were forced to take time off of work or, if they could
not for whatever reason, leave their children with some of the other parents who could. I was
interested in the prospect of travel for two reasons: first, travel invites more interaction off the
field for parents, as they are in a different place where they (usually) know fewer people. That
they are focused on the activity at hand, and usually staying in the same hotel provided a great
deal of socializing opportunities. Second, the prospect of potentially having to leave children
with other parents was prominent on many parents’ minds. I thought that discussing their
mindset over this situation was a good way to gauge the level of trust they may or may not have had in leaving their children with other parents. This became one of the central themes with the parents from the Mariners I interviewed.

I traveled with the team in hopes of catching a game, but two days’ worth of games were rained out while I was there. In one sense, this was bad, as I had hoped to see a great deal of socializing at the games, spurred on by the high level of tension and competition. However, the rain, being so pervasive, was enticement for many of the families to stay near the hotel and, hence, each other. Several of the parents spent their Saturday evening on the balcony of the motel with lawn chairs and coolers shooting the breeze while the kids ran around until the sun went down. After that, the boys went split up and went into several rooms, mostly hanging out and playing video games while their parents stayed on the balcony. In the end, several sets of parents outlasted the boys as far as staying up late and socializing. I had to leave the following day, and the team did not start the state tournament until Monday. They promptly lost their first two games and returned either Tuesday night or Wednesday morning.

*The Cubs*

After poring over the data for several weeks once my first season had concluded in the league, the ideas that form the substantive chapters in this work began to take shape. I decided that, in order to develop them further, I wanted to observe a second season in the league. I reasoned that while my first season had been a valuable learning experience, I wanted to spend another season with another team, refining my initial observations of team life and parental social networks. I also realized that, of the three teams I had followed the previous season, two of them were coached by members of the Board of Directors (the third, the Mariners, were not coached by a Board Member, but was connected to the board through other parents). I wanted to observe a
team with no board connections to get a better understanding of what team life was like for the
less-connected. I employed much the same method for choosing a team as I had the first season:
I went to the tryout, gave a small talk before the draft (the Minor boys draft this time) and asked
if any coaches would be interested. While several raised their hands, I eliminated those with
board connections, and narrowed my choice down to Brent, an underemployed contractor who
tended to wear shorts no matter what the weather, and whom I had seen the previous year
coaching in the Minor division. Brent’s team was the Cubs, and they had lost all 19 of their
games the previous season.

Brent expected to have many of his kids back from the previous season, but also expected
to compile a much better record in 2011. For one thing, he benefitted from his experience
coaching a club team with Ron. Ron was a heavily involved board member and well-respected
manager who simultaneously had a reputation for being overly competitive and manipulating
league rules to his own benefit. Ron had hatched a plan for him and Brent to split the 8 players
that played both for their club team and in the VCLL.⁹ In the end, they were able to split the club
players, with Ron receiving 5 and Brent receiving 3. The remainder of his team was drafted and
largely consisted of players he had the previous year – who were expected to get better with age
and thus help the team be more competitive – and parents he and his wife Sierra had known
previously. As will be seen in Chapter 4, the team selection process, especially for coaches and
families with long-standing ties to Valley City, is only partially dictated by the coach’s
competitive drive. Relationships must be maintained and long-standing friendships honored

⁹ I learned this only after committing to following the Cubs team. While it does represent a
connection with the board and the benefits of knowing board members closely, the connection
did not come directly from the team itself, and thus affected the parent chemistry of the team
only somewhat, in that parents of the club players (of which Brent drafted 3) already knew each
other better than the other sets of parents who were not involved with the club team.
during the process if possible. This can have both positive and negative effects on the competitiveness of the teams. For Brent, the process fairly well evened out, as his wife’s relationship with another longtime resident forced him to choose a player of lesser ability earlier in the draft than he would have otherwise. However, Sierra’s relationship with Katheryn, a highly involved mother with a simultaneously bubbly yet cynical personality whose husband was in the Navy, brought him an outstanding catcher (Martin) who was not initially planning to play baseball in 2011 and who also ended up being an All-Star for the league.

Brent had a large back yard with space devoted to a batting cage and thus held practice at his house once per week with the boys. While this was officially against Little League rules since the boys were not covered by Little League insurance at Brent’s home, whether or not this was known or regarded by the parents is unclear. No one ever voiced their concern about it publicly, and no boy was ever hurt at the home practices. While I initially was delighted at the prospect of these home practices, hypothesizing that they would allow parents to step indoors to chat while their children practiced, this never developed during the season, as parents continued to drop their sons off and pick them up when practice was over. Only one mother, Katheryn, stayed regularly at Brent and Sierra’s home. She and Sierra were close friends who also served as officers for the local Parent-Teacher Organization; they spent the majority of their time at these (and most other) practices talking about PTO matters and trading local youth sports gossip (Katheryn’s son Martin played football and wrestled, both of which had a great deal of crossover with baseball).

Interestingly, in speaking with his mother, the reason for the player’s reluctance to play baseball came because of the contentious relationship that he and his parents had with Valley City youth football coaches who also coached in the VCLL. He was afraid that he might end up on one of their teams, which would have been a “miserable” experience for him.
The Cubs’ season was, by and large, a successful one. They finished third in the league and had a very solid record for the season, a vast improvement from their 0-19 campaign in 2010. The parents, with their cliques largely based on previous and multiplex relationships, still managed to work as a functional unit, and their games were often lively affairs. Their season was not without its drama, however. Over the course of the season, a parent was ejected from a game, an umpire walked out from a game because the board would not back his ejection of another parent, they were nearly forced to forfeit a game because an opposing coach refused to acknowledge that he and Brent had rescheduled their game, and the wife of one of Brent’s coaches got very upset that her husband had not received a uniform like the other coaches and was not included in the team picture. The team did not have a good relationship with the board, and with Joshua in particular, who more than once referred to them as “my problem child.” And while Brent attempted to be fair with playing time between the more talented boys and the less talented (and/or less experienced) boys, he was not as judicious with playing positions, which left some parents less than happy with his allocation of infield positions during games. Many of these boys were not planning to come back for the 2012 season.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: EVOLUTION OF A PROJECT

It is worth noting that inductive ethnographic inquiries are best served when the researcher acknowledges the data-driven nature of the project by engaging in the process of emergent design. The implications for these projects (and this one in particular) are that the research questions posed at the beginning of the project may look substantially different than those that end up being answered throughout the process of the project and in the finished project. This is certainly not without precedent (see Foley 1990 for an explicit statement in this regard). In the beginning of the project, I was primarily concerned with the structure and nature of the ties
formed during parental participation in the VCLL, the process by which ties formed between parents, the variables that facilitated and constrained relationship formation, and inclusion and exclusion patterns. As the project took shape, I found that I had asked too many questions in the beginning, and that the data I was collecting was not necessarily appropriate to start to answer them. Relationships are messy entities. On every team, there were parents who knew each other well, who knew each other as acquaintances, or knew each other not at all. It also became clear that most of these relationships fell into the acquaintance category, meaning that parents would talk during the season, but did not often extend their relationships outside of it. This, however, did not preclude the formation of social capital exchange – both actual and potential – between them. When I began to take stock of the data that I had, certain themes kept popping out. While I noticed that exchange was present between parents, there were interesting characteristics that suggested a pattern running throughout seemingly disparate forms of relationships and social capital exchanges. As I entered my second year of fieldwork, I altered my research questions to reflect both what I had learned in my first year and what I thought I could explore effectively in my second year. They form the core of Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In particular, they cover:

1. How does social capital manifest in the particular forms of relationships that tend to form on a VCLL team? What impact do the players have on these relationships? What are the types of benefits that are exchanged between parents, and what league process throughout the season facilitate the creation and/or mobilization of these benefits?

2. How do parents account for their motives for both asking for and providing help? How does the presence of children in the setting as the primary beneficiary of the league affect the provision and accessibility of resources in the league? How does a
parent’s level of social participation on the team affect their access to the resources potentially available by virtue of participation on the team? How do relationships in this setting conform, contradict, or complicate existing research on donors and recipients?

3. What is the source of negative social capital? How can it be distinguished from what is conventionally known as the “dark side” of social capital? Under what conditions is it likely to be produced? What are the institutional and personal consequences of participating in this type of relationship? How do the antagonists in these relationships view their conflict within the league’s ethos of existing solely for the benefit “of the kids?”

CONCLUSION

During my time with the Twins, Wildcats, Mariners, Cubs, and the Board, I witnessed a great deal of coordination between parents and coaches, and among parents as well. I asked questions of the parents involved with the teams that involved their relationships, how they approached the participation required to engage their child’s experiences of the sport, and how they approached relationship-building within the league. As I progressed in my examination, I began to encounter themes and consistencies in parents’ responses. I learned that most relationships formed during the season were shallow, weak, and ephemeral. At first, this thought disappointed me, and I began to wonder if there was anything “there” for me to report. Eventually, I learned that, in agreement with a long line of social capital scholars, but in particular Granovetter (1973) and Dyck (2002), that a lack of closeness between parents should not be read as a lack of potential social capital benefits between them. That they have been put together on a team through an organization that they generally respect (Little League) changes the way that they view the other
parents on the team, even those with whom they have had minimal contact during the season. I also began to notice where relationships were built, where social capital was created and where it was consumed, as well as what types of benefits were routinely exchanged. I also began to take note of the motivations behind the provision of resources by parents as well as the granting of exchange by benefactors. Finally, I was exposed to the dark and troubling underbelly of the Valley City Little League. I experienced the high-stakes realm of the hyper-involved, where negative relationships were allowed to fester to the detriment of the league. Much of what I saw could be characterized by Jeremy Bentham’s idea of “deep play” that Clifford Geertz so deftly appropriated for his observations of Balinese cockfights (1972). In deep play, the stakes of the game become so high that those who engage in it are said to be acting irrationally. I was often reminded of this idea when I heard gossip being bandied about by one board member in regard to another, or when – on rare occasion – the gossip went public in the form of accusations and counter claims. Scholars have come around on the idea that social capital can take positive and negative forms, but we have spent too little time examining negative relationships. A full reckoning of social capital requires a thorough examination of both positive and negative relationships and the stakes for both from an individual as well as an organization point of view. Before diving into the question of benefits, motivations, and negative relationships, however, I want to explore what social capital is, how sport scholars have engaged the concept, what scholars have as of yet left unexplored, and how this project fills some of those gaps.
Chapter 2 – Orienting the Present Problem

In this chapter, I first lay out the three major areas of study that inform the current project: the interaction between sport and the community, social capital, and the intersection between sport and social capital. This discussion will lay the foundation for the present set of research questions. Finally, I introduce the role of children into the discussion of sport and social capital through a discussion of the current state of the literature in the three substantive areas to be covered in detail below: the role of children in generating social capital for their parents, the connection between children and motivations behind the donor and recipient roles in a social capital relationship, and the destructive forms of social capital. The scant and scattershot way in which sport and social capital have been linked thus far – by both mainstream sociologists or sports scholars – as well as the relative neglect of children in the process of social capital formation underscores the need for a critical, empirically-grounded ethnographic study. Among other things, such study should include, on the one hand, the role of sport in creating network-level social capital; on the other, the expansion of investigations of the role of children and child-centered contexts on social capital formation.

SPORT AND THE COMMUNITY

The long-term study of sport and community has produced two major stances, roughly corresponding to the consensus and conflict theoretical traditions in sociology. Consensus-oriented scholars highlight the ability of sport to: (1) build community, (2) overcome social difference, and (3) produce pro-social outcomes in the lives of its participants and spectators. This position is rooted in the work of Durkheim, specifically The Division of Labor in Society (1997 [1933]). Sport in the local community is portrayed as an attempt to find vestiges of mechanical solidarity in a world dominated by the increased division of labor (organic
solidarity). Mechanical solidarity remains important because of the continued need to feel a connection with something larger than oneself: the collective conscience. Other scholars employ Tönnies’ (1957 [1887]) related typology, asserting that sport can be employed in the service of Gemeinschaft-type relations. Elias and Dunning (1993) argue that sport helps to fulfill the inherent human desire for the two primary spheres of leisure activity: the sociable and the mimetic. The concern here is with the sociable sphere, which can be summed up by the term “Leisure-Gemeinschaften” (p. 115). It is a place where more overtly emotional contacts can be made, and a slight loosening of the affective parts of personalities can take place. This is distinguished from a romantic, nostalgic longing to return to a gemeinschaft type of society. The desire for uncommitted social relationships is not equated with a desire to return to communal life in general. It does, however, help to satisfy the emotional longing for human contact that isn’t purely instrumental.

Conversely, conflict theorists see sport as an inherently divisive force that necessarily dissolves bonds between people by: (1) creating additional points of potential conflict between them, (2) as a pacifying mechanism to divert the proletarian revolt, or (3) as an alienating institution dominated by the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization. This position is derived largely from the work of Marx and Weber. While Marx did not feature sport as a serious topic of investigation, some strands of sport critique grew out of his work. It can be summarized thusly: modern sport is a bourgeois product, initially utilized by the ruling class as an alternative to work. As it filtered down the social chain, it became imbued with work-like characteristics, resulting in an achievement orientation manifested as a win-at-all-costs orientation, or a drive to break records. “Moreover, training techniques such as ‘interval’ and ‘circuit’ training replicate the ‘alienating’ and ‘dehumanizing’ character of assembly-line production” (Elias and Dunning
The idea that sport provides an alternative to work is a “masking ideology,” which hides its real function of, “…reinforcing in the leisure-sphere an ethic of hard work, achievement and group loyalty which is necessary for the operation of an advanced industrial society” (ibid.: 212). Additionally, Marxists argue, “…historically the interest of the state in popular culture has been to undermine the potential for class struggle through diversion, ideological penetration, and spatial and physical control” (Sugden and Bairner 1993: 194).

From the Weberian perspective, sport is an institution that is afflicted by the related processes of rationalization, modernization, and bureaucratization (Weber 2002 [1930]). One of the consequences of these processes has been the increasing professionalization of sport at the expense of the amateur ideal (Huizinga 1955). Further, the process of bureaucratization is an alienating one for participants who do not always value the ‘efficiency’ of a bureaucratic structure. For example, in their study of the conflict between sport hunting and tribal hunting on Cree lands in Canada, Scott and Webber (2001) note:

One of the main problems of co-management bodies in their many variations across subarctic and arctic North America is their tendency to adopt a culture of bureaucracy, to rely preponderantly on the idiom of scientific management, and to fail to connect with the knowledge and cultural priorities of those local people who have the most direct contact with – and often the most at stake in – lands, waters, and resources in their home areas (P. 149).

Thus, the institution of sport replaces leisure or play as a personal or communal endeavor – as it has been experienced in communities for centuries – either by participants or by observers. These two orientations are generally treated within the literature as oppositional categories.

*The Consensus Tradition - Sport as Community Builder*

Hobsbawm (1999) noted that sport is such a good vehicle for nationalism because “the imagined community of millions can be more easily visualized as a team of eleven people” (p. 143). The conceptual leap from the nation to the local community – which is still imagined in a significant
way (Anderson 1991) – is not so difficult, nor is it without precedent. The connection between sport and the community, in fact, far predates modern social scientific thought about it. The ancient Greeks equated the accomplishments of their athletic heroes with the distinction of the city to the rest of the city-states (James 2005 [1963]). This tradition survived into the nineteenth century, when members of the community followed very closely both the athletic feats of teams as well as their conduct. “Once on the field and ready to play, teams had to perform and comport themselves in a manner to the credit of their community, “For as much as any discrete group, they seemed to represent the virtues and values of a village or town that saw itself as a unique community” (Becker and Grigsby 1985:84).

Sport in the nineteenth century was also seen as potentially a powerful community builder in urban areas where it was thought to have been lost. Stephen Hardy (1982) found that the Parks and Playgrounds movement grew out of the increasing realization that the idealized rural and small-town community feeling had been lost. Even competitive sport was seen as a way for oppositional elements within a city to come together in the spirit of fair competition and shared values. For example, boxing, according to Eliot Gorn, “…bound men together with their own cultural style. Despite political, ethnic, and occupational schisms, despite the intense rivalries of urban cliques, boxers and their fans shared values and behaviors” (1984:138). These historical ideas inform current functionalist thought regarding sport and the community.

In the sport literature, the functionalist orientation generally manifests in one of two different manners: sport as a source of mechanical solidarity or gemeinschaft-type relationships in complex modern societies characterized by organic or gesellschaft-style relationships, or as the modern-day equivalent of religion. In the former, sport is a medium through which modern citizens, with their unceasing diversity, can come together either in friendly competition or
cooperation and coexist peacefully. Their focus toward a singular goal subsumes the individual ego to the will of the collective, such as the collective will present at professional sporting events (Lever 1983). In a latter manifestation of consensus thought, sport is seen as a modern-day functional equivalent to religion. Sport is a particularly effective mechanism for recreating the religious experience in different ways. For some, the ritual aspect of both sport participation and fandom are emphasized (Brandes 1981; Lever 1983). For others, it is the euphoric feelings that can be created by participating in or witnessing a significant victory, “‘the ebullience felt by fans as a result of a football victory can be compared with the ecstatically emotive experience of fundamentalist Protestantism’” (Iber 2007:122, quoting Novak). Without continuous affective interaction or a dominant religion, sports are sometimes touted as the “glue that holds society together” (Eckstein and Delaney 2002). The entire consensus line has been applied by researchers in various ways, including but not limited to: (1) immigrant integration (Gorn 1984; Nelson 1998), (2) the relief of local tensions (Geertz 1972; Sugden 2005), (3) the transcendence of class, (Iber 2007; Kraus 2003), (4) economic regeneration and community self-esteem, especially in urban areas (Eckstein and Delaney 2002; Sheard 1999), (5) a source of social capital (Dyreson 2001; Nicholson and Hoye 2008; Perks 2007), and (6) the resistance of dominant power relations and the redress of social injustice (Grey 1992; Majumdar 2004; Wacquant 1992). Of central interest for this project is the relation between sport and social capital, which will be covered in more depth below.

The Conflict Tradition – Sport as Community Inhibitor

For conflict theorists, sport can harm social relations in several different ways, either at the community level or at much higher levels of abstraction, such as between races, classes, or nations. Research emerging from this position either exists independently of the functionalist
work, or as a direct response to it. The crucial difference between conflict and consensus sport sociologists is in the way they view the negative externalities of sport. Conflict theorists believe they are inherent to the institution of sport, while functionalists believe they are aberrations to be corrected (Hughson, Inglis, and Free 2005).

Much of this work falls within a strand of Marxism termed “repressive Marxism,” “Emphasis in this analysis is placed on the claim that the capitalist class controls the organization of sport, that capitalists exploit athletes for commercial ends, and that sport serves as an opiate, distracting the working class from its oppression, alienation, and revolutionary potential” (Mandle and Mandle 1995: 198). Though these studies are not always explicit in their theoretical orientation, elements of this Marxist critique are evident in their presentation and conclusions. The broad critiques of sport within this tradition include: the exacerbation of race (Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, and Ambrose 2003; Edwards 1979; Harris 1997), gender (Alamillo 2007; Foley 1990a; Gruneau and Whitson 1993), and class (Coleman 2004; Ingham and McDonald 2003; Smith and Ingham 2003) inequality, an emphasis on “othering” as the mechanism for community building (covered in more detail below), and sport as a tool of social control (Akin 2006; Hardy 1982; Hartmann and Depro 2006; Kruckemeyer 2002; Williams 1990). For the purposes of this study, the most salient critiques to be discussed further are the exacerbation of community tensions and othering behavior.

Exacerbation of Community Tensions

Sport can be harmful to already divided communities or groups as the (ritual) conflict of sport can highlight and excite latent tensions within them. The functional position highlights the ways in which sport can – through the ritualization of conflict – relieve tensions within communities (Elias and Dunning 1993; Geertz 1972; Lever 1983). There is, however, substantial
evidence to the contrary. Research in Northern Ireland has shown specifically how sport in divided communities tends to reproduce and exacerbate tensions rather than reduce it (Bairner 2003). Additionally, in her study of soccer fandom in Brazil, Janet Lever (1983) also notes “…where animosities run deep, ritual conflict may easily lose its game character and serve as a catalyst for riots and disorder” (p. 148). Closer to home, Mark Dyreson (2001) related an anecdote of a junior high soccer game turned organized brawl due to disparaging comments made by parents of a predominantly white team against his own (coached) team consisting largely of minorities. His conclusion: sport divides the divided community.

Othering

Another recurring theme in the critical orientation to sport is the notion of the “other.” In this work, a coherent community requires the existence – or creation – of an out-group. The community is thus best defined through its boundaries, “The community unity engendered by athletics has a price, which is usually in the form of othering neighboring communities, which can exacerbate differences between people, and even cause violence at the athletic events” (Miracle and Rees 1994:168). The argument implies that while certain forms of community can be built through sport, it cannot build true community because there is necessarily an exclusive element involved in the constructed community. At the transnational level, this operates as the invocation of very familiar stereotypes, such as the old idea that northern nations produce temperate, calm and reliable athletes; as one progresses south, the stereotypes change. Southern Europeans are emotional, South Americans are fiery, and Africans are magical and irrational (Giulianotti 1999). At the local level, it is still easy to “other” opponents, and to describe them in trite and over-general terms, such as the losers, hicks, or deadbeats from the town across the river. In Protecting Home (2005), Sherri Grasmuck details this process in action. She observed
that the expansion of the youth baseball league (a neighborhood league) to areas outside the neighborhood meant that neighborhood control of the association was threatened by ‘outsiders’.

The locals’ defense:

…it reflected a deep sense of entitlement to decision-making in the part of the Fairmounters. The conversation makes clear the extent to which the categories of ‘neighborhood guys’ and ‘yuppies’ were part of insider FSA consciousness and the very effective way neighborhood solidarity could be tapped to thwart an overt attempt by newcomers to gain organizational control.” (P. 50).

In fact, the identification or creation of a common enemy is perhaps the best way to ensure the solidarity of one’s own group. Grasmuck notes the moments of the greatest community solidarity occurred during times when Fairmount (an urban neighborhood) teams played in the suburbs. Even still, the phenomenon Grasmuck describes, might be better understood as “communitas” rather than “community,” (Ingham and McDonald 2003) as the animosities between races and classes that were missing during times of effective othering behavior resurfaced when the locality no longer served to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Before unpacking its effects, one must first attempt to explicate the concept of social capital, an increasingly difficult task as scholars continue to grapple with it. Karl Marx’s work is generally acknowledged as the origin of the concept “capital” as accumulated labor. Alternative models of capital have emerged since Marx’s work, including human capital (Becker 1964), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985a; Bourdieu and Passeron 1973), and social capital theories (Bourdieu 1985b; Coleman 1988; Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993; Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000). Lin (2001a) refers to these alternative theories as neo-capital theories. The difference between these and conventional capital theory, according to Lin, is in the numbers and types of people who can accumulate surplus labor from their investment (i.e., profit). He writes, “…the laborers, workers, or masses
can now invest, and thus acquire certain capital of their own... they can now generate surplus value in trading their labor or work in the production and consumption markets,” (p. 6). Ronald Burt, meanwhile, notes that social capital is the contextual counterpart to human capital theory, which takes the position that, “…people who do better are more able individuals; they are more intelligent, more attractive, more articulate, more skilled,” (Burt 2001: 32). Social capital theorists emphasize the role of context and relations in the production of goods

While the widespread use of the term “social capital” is of fairly recent vintage, the concept behind the term is not. In fact, contained within this idea are some of the basic tenets of sociology’s classical thinkers:

That involvement and participation in groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community is a staple notion, dating back to Durkheim’s emphasis on group life as an antidote to anomie and self-destruction and to Marx’s distinction between an atomized class-in-itself and a mobilized and effective class-for-itself (Portes 1998:2).

The underlying mechanism by which social capital can function is reciprocity, though the specific form of reciprocity invoked changes depending on the theoretical predilection of the scholar. For those who emphasize a *homo economicus* view of human action, social capital is derived from the accumulation of specific obligations based on particular favors past (ibid.). Other scholars, especially those who view social capital as a resource of communities and larger units prefer the idea of generalized reciprocity. Putnam (2000), for instance, claims, “The touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalized reciprocity – I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor,” (p. 134). Depending on the model of reciprocity employed, a critical issue is that of motivation. In the former case,

11 Goods here can take many forms, which is part of the challenge of constructing good social capital theory. Goods can be tangible or intangible, physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. The list has become virtually inexhaustible.
motivation is generally unproblematic, as favors are expected to be repaid by the individual receiving the initial benefit. In the latter case, motivation can be conceptually “tricky”. Without a specific temporal or material dimension to the potential repayment of favors given, what motivates the donor in the first place? In this case, the line between generalized reciprocity and altruism becomes blurred (ibid.). Reputation and prestige may be the actual returns for favors given (Lin 2001a), and these can be powerful motivating tools as the accumulation of reputation and prestige may be useful in creating material benefits down the line.

Social Capital as an Individual Resource

While the origins of the term “social capital” date to at least the early twentieth century, social capital’s modern genesis lies in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1985a). Bourdieu employed the term to refer to benefits accruing to the individual as a result of her membership in social networks (Portes and Landolt 1996). More precisely:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu 1985a:248-249).

Bourdieu approached social capital from a conflict perspective. For him, social capital and cultural capital are employed to hide the process of class reproduction in a way that purely economic transactions cannot. For this to be a valid argument, social and cultural capital must actually function as capital. In other words, social capital must be fungible with human, cultural, and physical capital. There are costs associated with converting social and cultural capital into economic capital – the forms are not directly fungible, nor are they directly quantifiable – but these alternative models hide their economic nature in their forms, thereby avoiding censure.
often associated with naked economic transactions. In some cases, the economic nature of social relationships may be hidden from the participants themselves:

…there are some goods and services to which economic capital gives immediate access, without secondary costs; others can be obtained only by virtue of a social capital of relationships (or social obligations) which cannot act instantaneously, at the appropriate moment, unless they have been established and maintained for a long time, as if for their own sake… (ibid.:252).

Bourdieu also separates social capital into two components: the relationships through which social capital is mobilized, and the resources that are actually available to the individual as a result of social connections. Some later theorists have obscured this distinction, and in doing so risk making tautological claims, as the ability to access resources through networks is inferred by the quality of the resources accessed. This also introduces an element of class bias into the study of social capital. Thus, for Bourdieu, social capital was an individual-level resource with individual-level benefits. He allowed for the creation of social capital a by-product of sociability for other purposes, but he was keenly interested in the ways in which social relationships are consciously cultivated and maintained for instrumental purposes.

Other scholars have expanded and applied Bourdieu’s conception of social capital, and thus take an explicitly network-oriented and individual-level understanding of the concept. Two of the most important scholars in this vein are Ronald Burt and Nan Lin. In some ways, Burt (1992) takes as his starting point Granovetter’s (1973; 1983) “Weak Tie” thesis, and its concern with nonredundant contacts and information flow. Burt, however, offers first a trenchant critique of Granovetter’s position regarding weak ties and their benefits. Burt criticizes Granovetter for affixing causation to the strength of the tie, when really weak ties are merely a correlate to occupation attainment. Burt argues that the strength of the tie is not what is important, but its
position in the social structure. For this, Burt has coined the term “structural hole” to refer to, “…the separation between nonredundant contacts” (Burt 1992: 18).

Nan Lin (Lin 1999; 2001b; Lin, Cook, and Burt 2001) also focuses on social capital as a network-level resource. He introduced the separation of access to social capital with the mobilization of social capital. Lin is particularly careful to define social resources and to separate them from the ties that potentially provide said resources, following Bourdieu’s lead, “Social resources are resources accessible through one’s direct and indirect ties. The access to and use of these resources are temporary and borrowed,” (Lin 1999: 468). For Lin, the difference between the access and mobilization lies in the access to resources that an individual believes they have (accessed social capital), and the actual resources that they have called upon previously (mobilized social capital).

*Social Capital as a Community Resource*

James Coleman’s (1988) work marks the introduction of a divergent path in the literature, as social capital conceptually began to be applied to not only individuals, but to families, communities, and even nations. Coleman begins his analysis by exploring the tension between the oversocialized (sociological) and undersocialized (economic) conception of human action. On the one hand, the sociological view leaves the individual without an “engine of action,” or motivation to engage in any sort of social action. On the other hand, the economic view simply fails empirical testing. People’s actions, as it turns out, “…are shaped, redirected, constrained by the social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organization are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy,” (p. 96). Coleman viewed social capital then as a theoretical attempt at reconciliation between the two views. In his view, social capital allows for rational, self-interested action at the same time that it incorporates
the ways in which individual action is motivated, enabled, and constrained by the structure of relationships.

Thus, it is Coleman’s understanding of social capital that departed from the individual understanding such as that of Bourdieu and Burt. In what has been distilled by later researchers as the signature quote from his seminal 1988 article, Coleman defined social capital:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure,” (ibid.: 98).

Though this definition is vague, Coleman’s examples are less ambiguous in signaling a shift in emphasis from the individual to the collective. He specifically employed the idea of “enforceable trust” when describing the tight-knit diamond resale industry in New York City, and prefigured some of Putnam’s arguments when labeling as social capital the scenario whereby a mother moved her family from Detroit to Jerusalem in order that her kids might be safer, reflecting a process described by Jane Jacobs (1992 [1961]) as “eyes on the street”. Coleman also eschewed the weak ties principle advocated by Granovetter and Burt in favor of a dense ties model. In his specific application of the process, Coleman demonstrated that networks with high “intergenerational closure” enhance educational attainment (human capital) through effective norm enforcement and informal social control.

Robert Putnam expanded the concept even more dramatically. (1993; 1995; 2000). 

Bowling Alone was both a tribute to social capital and a polarizing document amongst social capital theorists, who were forced to address the question of both the sources and beneficiaries of social capital. Putnam began his analysis by ignoring many previous applications of social capital in the literature. To begin with, for Putnam, social capital is not literally capital. He referred to social capital as an analogous form to physical and human capital, ignoring
Bourdieu’s conception of social capital as a literal form of capital. Secondly, Putnam asserted a kinship between social capital and civic virtue without warrant from the established sociological literature. Instead, Putnam pointed to the definition of L.J. Hanifan (1916) as being the foundation of the term upon which nearly all others were built. Hanifan’s definition, rooted in social relationships, was decidedly community-oriented in its potential benefits. Finally, while correctly pointing out the fact that social capital has externalities, Putnam used this premise to draw a conclusion that, “… a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society.” (Putnam 2000:20).

Putnam’s work introduced very useful concepts into the social capital vernacular. The ideas of bonding and bridging social capital, for example, became quite useful in illustrating the ways in which the structure of social networks may have both positive and negative effects on goal-attainment for the members of said networks. Bonding social capital represents the density of ties within a particular social group. It is “within-group” social capital. Bridging social capital is that which connects groups to one another. It more closely conforms to the sparse networks theory touted by Burt and Lin. Putnam acknowledged that while these types of social capital often come at the expense of one another, they do not represent a purely zero-sum tension, and the conflict is better described as one of “more or less” rather than “either/or”. Putnam’s thesis was that social capital in the United States is in the midst of a decades-long period of decline. Whether understood as political participation, informal socializing within the neighborhood, workplace connections, or organizational memberships, America’s “stock” of social capital is declining.

A change in the type of social capital studied yields distinct consequences for both the parties involved in the exchange and the people around them as well. For network theorists,
benefits are usually understood as individual, with limited externalities, either positive or negative. They generally include job attainment and promotion, but can also include more direct social and material support. Putnam, on the other hand, links high levels of social capital with increases in levels of education and child welfare, neighborhood safety, health (physical and mental) and democracy itself. In the expansion of social capital from an individual to a nationwide resource, its purported benefits grew in scope as well.

SPOR AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

As early as 1993, calls were being made for an investigation of sport that focused on networks and structure, counter to the then-current trend, whereby researchers’ interest in sport focused on the interpretive meanings of sport to its participants. “Sport sociology could benefit from relatively more attention to the stripped-down level of social interaction and underlying social structures” (Nixon 1993:315). The rationale for Nixon’s plea typified the reaction against the “overpsychologized” treatment of the small group within sporting contexts (Lüschen 1986), even as acknowledgement was made that individual psychology was a relevant element operating within said groups (Melnick 1986). Nixon specifically cited ethnographies of sporting subcultures (particularly Klein 1986) to suggest that an understanding of networks within the larger study of sport was a worthwhile endeavor in expanding scholars’ understanding of the ways in which groups of people in a sporting context operate. While Nixon was not referring specifically to social capital, his recommendations are noteworthy for establishing the need for both network studies within sport sociology as well as research committed to uncovering structures operating within the sporting realm.

The explicit connection between sport and social capital was given conceptual and visual boost by *Bowling Alone*. Putnam’s employment of the decline of bowling leagues as a metaphor
for – and a symptom of – the decline of civil society in the United States was a boon to sports scholars, who jumped at the opportunity to show that sport was in fact the next great hope for saving social capital in the United States. Some claimed Putnam’s work had barely scratched the surface of the sport and social capital connection:

The idea that sport produces public virtue is just a little younger than Jeffersonian agrarianism and somewhat older than American faith in science or confidence in the brand of modern liberalism which insists that government can manage corporate capitalism… I would argue that Putnam understated the case for sport. Along with perhaps national faith in public education, many Americans have considered sport the most important tool for making social capital. What other antebellum reform movements besides sports still have such cultural power at the end of the twentieth century (Dyreson 2001:24).

It is critical to note, however, that perhaps largely because of Putnam’s explicit connection between the sport and social capital, it is the “Putnamian” conception of social capital that has dominated the discourse on its relation to sport, and the trope of the lone bowler has been employed as a starting point for much work attempting to uncover the exact nature of the connection between the two.

Linking sport and social capital is appealing to sport scholars and policy makers alike, “The general argument put forth is that sport participation creates social connections between people that, in turn, build trust within a community, thereby helping establish the foundation for an active and engaged citizenry who are likely to serve broader community interests” (Perks 2007:381). Further, because the “community” ideal has appeal across the political spectrum, any tool which might facilitate the building of community (however measured) attracts hordes of policy ideas and private initiatives (Jarvie 2003). Such initiatives have included innovative ideas such as midnight basketball, youth soccer and church softball leagues (Dyreson 2001). These initiatives and the policymakers responsible for them ignore the commonsense understanding of sport as merely a vehicle for either positive or negative externalities. Sport sociology writings,
both empirical and conceptual, have largely dealt with social capital in sport within the realm of policy, which has hampered a concrete understanding of how sport can produce or limit social capital formation for its participants.

The most substantial collection of work to date dealing specifically with the sport and social capital connection has been the 2008 volume on the subject, edited by Matthew Nicholson and Russell Hoye. In it, the editors first attempt to take on the task of reconciling the two major strands of social capital, “These two understandings of social capital are not mutually exclusive, for the outcomes of increased trust, reciprocity, and communication can result in greater access to the resources of the collective” (p. 6). Additionally, the editors reconceptualize sport as a multi-tiered experience that includes not only participating, but facilitating and consuming sport. The multi-tiered understanding of sport engagement has particular ramifications for this project.

Largely within the volume, however, the authors deal not with sport engagement as a vehicle for social capital, but on the policies and initiatives that have attempted to increase social capital through sport. Coalter (2008), for example, examines the differences between what he calls “sports plus” organizations with “plus sports” organizations in their emphases on sport or development in particular. His study is useful, however, in further illustrating the idea that sport is not a monolithic “thing” with inherent qualities vis-à-vis social capital. It is instead the aims of the organizations, administrators, facilitators, and participants in sport programs that allow or inhibit the organization to achieve the ends of the policymakers or other benefactors who provide the funding vital to their existence. It is for this reason, Coalter argues, that sport so often fails to produce the outcomes so optimistically pinned on it. The theme of disconnect between the intuitive appeal and logical neatness of sport existing as a tool for increasing social capital and the empirical evidence that rarely supports such ideas recurs throughout the volume.
Two particular themes emerge from this volume with particular implications for this project. First, the prevalent assumption within policy circles that social capital in sport is an equal opportunity and equal benefit entity is addressed. Grant Jarvie (2008) in particular engages the “social capital for whom?” question, noting that more than 60% of poor children rarely participate in organized sports, while the figure for more affluent children is under 30%. Jarvie argues that if, in fact, organized sport has the potential to increase levels of social capital for its participants, then policymakers should, among other things, begin treating organized sport for children and other vulnerable populations, not as a luxury or extracurricular activity, but as a right. Cuskelly (2008) indirectly corroborates Jarvie’s data regarding sports participants when noting that the majority of sports volunteers are “time poor” owing to their other commitments, most notably full-time work. Thus it seems that to the extent that sport increases social capital, it does so largely amongst populations for whom social capital is not lacking in the first place.

Second, several works deal with the relevant issue of volunteerism. Doherty and Misener (2008) examine community sport from a stakeholder perspective, which includes facilitators as well as participants. Youth sport in particular is likely to see some of its positive externalities realized by people other than the direct participants, making this analysis particularly helpful. The authors draw an important distinction between mere participation (in this case as a volunteer) and the type of relationships forged within the volunteering structures. Mere volunteer activity is not enough to engender social capital within community sports organizations. More important are the types of relationships forged within that environment that determine whether or not volunteering in a community sports organization is likely to lead to an increase in social capital. At risk in these volunteering structures is the formation of cliques and subgroups, which tend to undermine social capital formation amongst the excluded volunteers. Further, Cuskelly
and Bradbury and Kay (2008) note that the social capital formed within volunteer networks tends to be bonding rather than bridging, again reinforcing division rather than integration for vulnerable and disenfranchised populations.

In the end, the works within this volume underline the need to be skeptical of the uncritical acceptance of sport as a vehicle for social capital formation, especially in populations lacking in bridging social capital to begin with. At the same time, most scholars demonstrate that sport carries the potential as a vessel for bridging social capital. What remain critical are the structural characteristics of the organizations and the aims and activities of both administrators and other stakeholders within any particular sporting entity (Seippel 2008). Their particular examinations of the issue, like many of the works preceding them, are heavy on conceptual debates, hypothetical situations, and policy evaluations, and light on empirical examinations of particular sporting organizations and policies. Sport sociology has largely focused on the examination of these specific sporting policies and the attitudes of those who have put them in place. Unless researchers can uncover structural elements leading to either positive or negative externalities, this line of inquiry risks stagnation.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study is an attempt to address some of the major gaps in the literature at two levels: first, the literature dealing with the intersection of sport and social capital is active, but overall not well-developed or helpful. It is lacking in well-grounded and empirical studies of social capital in situ, and the ways in which different populations may or may not benefit from whatever social capital is to be built or utilized within sports organizations. Second, this research has largely taken a Putnamian conception of social capital, leaving the individual-level understanding of the concept understudied and under theorized in the sporting context. Less
substantially, research on sport and social capital within the context of the United States has been virtually nonexistent. The vast majority of works in this area have taken place in Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia. To the extent that sport provision is different in the United States than in these other locales, their work is of questionable utility when studying in the United States.

Within the more general social capital literature, this study addresses three sizable gaps in the literature. First, social capital literature has been largely silent on the role of children. While some works are beginning to make the connection between social capital and children-centered contexts (Small 2009b), the explicit connection between children and social capital formation is still woefully underdeveloped. Further, the distinction between benefactors and beneficiaries needs to be explored, especially in light of the child-centered context. Because the resources often entrusted in these relationships are children themselves (an extremely valued and singularly irreplaceable resource), the relationship between donor and recipient is complicated. Finally, the study of negative social capital is an area of the literature that is also under theorized, resulting in a treatment of social capital as a largely positive element within one’s own social network. While the externalities resulting from social relationships have been researched – and occur with startling regularity within the VCLL – negative relationships and their impacts are still under-researched. The following sections of this chapter will examine the state of the literatures that correspond to the three substantive chapters contained herein: the role of children in social capital generation, how child-specific and child-centered forms of social capital affect the roles of benefactor and beneficiary, and what happens when relationships turn sour.
CHILDREN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Demography and Fertility

Demographers largely agree on one element of the declining fertility rate: the decreased economic utility of children. There has been considerably less agreement in two other significant areas: disentangling causes from correlates and deriving the noneconomic utility of children that kept the fertility rate from approaching zero as children became – from an economic perspective – irrational investments. The “value of children” approach (Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, and Astone 1997) was developed from a theoretical scheme put forth by Hoffman and Hoffman (1973), “in which the value of children was conceptualized in terms of the psychological satisfactions they provide for parents” (Hoffman, Thornton, and Manis 1978). Such satisfactions include group affiliation and personal identity benefits (Hoffman and Manis 1979) and benefits to aging parents (Blake 1979). Other perspectives, such as wealth flows theory (Caldwell 1982; Handwerker 1986) emphasized the role of education and human capital (Becker 1964) in the access to economic opportunities and success, which signaled the decline of children as providing social capital benefits to their parents through direct economic contributions to the household and through their own professional connections outside the family.

Other demographers began to view the possible social capital benefits of children to their parents (Schoen et al 1997), arguing that previous perspectives failed to account for a fertility rate of anything greater than zero. Such studies (Schoen et al. 1999; Schoen and Tufis 2003, e.g.) utilized indicators from the National Survey of Families and Households to establish the value of children outside of the psychological benefits they confer on their parents. Though there have been sociologists who have applied these insights to their work, particularly in discerning the motivations for young, unwed, urban-dwelling women to have out of wedlock children (Burton
by and large the discipline continues largely under the assumption that the social capital flow between parents and children is unidirectional. Further, scholars who have examined the possibility of bi-directionality – both demographers and sociologists – have focused their attention on either emotional or intangible benefits of children. They have up to this point left aside direct and indirect network alterations and potential tangible, material benefits as by-products of these connections. The notion of social capital as a by-product of social interaction is, of course, a fairly conventional one in sociology (see, for example Coleman 1990; Flap 2003; Fukuyama 2001), but it has been largely overlooked in the few studies that acknowledge the child-to-parent flow of social capital.

*Sociological Origins*

The sociological investigation of children and social capital is characterized largely by the flow of capital from parents and significant others to children (for a notable exception, see Small 2009b) and predates the modern conception of social capital (Cochran and Brassard 1979). This is not without warrant. Children in the United States are rarely in a position to benefit their parents materially. This has not always been the case; the decreased economic utility of children has been noted in the family demography literature, and is largely the result of the removal of children from the regular labor market (Caldwell 1982; Fawcett 1983; Handwerker 1986; Hoffman, Thornton, and Manis 1978). Consequently, sociologists have spent the majority of their research efforts detailing the benefits that parental networks and time can and do have for children.

Coleman, in addition to providing situating social capital firmly within the contradiction between economic “rational choice” and sociological models of human action, also provided a specific category of benefits to the accumulation of social capital: the creation of human capital
(Becker 1964). The empirical work undertaken in the article suggests that families with higher levels of social capital are equipped to ensure better educational outcomes for the children within that family (human capital). Utilizing his definition of social capital, Coleman’s particular indicators for the existence of social capital all share the idea that relationships – both within and outside of the family – potentially matter in the acquisition of human capital. Within the family, relationships between parents and children are crucial. The transmission of skills and knowledge acquired in the parents’ own human capital creation are of little use to children without the investment of time and energy to pass such knowledge and skills on to the next generation. This represents a critical source of social capital for children navigating the academic system. In a rather extreme example, Coleman tells of a school district with a high proportion of Asian immigrant families where students were purchasing two copies of textbooks: one for the student, and one for the mother, who would provide a study partner for the student, and who would presumably provide social capital for the student in the form of time and energy spent on the student.

Outside of the family, relationships also matter, particularly dense networks with many redundant contacts, referred to as “closure” (p. S105). This closure is particularly helpful when it involves the parents of the child’s friends. When the parents of two childhood friends know one another, they can more effectively share both knowledge and norms. Sharing knowledge is important in terms of monitoring the children’s activities. For example, children who are attempting to deceive their parents in order to partake in some discouraged or forbidden activity are more likely to succeed when their parents do not know or do not talk to one another. When parents communicate regularly, the potential for their children’s successful mischief drops precipitously. Further, to the extent that relationships are formed through homophily principles
(McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), parents who know one another are more likely to be able to reinforce common norms and expectations within the children of the relationship. When these bonds are either disturbed (particularly through residential mobility) or never created, these benefits of social capital creation disappear with them.

Coleman’s contribution was a crucial moment not only in the definition of social capital, but also in its application as well, particularly where children are concerned. Coleman clearly and explicitly positioned children as passive beneficiaries of the social capital provided them by their parents, either through the parent-child relationship, or the parent-parent relationship that characterizes closure. Whether Coleman set a precedent for this particular application of social capital between the generations or if he was simply the first to exploit this natural fit, sociologists have largely followed his lead (for a useful review, see Dika and Singh 2002). While some sociologists and demographers have begun to acknowledge the impact children can have on both their own social capital and their parents (see below), very few studies have explored this link in any meaningful way. 

*The Sociological Perspective after Coleman*

Much work has been undertaken in the wake of Coleman’s statement on social capital. The scope of the work is impressive. Some have attempted to replicate portions of Coleman’s work, either through novel statistical procedures or through different datasets and indicators. Others have attempted to expand the scope of outcomes to include both educational outcomes as well as behavioral outcomes. Parcel and Menaghan (1994), for example, showed that social capital indicators centering on two-earner households must take into account not merely the time investment on a particular job – working full-time versus part-time versus unemployed – but must also take into account the working conditions of the job, the complexity of the job, and
whether or not overtime was required on the job. These elements of the parental working experience play an important role in mediating the link between work and the transference of social capital from parent to child, with outcomes affected in both verbal acuity and behavior. Many other studies have also attempted to test various aspects of Coleman’s work, with mixed results. On the whole, elements of social capital do seem to positively impact various educational outcomes. However, both “social capital” as an umbrella term and “educational outcomes” as another umbrella term most likely subsume a number of discrete processes (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995), and thus scholars have been encouraged to parse out these discrete processes and outcomes to better understand which elements of social capital affect various educational outcomes. Scholars have looked in particular at contextual variables such as parent interaction with their children and involvement with the school (McNeal 1999; Teachman, Paasch, and Carver 1997, e.g.), intergenerational closure (Carbonaro 1998; Morgan and Sørensen 1999, e.g.), residential mobility (Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton 1996; Hofferth, Boisjoly, and Duncan 1998, e.g.), parental network benefits (Hofferth, Boisjoly, and Duncan 1998; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003, e.g.), and the impact of social capital on the educational outcomes of minority youth (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995) on educational and behavioral outcomes. This research, with the notable exception of intergenerational closure, has provided a great deal of support for Coleman’s claims, though the results are hardly unequivocal.

Other scholars have expanded the scope of Coleman’s concentration on educational outcomes. Such studies include an examination of the transmission of civic involvement between generations (Matthews and Howell 2006), utilizing social capital as a buffer against violent behavior and victimization (Wright and Fitzpatrick 2006), the effects of closure, social bridges, and parental attachment on adolescent delinquent behavior (Mangino 2009), and the effects of
housing programs like Section 8 and Moving to Opportunity on the amount of social capital that parents can successfully leverage for their children (Pettit and McLanahan 2003).

What unites these studies is the mostly implicit but occasionally explicit notion that social capital, in whatever form, is possessed by children only indirectly through their parents. The successful transmission of social capital from parent to child takes place directly in the parent-child relationship, or indirectly through either parent involvement with their child’s school, through links between the parents of their children’s friends, or through the extra-familial links that parents acquire through their everyday lives. These links can be disrupted to both the parents’ and the child’s detriment through residential mobility.

When scholars in other sociological sub-fields began to explore social capital beyond the narrow confines of Coleman’s work on education and Bourdieu’s work on class inequality, they began examining the connections between networks, resources, and their own areas of research interest; naturally, sociologists of childhood and adolescence began to look at social capital and its relations to youth. They found the foundational work of Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam lacking, particularly in the way they failed to account for children’s agency in their social lives. While scholars have been investigating the social networks of children in various contexts (see Belle 1989 for a useful review), “social capital” did not enter the lexicon of childhood and adolescent researchers until approximately 1999. Since that time, scholars of childhood and adolescence have become increasingly interested in how children structure their own networks as independent social agents.

Virginia Morrow (1999) began her discussion of children and social capital by noting that social capital, as then characterized and applied was ill-suited to provide a better understanding of the lived experience of children and adolescents. Of particular concern to Morrow was that
children were being ignored as active social agents with agendas that extended past their parents’
purview:

A more ‘active’ conceptualisation of children, drawing on the sociology of childhood would explore how children themselves actively generate, draw on, or negotiate their own social capital, or indeed make links for their parents, or even provide active support for parents. In other words, children's agency, constrained though it may be, is downplayed in US research and children appear as passive burdens on adults’ time (P. 751).

The active support of which Morrow speaks is reminiscent of the rhetoric used by demographers to justify continued birth rates above zero discussed earlier. However, the idea that children should be thought of as active and independent social agents provided researchers with a new avenue to explore the relationship between children and social capital, and laid the foundation for later research exploring the role of children in their parents’ social capital.

Research that began with the assumption that children were independent social agents often dealt with the same issues that the dominant strain of social capital research engaged, such as employment (Raffo and Reeves 2000), education transitions and outcomes (Schaefer-McDaniel 2004; Weller 2007), neighborhood ties (Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007; Hossain et al 2007; Leonard 2005) and recreation opportunities (Morrow 2007; Weller 2006). In these analyses, the social lives of children were explored as important in their own right and not as a by-product of the adult social world. As socialization progresses away from the family and to the peer group as children grow up and mature, it follows logically that their social networks will outgrow the constraints that their limited geographic mobility and social skills place on them in early childhood. While the resources available to youth and adolescents may be of a different order than that accessible by adults – it is primarily emotional support (Weller 2007) – and fungibility may also be an issue in classifying youth relationships as social capital (Leonard 2005), these scholars established that youth were not merely the, “passive recipients of the
benefits of parental social capital” but were, in fact, “active producers and consumers in their own right” (Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007: 97). Sociologists of childhood brought children form a passive state of beneficiary to the active state of independent social agent. The idea of children acting as social agents implies the possibility that children could actually be benefactors in their family’s stock of social capital, and scholars such as Morrow acknowledged this as such. However, while demographers have been active in deriving the social capital benefits of children for their parents, as described above, sociologists have only within the last decade began engaging the question seriously, and the work that has done so has been general and ambiguous.

Sociologists approached the question later than demographers, but by 1995, they also approached questions of fertility, particularly in economically deprived areas. They explored the motivation for having children amongst adolescent girls in these areas, learning that it had more to do with status than rational economic decision-making (Fernandez Kelly 1995). While an increased number of children would result in greater government subsidies, these were in no way commensurate with the increased expenses of raising a child. Instead, children were associated with adult status, social solidarity, and meaning on one’s life. Thus, where conventional access to societal rewards is blocked or constrained, early pregnancy might be a predictable outcome amongst the female population because of the social benefits that children provide simply by virtue of their birth. Subsequent work on the matter is taken in much the same spirit (Edin and Kefalas 2005). While children can be a source of social capital for their parents, this process derives largely from children as passive social agents.

Researchers have noted that, when children are born, the social networks of their parents change. In particular, new parents experience greater contact with family members and other
new parents (Bost et al. 2002). An increase in familial contact seems natural, since there is an inclination to share the news of the birth with family members and for family members to reciprocate with kind words, congratulations, and visits to the new family member. Contact with other new parents may come from visits to the pediatrician or through new parenting groups. These contacts also have therapeutic benefits for new mothers, as those reporting more supportive social networks have lower levels of postpartum depression than mothers with less supportive networks. Such support often comes from new parenting groups. A high percentage of parents taking part in the groups studied by Fielden and Gallagher (2008) indicated that the groups had facilitated the creation of new social contacts for the parents. The practical advice given to new parents in this group is augmented by social capital creation, which contributes to the overall success of the program, “It is evident… that while improvements for parents (enhanced knowledge and confidence) and children (cognitive, social and emotional outcomes) may be the primary aims of many group-based parenting programs, the success of some programs may relate to secondary gains such as opportunities to form social networks with other parents” (p. 407).

Shira Offer and Barbara Schneider (2007) were among the first to note the specific social capital benefits of children to their parents as well as the specific contexts where this is most likely to occur. They pursued two lines of inquiry: first, they were interested in the contexts that active parents found themselves on account of their children, such as PTA meetings; second, they were interested in how a desire for closure impacted the network resources of parents. While they found no association between social capital and school activities, they did find a significant, positive association between social capital and out-of-school social activities. Mediating this effect was what the authors termed “high-quality” friends. High-quality friends
are those of which the parents approve. These are the friends whose parents they will be more apt
to get to know and with whom they are more likely to form meaningful relationships. Thus, they
are more likely to become sources of social capital. This finding provides a substantive critique
of the idea that social capital flows from parent to child unidirectionally, “…rather than being
solely the outcome of parents’ investments in their children, social closure and the creation of
community social capital are processes also mediated by the children themselves. Parents will be
more likely to connect to the parents of their children’s friends and create social closure if their
children have good friends, that is, friends who are likely to be approved by their parents”
(ibid.:1137).

Susie Weller and Irene Bruegel (2009) take a similar path in their work, attempting to
link network orientations of social capital with more communitarian visions, such as those of
Putnam (2000) by exploring how children’s circulation through the neighborhood can create a
sense of community within the neighborhood while it connects individuals through the children’s
own relationships, “…many children play an important role in enabling the development of
community cohesion and social capita, either directly via their own actions – for example,
helping neighbors, ‘hanging out’ and building local networks – or indirectly by providing
connections and networks for their parents and other members of the community” (Weller and
Bruegel 2009:631). Thus, not only are children in the neighborhood seen as possessing valuable
resources available for mobilization by others in the neighborhood – as when a neighborhood
youth house or plant-sits for members of the community when they are away – but they are seen
as social brokers within the neighborhood capable of connecting their parents to others in the
community in meaningful ways:

…children both indirectly and directly forged relationships and connections for their
parents. In terms of children’s direct involvement in their families’ social capital, many
parents suggested that they had established more networks and friendships in the local area through their children than by any other means – via antenatal classes, nursery and primary school, or through their children’s friends’ families. Some parents found firm friends through their children’s connections and in one case went on holiday together (ibid.:639).

Thus, the view of children vis-à-vis social capital generation has evolved from Coleman’s original view. Children are neither passive recipients of their parents’ resources or extra-familial connections nor are the benefits of their independence as social agents confined to their own dyadic and group relationships. Recent work has shown that children can and do create connections and potential connections for their parents through their own relationships. These actual and potential relationships can function as sources of social capital through monitoring of the children’s relationship and actions, through social support, or through more material means, depending on the form and content of any individual relationship.

This study advances the view of children as a source of social capital in two crucial ways. First, unlike the family demographers, I view child-based social capital as less of a purposive, rational investment and more as a by-product of the contexts within which parents find themselves embedded as a result of the day-to-day activities of their children. This happens both directly and indirectly through youth sports. This study provides support to the institutional perspective advanced by Mario Small (2009b) in Unanticipated Gains. Small argues that the context, more than the structure, is critical in understanding the ways in which ties form within institutions. As such, he argues that, “…independent of their own intentions, people are more likely to form ties when they have opportunities to interact, when they do so frequently, when they are focused on some activity, and when they have reason to cooperate” (p. 15). Youth sport is an interesting context within which to investigate this argument, as it fulfills all of the criteria that facilitate relationship formation, and parents do form ties on the basis of this participation,
even if they are predominately weak. Second, this research also supports the idea that the institutional norms and credibility contribute to the general sense of trust that pervades youth sport organizations. Parents do not need know one another to be trusting of one another. Instead, organizational values are presumed to reside within the group of parents whose children are participating, and those values allow parents to largely bypass the interactional process that leads to interpersonal trust. This is to say that both types of reciprocity are facilitated in this arena. Certainly, favors are traded where parents know one another and have established relationships based on mutual trust (specific or simple reciprocity). However, where these relationships do not exist – or are weaker – the institutional context (the league) ensures that favors granted and resources traded will be repaid, even if not by the original beneficiary (generalized reciprocity).

This idea is explored in Mario Small’s *Unanticipated Gains* (2009b). This study offers two important distinctions from that work. First, this study highlights the importance of children’s networks in the creation of adult networks, a perspective Small’s work did not emphasize, possibly owing to the age of the children in his setting. Second, while Small stresses the importance of homophily in the creation of intimate ties, he acknowledges the similarity of life circumstances of the parents within each center, and thus the possible self-selection effects of the daycare centers he studied. Youth sport is more likely to offer a greater diversity of individuals to participate, through scholarship programs that minimize participation costs. Further, the team creation process ensures that teams on the whole are diverse entities along many dimensions such as ethnicity, class, religion and political affiliation. Thus, parents have more opportunities to create close relationships with a more diverse array of people. As I discuss more fully in Chapter 4, when describing the close relationships they have created within these settings, parents are just as likely to emphasize differences between the parties as they are the
similarities. This is also because parents are led toward some and away from other relationships based on the friendship choices of their children. Criteria for player friendships do not work in the same way as homophily in adult relationships (Fine 1987). To the extent that they are different, children relationships may undermine conventional homophily principles. This effect is magnified by the increasingly child-centered nature of modern parenting styles, which I will argue later derives from an increased desire of parents to create intergenerational closure with their children’s social networks. That is, parents in the VCLL increasingly desire to know their children’s friends and their children’s friends’ parents. While the parents see this as an effective monitoring tool, in some cases this desire for closure leads to a closer relationship between the parents that provides other social capital benefits, material and emotional.

BENEFACTORS AND BENEFICIARIES

The motivation of both donors and recipients in relationships where social capital is present has been one of the least theorized aspects of social capital studies. In largely ignoring this crucial element of a potentially mature theory of social capital, scholars have missed an important link to some of the extremely important antecedents to social capital theory, particularly the help-seeking literature. Where social capital theorists have explicitly dealt with motives, they have done so in the realm of donor motivations (Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 2000; Portes and Mooney 2002), leaving un-problematized the motivations of recipients. Specifically, since social capital transfers take on the character of “a gift,” scholars have felt justified in taking recipient motives for granted. However, anthropological research on gift-giving (Mauss 1990 [1950]; Smart 1993) and sociological research help-seeking behavior (see below) indicate that both the receipt of a gift and the decision to actively seek help – both of which have implications for social capital theory – cannot be dismissed quite so easily. Receiving help places the beneficiary
in an ambivalent position that may be fraught with psychological and sociological implications for self-esteem and group standing. Chapter 5 deals explicitly with the complex motivations of both donors and recipients, and how the physical and rhetorical presence of children can shift the ‘burden of motivation’ from donor to recipient in the Little League setting. In order for that analysis to be salient, however, I explore here the foundations of motives in social capital relationships and what I perceive to be their inadequacies in delineating a meaningful theory of social capital motivation. In seeking to build a more coherent and comprehensive theory of motivations, I will then explore literature dealing with motivation in exchange relationships and help-seeking behavior that can enlighten a discussion on social capital motivation.

**Motivation in the Social Capital Literature**

There is, first of all, the question of whether or not motives for human action are identifiable in any systematic and empirical manner. If not, then the study of motives in any facet of human organization, and in social capital relationship in particular, is a waste of time. Adler and Kwon (2002) address this question directly:

> We should note two lines of thought that argue against this focus on motivation. First, in the standard rational actor model, it is assumed that all actors are identically motivated by self-interest. On that assumption, there would be no reason to explicitly consider motivation, and the empirically observed heterogeneity of actors’ motivations would be simply ignored. Second, a strong version of formalistic sociology would posit motivation as the effect of network structure, and, on that assumption, explicit attention to motivations would be redundant (P. 25).

Coleman (1988) provided the natural retort to this argument, claiming that while indeed the “oversocialized” version of human action leaves no room for action’s “engine,” the rational actor model “flies in the face of empirical reality,” (p. S96). In dealing with volunteerism, a related topic to social capital studies, John Wilson (2000) also provides a powerful argument for the study of motivations, “…talk about motives is a key organizing feature of everyday life. Humans
impute motives – to themselves and to others –and thereby validate or challenge identities, strengthen or weaken commitments,” (p. 218). Thus, when dealing with action that seems to be neither motivated solely by rational calculation nor by network structure, motivations of actors can be a key component of the process of social capital building, maintenance, and dissolution. Why actors act in the way that they do seems to be one of the most crucial questions that sociologists can ask, yet it is largely unaddressed in the literature.

The earliest and most systematic statements dealing with the question of motivation in social capital relationships have been made by Alejandro Portes and colleagues (Portes 1995; Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 2000; Portes and Mooney 2002; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). In this model, motivational issues lie strictly with the donor in social capital exchange, and his fourfold typology of donor motivations has informed later research that deals with motivations in these exchanges. Portes focused on the difference between instrumental and altruistic motivations, ultimately settling on two different types of motivations for each category. These will be treated fully below. Portes’ work on social capital motivations thus explicitly neglects recipient motivations, though he does express the need to distinguish them from that of donors, “Recipients’ desire to gain access to valuable assets is readily understandable. More complex are the motivations of the donor, who are requested to make these assets available without any immediate return,” (Portes 1998:5-6). Over the course of several papers, and beginning in 1993, Portes and his colleagues began to elucidate and refine these donor motivations. In 1993, Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner noted 4 “sources” of social capital: value introjection, reciprocity transactions, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust. At the time, these were not referred to as “motivations” for the donor of social capital, though when Portes began writing on social capital motivations, he labeled them “motivations” rather than sources, though
he changed little else about them (e.g., altruistic motives eventually became “consummatory” motives). In particular, Portes was interested in the difference between motivations that could be considered “altruistic” and those which were considered “instrumental” in nature. He explains the difference:

Social capital may arise because donors feel that granting these resources is the right thing to do either to fulfill moral obligations or out of emergent solidarity with a particular individual or group... Gifts may be granted to others in the same organization or community because donors fully expect something in return, either in the form of commensurate economic resources or nonmaterial rewards such as social standing and approval (Portes 1995:13).

Within these categories, Portes delineated two specific types of motivations. The first type of consummatory motivation is Value Introjection. Value introjection involves the internalization of values and norms that encourage giving, such as charity, gifts, and a general regard for humans in need. The second type of consummatory motivation is Bounded Solidarity. Bounded solidarity involves the affinity one feels for members of a similar group, especially one that is bounded by territory, ethnicity, or religion (Portes and Landolt 2000). Within instrumental motives, the first specific type is reciprocity transactions. These have roots in classical sociological works, and involve the simple tenet that goods presented from one to another should involve payback from the benefitted party directly. While this expectation can also be said to be housed in deeply held norms (Gouldner 1960), as the norms are expected to be held by not only the donor but the recipient as well, then payback can be reasonably assumed by the donor. Thus, goodwill is an investment in the dyadic relationship that can be expected to bring returns to the investor. As we shall see in a later section, this tends to hold because the norm of reciprocity is so strong that, in the event that the initial beneficiary cannot foresee the ability to pay back their benefactor, they are quite likely to refuse help altogether, or fail to make their need known to other parties. The second type of instrumental motivation is known as enforceable trust. While
the return on investment here is expected, the investor cannot be certain whether the return will come from the beneficiary or from the community at large. Further, they also will likely not in advance know the form of the return. It may be tangible or intangible. It could come in material form down the line or in the acclaim, prestige, and esteem from the larger community.

Motivations can therefore be separated by the character of the return expected by the donor. Where the initial motive of the donor is consummatory, the return on the investment of time and/or resources tends to be endogenous, and the donor places their faith in the prevailing norms and values of the community at large in the event that they change roles from benefactor to beneficiary. The donor places their faith not in the direct recipient of their generosity, but in the communities within which they are embedded (generalized reciprocity). Portes uses the example of allowing kids to play outdoors knowing all the while that they will be taken care of by other adults in the neighborhood, very much akin to Jane Jacobs’ “eyes on the street” (Jacobs 1992 [1961]) or Coleman’s (1988) anecdote of a mother moving from Detroit to Jerusalem discussed above.

Motivations driven by instrumental aims are much more specific in terms of the payback. Portes likens it to the accumulation of social “chits” that can be called in for repayment. In order for this to work, the repayment is more likely to come from the initial beneficiary. Portes distinguishes this from purely economic exchange, reasoning that since the form of the payback can be different (and can even be intangible) and the timing of the payback is unspecified. However, the initial action is undertaken not because the prevailing norms and values of a particular group demand it (Value Introduction), nor because of any particular identification with the social standing of the beneficiary (Bounded Solidarity), but because the benefactor expects to gain something in return. They may be building up credit for potential future need, or they may
be building up goodwill and esteem within the group. The rewards of such action, then, tend to be exogenous. Motivation in this case tends not to come from a sense of obligation, but in the perception of a return on the investment of time and/or resources. The other sources of social capital were not based on these “altruistic” motives, but instead on the expectation that favors granted now would be returned in time. In Simple Reciprocity, the reciprocation process is straightforward. The person granting the favor or offering resources would be paid back in due time by the beneficiary. What separates this from simple economic exchange is the standard of repayment (the “currency” may be different) and the time horizon of payback expectation (it is not generally laid out specifically). For Enforceable Trust, the threat of sanctions against either party in an exchange relationship prevents the abuse of trust by one party or the other and ensures (to a degree) a smooth transaction between parties.

While many scholars and studies have taken Portes’ work at face value for their own questions involving motivation, others have attempted to develop their own conception of actor motivations in social capital exchanges. The most notable is that of Adler and Kwon (2002), who explicitly include motivation as a key component of their “Opportunity-Motivation-Ability” framework. They hypothesize that, in order for social capital to develop between persons or in groups, the opportunity to help must be present, potential donors must be motivated to help, and they must have the ability to help. In their model, they acknowledge the fundamental constructs of Portes’ scheme of social capital motivation, as well as adding Putnam’s (2000) interpretation of generalized reciprocity, which removes individual as well as temporal obligations from the notion of repayment of benefits. Some see generalized reciprocity as constituting a weaker, less dependable form of social capital (Dolfsma, van der Eijk, and Jolink 2009) Additionally, it does seem to blur the lines between consummatory and instrumental action, as it seems to incorporate
elements of Portes’ enforceable trust as well as value introjection, instrumental and consummatory motives, respectively. Uzzi (1999) recognizes this potential blurring the most, arguing that the distinction between the two types of motivations is not especially helpful, “…the theoretical distinction between instrumental versus expressive interests may be moot because embeddedness changes actors’ motivations rather than treats them as immutable,” (p. 500). While it is certainly arguable whether or not the distinction is moot, it is still a useful exercise to elucidate actors’ own interpretations of their motives. Further, both Adler and Kwon and Uzzi, like Portes and colleagues, fail to recognize the motivations of potential (and actual) recipients. This is especially troubling given the first piece of Adler and Kwon’s social capital construct is “Opportunity.” In this conception, however, it represents the opportunity of the actor in need to access potential resources from benefactors, rather than the opportunity of potential benefactors to be able to provide help to their friends, family, and colleagues. There is, however, a large body of help-seeking literature that underscores the complexity and importance of help-seekers’ motives. Opportunity, as it turns out, swings both ways. This has important implications for the type and manner of social capital exchanges that take place in the VCLL.

A more basic notion of motives comes from Charles Kadushin (2002) who, in taking the question to a more foundational level, acknowledges the intrinsically psychological nature of motivations for human action. Embedding his work in the theoretical ideas of both “relational psychoanalytic theory” and “eclectic academic psychological theory,” Kadushin breaks motives for human action into two basic categories: safety, which, “…clusters the motives and feelings of dependency, trust, and support,” and efficacy, “…which clusters the motives and feelings of mastery, competition, and envy,” (p. 80). He equates the safety drive, in network terms, to density and cohesion, noting the major benefits as forms of social support. In contrast, efficacy
drives drive actors to search out structural holes (drawn from Burt’s work) to exploit inefficiency to personal advantage. Further, Kadushin notes the major difference between safety and effectiveness drives: the location of trust, “In safety networks trust tends to be an attribute of the entire network, not just the ‘player’s’ side. In effectiveness networks trust is present only to a limited degree between the player and the other who is the object of play” (p. 85). Thus, one can draw clear lines of demarcation between Kadushin’s safety drives with Portes’s expressive motives and Putnam’s “bonding” social capital, as well as between Kadushin’s effectiveness drives, Portes’s instrumental motives, Putnam’s “bridging” social capital, and Burt’s structural holes. While it may be self-evident that people would utilize social connections for different needs, exactly how they accomplish this and through whom becomes important for social capital scholars.

Help-Seeking

There is a large literature on the process of help-seeking. This literature, among other things, illustrates the necessity of considering not only the motives of help providers but also the motives of those who are the beneficiaries of that help. This work relies on the assumption that help-seeking takes place at sub-optimal levels – that is, people in need do not always ask for it. Motives for help-seeking are thus more complex than simply recognizing a need for help. This research complicates Portes’ neglect of recipient motives for accepting resources in a social capital relationship. The primary reasons for refusing to ask for help when it would be expedient center on: issues of embarrassment and self-esteem, as well as the perception of an inability to reciprocate. When these are threatened, help-seeking becomes at best a very ambivalent process for the party in need. In such cases, offers of help, where they may come spontaneously, may be treated not with grateful acknowledgement and praise, but instead with scorn or refused.
altogether. Only when the motives of the donor and the recipient align can successful transfer of resources take place while leaving the door open for future reciprocal transfers. If any link in the exchange chain is broken, the relationship is threatened. Alternative courses of action include the treatment of the help as a business rather than a personal exchange (with its own consequences), or the dissolution of the relationship altogether. Sandra Smith (2010) in particular pays close attention to both donors and recipients in the low-wage urban job market, the subject of her book, *Lone Pursuit*. Smith outlines that the reluctance of job-seekers to rely on their potentially useful networks contacts – especially in a market where social connections are the primary way to acquire employment – stems from both the primacy of the individualist ethos among low-wage workers and the fear that they may well be unable to hold up their end of the bargain by being a good employee, a form of reciprocity. This examination confirms much of that which help-seeking scholars found in their studies and points toward useful lines of inquiry for this one as well.

In the prototypical helping situation, the cycle begins with a request for help which is then provided or denied by the potential benefactor. After that, the roles reverse as the original beneficiary seeks to reciprocate the help received (Nadler, Bar-Tal, and Drukman 1982). In this scenario, the recipient seeks to repay the person or group who originally provided the help, rather than a “pay it forward” type of help advocated by proponents of generalized reciprocity. This is driven by a more specific version of the norm of reciprocity, particularly as outlined by Gouldner (1960). This early work on help-seeking and reciprocity – antecedents to social capital research – emphasized the rational choice approach to help-seeking and help-providing. In this conception, the motivation of the help-seeker consists merely of a problem that cannot (or cannot easily) be solved alone. When the need for help is acknowledged, one seeks help because it is the
pragmatic or rational thing to do when one is in need. However, research has continually shown
that ignoring the context within which action (including help-seeking) takes place cannot
produce rich predictive, theory on human action, “…much recent research suggests a
multifaceted base of action – affect and rationality, emotion and cognition… action is seen as
proceeding on the basis of both, each intrinsically social rather than individual,” (Pescosolido
1992:1107; emphasis mine). Even the psychological factors examined below in the help-seeking
process derive from social foundations, as has been emphasized by symbolic interactionists
(Cooley 1902; Mead 1938).

When scholars began looking more closely at help-seeking, they uncovered a
psychologically complex and dynamic process that potential help-seekers endure in order to
drive a decision to seek or decline to seek help even after the need to assistance is acknowledged.
In a ground-breaking volume published in 1983 (DePaulo, Nadler, and Fisher, eds), help-seeking
scholars began explicating this complicated help-seeking process. This work laid the foundation
for the new paradigm in help-seeking research, which represents a continual process designed to
refine the help-seeking process. Perhaps the most important and fundamental change in
perspective emerging from this line of research is that, even when in need, people often resist
seeking help:

It seems, then, that people in need often do not ask for help at all. When they do seek
help, they often seem to prefer the type of help that they can administer to themselves.
Even when help is solicited from other persons, it is often disguised as something other
than a direct request. From this it can be inferred that, along with the considerable
benefits that may accrue to the seeker of help, there may also be important costs.
Included among the many psychological factors that might inhibit help seeking or
feelings of embarrassment; fears of refusal or rejection; reluctance to reveal one's
inadequacies, to incur debts, to self-disclose, or to impose upon the helper; and the desire
to achieve success completely independently (ibid.:4).
The remainder of the volume consists of scholars exploring these factors and refining new models for the help-seeking process. Alan Gross and Peg McMullen (1983) explored the self-esteem issues related to asking for help. These feelings – as other scholars attest – are exacerbated by the ideology of rugged independence so prevalent in America, “Especially in a culture that values achievement and rugged independence, the act of asking for help often implies to individuals that they are failing to measure up to what they have been socialized to expect of themselves” (p. 57). They established a four-fold typology of issues inhibiting the asking for help: issues relating to self-concept, threats to freedom, feelings of inadequacy, and the feeling of being uncomfortably indebted (threat to self-esteem, reactance, attribution, and equity, respectively). Shapiro (1983) examined specifically the threat to self-concept through the lens of embarrassment, an extension of Gross and McMullen’s work, noting the seemingly-obvious inverse correlation between embarrassment and help-seeking. However, he also noted that asking for help can take a variety of forms, each with implications for embarrassment levels. At one extreme, the help-seeker can simply ask for another to provide the desired outcome. At the other extreme, the help-seeker can ask for help in improving their skills so that they may eventually solve their problem themselves. In the middle of these two poles, one can ask for assistance in solving the problem. Additionally, Shapiro noted that, “It has been found that persons are more likely to receive help if it is offered to them and they only have to accept the help than if they must request it from others,” (p. 150). This distinction between asking for help

12 Think of these in terms of finding a job. In situation A, a person might simply ask for a job from Person B. In the other extreme, they may ask B to help them build their skills to become more qualified for a job. In the middle position, A may ask B to put in a word for them with the hiring parties. The second scenario in this situation is the best way to preserve A’s self-concept and self-esteem.
and being offered help has distinct implications for social capital relationships, both in Little League and in general, as shall be explored in Chapter 5.

Relationship strength is another crucial element in the help-seeking process. Many presume that help is preferred from close ties rather than distant ones, and this is by-and-large true. This is often because friends and family are more likely to provide the help needed and to provide it at a lower cost, both in terms of the self-esteem of the recipient and in terms of reciprocation (Rosen 1983). In terms of the help-seeking process, Margaret Clark (1983) distinguished between “communal” and “exchange” relationships in order to comment on why close relations are preferred to distant ones. However, what then to make of the “weak ties” approach pioneered by Granovetter (1983)? It is certainly true that not only can distant relationships be useful; they may actually be preferable in accomplishing certain tasks. To this, Clark (1983) answers that, for most of us, there is a certain humanitarian concern for the welfare of fellow humans in general (Schwartz 1975). “Another way of putting this is that most people tend to have very weak communal relations with everyone and are often willing to provide low-cost health without expecting anything in return,” (Clark 1983:210-211).

Clark also acknowledges another motive for help-seeking: relationship building. Because helping behavior is a hallmark of a significant relationship, one can signify the desire to begin a relationship by engaging another in a helping relationship (i.e., the building of social capital through an exchange relationship). This also has important implications for the story of helping and social capital relationships in child-centered organizations such as Little League, as many scholars have recognized. Exchange relationships are built over time, usually starting with low-stakes exchanges and building toward an exchange of more and more valuable resources as trust is built through each successive exchange (Blau 1964; Smith 2010). Thus, the process can be
derailed in its infancy if the initial requests for help involve high-stakes sharing, involves too high of a cost for the benefactor, or somehow makes the beneficiary seem unattractive as a potential friend (Clark 1983:212-213). As so much of the activity that surrounds helping behavior in Little League (and, of course, in any child-centered organization) is oriented toward children – such as child-care, rides to and from practices and games – this can inhibit the formation of social capital relationships, because entrusting anyone with children involves trust levels that are not usually warranted by the closeness of the relationships that characterize many Little League parents.

However, there are instances where distance is an advantage rather than a disadvantage during the helping process. In combining the tenants of homophily with social comparison theory (Festinger 1954), Nadler, Fisher, and Ben Itzhak (1983) show that help from a friend can be a negative experience. This is because we are naturally attracted to those who are similar to us in some way (also see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). While this can be a solid basis for friendship, it is also a very convenient basis for comparison of our abilities. Comparing abilities with those who are otherwise similar can provoke very negative effects on an individual’s self-concept, “Social comparison theory and related empirical and conceptual developments suggest that cues of relative inferiority and dependency in aid should be psychologically meaningful (and thus threatening) only when the helper is a similar other, because this promotes comparison stress between donor and recipient,” (Nadler, Fisher, and Ben Itzhak 1983:311). As with other research on help-seeking, however, this stress is provoked only when the task at hand is “ego-relevant,” meaning that it involves skills that we value in our own self-concept. If the task is ego-relevant, then experiencing help from a friend (to whom we consider ourselves similar) is a negative experience. In that case, we are more likely to seek help
from relative strangers, especially if the cost to the donor is low. If the task is not ego-relevant, then it does not affect the self-esteem of the person requesting the help, as the recipient does not regard the inability to complete the task as of particular importance to their own self-image. Thus, help from friends and relatives does not invoke negative feelings and comparison stress.

For our purposes, the relative weakness of relationships built and sustained at the ballpark thus may be conducive to certain kinds of help and detrimental to others. In this scenario, the types of resources exchanged would most likely be low-cost to the donor. In terms of ego-relevance, certainly nothing would preclude the receipt of resources that were not ego-relevant, but it also means that we should not be surprised by the exchange of resources that may be ego-relevant to the recipient, as the social distance between potential donor and recipient may be such that receiving help on such tasks would not penetrate the self-esteem of the recipient.

By norm, if not by definition, the process of exchange should involve both the giving as well as the receiving of resources in a relationship. The drive toward reciprocity is strong, and acts as a moral safety net for the normal giving and receiving relationship between individuals (Gouldner 1960). This moral prescription, according to Gouldner, takes two forms: that we should help those who have helped us and that we should not injure those who have helped us. The drive to reciprocate is strong enough in most people that, where they fail to perceive in their own situation the ability to play both roles in a helping situation, they may avoid asking for help altogether. While it might be natural to believe that a one-way relationship may be harmful to the person who finds themselves on the giving end disproportionately – Gouldner referred to this as ‘exploitation’ in both the Durkheimian and Marxian sense – both conceptually and empirically a one-way exchange relationship also has negative effects on the chronic recipient as well.

Relationships seem to work for both parties best when there is a two-way flow of resource
sharing, “There is reason to believe that giving support only or receiving support only has a more negative effect on an individual than does the exchanging of support,” (Antonucci 1985:100). Likewise, the literature on the motivations of volunteer workers emphasizes the benefits that can accrue the volunteers themselves as much as or more than the benefits that they confer on those for whom they are presumably working. In fact, these “selfish” motives can be more predictive of both volunteer satisfaction and tenacity over the long-term (Snyder and Omoto 1992).

The ability to reciprocate also has implications for the balance of power in a given relationship. Blau (1964) notes that, when a recipient of help cannot reciprocate, they are then obligated in other ways to their benefactor, especially if they wish to continue utilizing that person for later help. While the person in need of help may have alternatives, such as taking help by force, obtaining the needed help elsewhere, or doing without, in the event that these are not viable alternatives, “…there is only one course of action left for him; he must subordinate himself to the other and comply with his wishes, thereby rewarding the other with power over himself as an inducement for furnishing the needed help,” (p. 21-22). The one-way relationship, where it exists, also engenders certain expectations which alter the dynamic of the relationship, making their withdrawal a form of punishment, which also unbalances the power dynamics. However, in most cases, people would prefer to reciprocate in ways that show their equivalence to one another, rather than allowing themselves to be subordinate to another, and this characterizes the helping relationship of most neighbors and friends (Cantor 1979). Research has shown however, that the more distant the relationship, the more likely that people feel the need to reciprocate “in kind” than in closer relationships (Rosen 1983). In kind reciprocation indicates the need to exchange resources of the same type (lending money would tend to involve paying the money back; changing a tire might be repaid with help around the house, etc). Payback in
these cases are also more likely to be time-constrained than by the payback in closer friend and family relationships.

Thus, motivational questions do not begin and end with the motivation of donors in social capital relationships. While these are, of course, of critical importance, they are not comprehensive. Social capital theorists have too long ignored the motivations of recipients and how these both enable and constrain the formation of social capital relationships. Portes’ contention that, for the recipient, the exchange of resources takes the form of a gift is incomplete and leaves unanswered questions of help-seeking as well as the motivations for the refusal of this “gift,” either after it is offered or preemptively. Social capital exchanges are not always initiated by the donor and, as such, it might be fruitful to examine situations in which resources are exchanged at the behest of the recipient as well as the donor. After all, a gift is not gift if one has to ask for it. That does not mean, however, it is not just as appreciated as that which is offered. Chapter 5 examines more closely the motivations of both donors and recipients of social capital benefits in the VCLL. There, I seek to illuminate specific situations in which social capital is exploited at the behest of donor or recipient. I will also explore the implications raised by this distinction, including situations where the “burden of motivation” can shift from donor to recipient, as the work on help-seeking behavior has shown is an important element.

THE BENEFITS AND PERILS OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

One of the most trenchant criticisms of early conceptions of social capital was its portrayal as a relentlessly positive process. This critique dates back at least as far as 1993, when Portes and Sensenbrenner (see also Portes and Landolt 1996; 2000) defined social capital in such a way as to include possible negative outcomes. “We began by redefining social capital as those expectations for action within a collectivity that affect the economic goals and goal-seeking
behavior of its members…” (p. 1323). Portes and Sensenbrenner were reacting explicitly against Coleman’s (1988) definition of social capital on the grounds that it highlighted “only half the story” (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993:1323) However, the negative elements of social capital had yet to be distinguished conceptually from the otherwise presumed positive elements that had driven early work on social capital. Portes and Sensenbrenner claimed that this presumption comes from “…our sociological bias to see good things emerging out of social embeddedness; bad things are more commonly associated with the behavior of *homo economicus*” (ibid.:1338). They refer to these as the negative effects of social capital. In doing so, Portes, Sensenbrenner, and Landolt – in their various writings – set the agenda for much of the research on negative social capital. Specifically, they noted four negative aspects of social capital: (1) The exclusion of outsiders. This is specifically a problem where resources are scarce and contests are zero-sum. In such cases, the competition for resources necessarily produces losers. To the extent that resources are kept within established networks – be they established on the basis of kinship or friendship – outsiders, as it were, are always left on the outside looking in. (2) Excessive claims on group members. In this negative effect, the successful within a population is repeatedly solicited for donations or help from those in the population who have been less successful. The authors present the example of successful artisans in the Ecuadorean highlands who have converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, not due to any change in their personal spiritual beliefs, but to escape the excessive obligations that Catholicism in the region entails, particularly when it comes to supporting financially religious festivals for the rest of the community. (3) Restrictions of individual freedom. The tight-knit communities that characterize ethnic enclaves and which provide much of the social support necessary for visible minorities to achieve security in their adopted homeland also enforces a strict conformity to group norms at the expense of
individual liberty. Bounded solidarity, the ties formed on the basis of particular statuses (particularly visible statuses such as race or ethnicity), is a double-edged sword. (4) Downward leveling norms. This is the effect that group norms and conformity have on individual members in especially downtrodden situations. In such situations, conventional opportunity structures and norms such as education and participation in the legitimate economy are collectively eschewed. Further, any member of the group who might want to pursue these opportunities are shunned and face expulsion or ostracism from other group members. As such, the members act in concert to keep each other down, “This conflict is experienced by Haitian-American teenagers… as they are torn between parental expectations for success through education and an inner-city youth culture that denies that such a thing is possible.” (ibid.:1342). Though Portes and Landolt did not explicitly employ the term “negative social capital” until 2000 (“Social Capital: Promises and Pitfalls of its Role in Development”), Guarnizo (1994), crediting Portes and Sensenbrenner for the concept, coined the term “negative social capital” as it is typically employed by sociologists.

A great deal of later sociological research has taken this understanding of negative social capital as a starting point for their case studies. Jo Beall (1997) employed a case study of waste management in India and Pakistan to illustrate that social capital studies and theorization ignore crucial power differentials. This critique, however, is intimately related to the “Pollyanna” critique that has driven negative social capital studies, as Beall found that, “Positive results were only achieved in relation to improved municipal waste collection services, where there was an equivalence of power or a coincidence of interests between representatives or communities and local decision-makers,” (p. 960). In other words, power differentials either negate the positive potential of social capital, or they create and/or exacerbate its negative effects. In a similar vein, Putzel (1997) shows that the same places would be considered highly civic utilizing Putnam’s
rubric are the same places that have seen, “…some of the most enduring forms of oppression linked with patriarchy and racism…” (p. 945), an indirect but relevant link to the exclusion principle above. Exclusion is also the consequence of living in a low-trust society (Knack and Keefer 1997). In such societies, those making hiring decisions are more likely to make decisions based on “…trustworthy personal attributes of applicants, such as blood ties or personal knowledge, and less by educational credentials…” (p. 1253-1254).

It can be difficult to empirically separate Portes et al’s negative elements of social capital in later case studies. The constraint of free action does not, for example, separate simply from downward leveling pressures, as both are based on the underlying principle of group conformity and norms. Norms, by definition, act as constraints on free action, but the process of internalization blinds us to that idea in many to most occasions. Thus, it is also a truism that social capital based on norms also act as constraints, ones that are perhaps more easily visible and subject to conscious calculation by participants in any particular group. Norms, to the extent that they impede free action, can also impede change, both positive and negative, as Walker, Kogut, and Shan (1997) claim, “The persistence of the past is welcomed if alternative futures look less promising, especially scenarios with free-rider or prisoner-dilemma problems. But social capital can also be associated with encumbering commitments that impede competition and change,” (p. 122). Thus, even when norms are considered “pro-social,” they can have negative consequences, both inside and outside of the group. When the norms themselves are “anti-social,” such as with Rubio’s (1997) “perverse social capital,” the manifestation of group norms most resembles Portes et al’s downward leveling pressures. Rubio details the ways in which group norms in areas of Columbia tend to reproduce negative rather than positive structures:
It is feasible to conceive of the existence of a perverse social capital in which the networks, the contacts, the power relations, the legal system, the informal norms of behavior, the political activities, and the reward systems est. in this society inspires rent seeking, or criminal behavior, to the detriment of productive activities in technological innovation (P. 815).

The pressure of downward leveling norms – as well as exclusion - is also apparent in Woolcock’s (1998) appropriation of the term “amoral familism” from Banfield (1958) in which an excess of community leads to such fierce loyalty (to clan, to kin and, more recently, to peer group, gang, etc.) that “…members are discouraged from advancing economically, moving geographically, and engaging in amicable dispute resolution with outsiders” (p. 171). This idea is reiterated in Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin* (1974). Stack notes that due to a combination of a lack of privacy and the reciprocal obligations embedded in relationships, what little surplus that can occasionally be generated by members in the exchange circle quickly evaporates into the circle itself. By the beginning of the century (Woolcock 2001), these particular negative effects of social capital were very well-established. Indeed, Putnam (2000), responding to criticism of his own neglect of the dark side of social capital (in Putnam 1995), devoted a chapter devoted to negative social capital in *Bowling Alone*, even as he attempted to systematically refute the substantial arguments that social capital carried the potential for negative as well as positive externalities.

At the same time that sociologists were establishing the negative effects of social capital (or the “dark side” of social capital), economists, where they were addressing social capital, were building models that took into account antipathy and the potential effects that it could have on social capital in any given dyad. Lindon Robison and A. Alan Schmid were most prominent in this regard, beginning in 1991 when they began exploring the idea that if positive relations between individuals (affinity) produced a net gain in social capital for both parties, then scholars
should also be hypothesizing both neutral relationships (no social capital gain for either party) as well as antipathetic relationships (net social capital was lost for both parties), where resources might actually be expended by either or both parties to negatively affect the well-being of the other party in the relationships, thereby affecting (negatively) both parties, “Indeed, when negative social capital exists, partners are unlikely to exchange on mutually beneficial terms of trade. The goal becomes to reduce the welfare of each other even if one’s own well-being is reduced in the process,” (Robison and Siles 1998). Exploring this idea, Robison (1999) conducted an experiment in which students were asked to detail what they would charge for a used car, given an objective value. They found that relationships characterized by affinity resulted in an average $420 discount for the car (positive social capital), while antipathetic relationships resulted in an average $697 markup over the actual value of the car (negative social capital). In 2000, Schmid explored thoroughly the idea that social capital was predicated on the existence of affinity between the parties involved, and that antipathetic relationships resulted in harm or disadvantage to the parties involved, “…the relationship between individuals can be one of malevolence instead of benevolence. Instead of deriving satisfaction from the welfare of others, one derives disutility. Such a person is happier when the hated one is worse off,” (p. 167).

While interesting for their insight and certainly persuasive in their logic, the work of Robison and Schmid (both separately and in tandem) is characterized by a lack of in situ empiricism. Experimental and hypothetical models lack the real-world exigencies that routinely complicate the study of human motivation and action. It is absolutely necessary that such claims be tested in real-life contexts that, while often messy, contextualize the structure and motivations of parties participating in social relationships. While motivation has often been an issue in social capital research – particularly that of the benefactor in any given transaction (e.g., Lin 2001a;
Portes and Landolt 2000) – the same issues persist when exploring antipathetic relationships. In particular, the idea that one’s own well-being becomes subordinate to the denigration of that of the enemy is one that cannot be trusted on face and should be explored in context.

Beginning early in the last decade, sociologists began exploring exactly what negative social capital in situ looks like, particularly in the work environment (Moerbeek and Need 2003; Morrison 2007; Morrison and Nolan 2007; Völker and Flap n.d.) Utilizing the terms foes and sour social capital to describe relationships characterized by negative social capital, Moerbeek and Need found that having foes in the workplace increased the chances of unemployment as well as and that having bad contacts also was associated with lower prestige jobs. In the workplace, high-prestige foes can, at best, block advancement and, at worst, result on the loss of a job for the less powerful or prestigious. The authors did not find significant negative consequences for foes with similar or horizontal positions in the job hierarchy. Building on this work, Morrison and Nolan categorized the productivity effects of negative work interactions and relationships into the following: communication breakdowns, lack of cooperation, and distraction from work tasks to think about or work on the negative relationships. Additionally, they catalogued both the career impacts of such relationships (similar to Moerbeek and Need) as well as the negative emotional impacts of such relationships. Still though, scholars had not yet found consensus on a definition of negative social capital even as they were continuing to make strides in examining its effects. Morrison (2007) defined them thusly: “…a negative relationship is one where interactions such as manipulation, conflict, disrespect, disagreement, incivility and/or animosity are frequent, and these relationships have been shown to affect both individuals and organizations adversely, causing stress and turnover” (p. 6). Other elements of negative relationships in the work environment have focused on third relationships, power dynamics, and
the multiplexity of negative relationships (Völker and Flap n.d.). Volker and Flap found that many friendly as well as unfriendly relationships can be explained by the relationship to a third party (balance theory) and those individual characteristics, other than status, are not predictive of incidence of negative relationships in the workplace. Higher status employees – and especially those in supervisory positions – are more likely to have foes in their networks than others.

Thus, the conception of negative social capital has evolved from the equation of it with the negative externalities of social capital that characterized early work on the subject. This examination of negative externalities developed out of the critique of early social capital studies and theorization that too often ignored the negative potentiality of social connections in favor of their benefits. Meanwhile, the study of social conflict developed right along with (and of course prior to) sociology itself. These works examined both macro-levels of social conflict (e.g., Marx 1990 [1867]) and the micro-level (e.g., Rook 1984; Simmel 1955). However, it was only when social capital gained momentum as a sociological concept that the very logically coherent connections emerged, and antipathy studies joined the social capital critiques to produce a more logically coherent version of the term “negative social capital.”

Perhaps negative social capital has not received the attention it deserves is due to the fact that, in many cases, negative relationships do not persist. In the event that a relationship turns sour, the parties tend to exit the relationship rather than persist in the relationship in order to damage their foe. However, some relationships are not so easy to exit, especially professional ones. Social capital scholars looking at negative relationships in the workplace were focused on relationships that were, by their understanding, difficult to exit (Moerbeek and Need 2003). Exiting a job is not a decision that tends to be taken lightly, and the existence of negative relationships is often accepted as part of the job, and not a reason to leave. Voluntary
associations, however, are not generally critical for the material well-being of participants (directly, at least) and are generally easier to exit and can be exited with fewer consequences. Thus, the existence of negative relationships in this context should logically result in higher exit rates for the parties involved. In low-stakes voluntary associations such as Little League, the benefits of participation in leadership positions should not outweigh the rewards (often they will not even in the absence of negative relations) when the leadership is fractured and divided. To the extent that individuals’ reputations are harmed within the organization, it becomes difficult to understand the motivations for staying in the organization.

Thus, this study advances the scholarly understanding of negative social capital in two critical areas. First, while the consequences of negative social capital have been explored from both an individual as well as organizational standpoint, the field of negative social capital is still young. The consequences for both individuals as well as organizations need to be contextualized and studied in-depth in order to understand just how these negative relationships develop, and the mechanisms by which they affect both the individuals involved as well as the organization itself. Second, the consequences of negative relationships have not been explored in the context of voluntary associations. In the negative social capital literature, workplace relationships have been considered involuntary, as they are not considered to be in themselves prominent reasons for leaving the job voluntarily. Voluntary associations, especially those having little to do with material concerns, are much easier to exit and thus the persistence of negative relationships are more difficult to understand. Because of this, it is imperative to understand the motivations of parties involved in such relationships in failing to remove the negative relationship from the network when the costs of doing so are low and the potential costs of maintaining them are so high.
CONCLUSION

In the above sections, I attempted to bring together several strands of sociological research dealing with social capital, sport, children, motivations, and negative relationships. All of these processes are important when dealing with the study of parent social capital in youth sport (particularly Little League Baseball). When discussing these strands of research, I pointed out both what scholars have done as well as points left unaddressed. By doing so, I implicitly set the expectations for the study. However, I will also lay them out explicitly here. Sport sociology, for all the work that has been undertaken in the name of social capital, has not properly dealt with it from a network perspective. In my work, I set out to correct this. The network-level study of sport and social capital is critical because people spend a great deal of leisure time involved in sporting activities of one sort or another: as spectators, as participants, or as volunteers. These activities are bound to have a significant impact on their social networks, potentially putting them in contact with people they might otherwise have missed, or avoided. Thus, I am particularly interested in personal network relations.

I also noted that children had largely been left on the sidelines where social capital studies have been concerned, except where they can be portrayed as beneficiaries. More recent work has placed them in an alternative yet complementary context as active social agents capable of building their own social capital and, by extension, affect that of their parents. This work provides a warrant for the closer study of the process by which children actually accomplish this. Their impact, as I discuss in chapter 4, is significant, perhaps even more so than acknowledged by even scholars of youth and adolescence. Because parents spend a great deal of time attending to the organized leisure activities of their children (Devereux 1976), it logically follows that their social life can and likely will be impacted by the people they come in contact with who are
acting in similar ways and in similar positions. This study is an attempt to draw further focus to
the role of children in the social capital creation of their parents.

As I pointed out, the current work dealing with motives behind social capital exchange
ignores a large body of research on help-seeking that complicates the actions and motivations of
recipients as well. That work, predating as it does social capital research, obviously does not
examine its effect on the social capital process. However, applying it to social capital studies is
both logical and extremely useful. This study, aims to identify motives of recipients in relation to
those of donors. I will also show that, in this context, there are times when the motives of donors
are unproblematic and those of recipients are the ones in need of closer examination. Again, this
is largely due to the presence of children in the context, how they are viewed, and how that view
changes the willingness of both donors and recipients to engage in social capital exchange.

Finally, I noted a conceptual mismatch between terminology and process in the social
capital literature, especially as it relates to negative relationships versus negative outcomes.
Social capital scholars have been analyzing the negative elements of social capital for some time
now. However, far less attention has been paid to the effects of negative relationships on the
social capital between parties. The difference is subtle, but critical. I have chosen to use Portes’
term the “dark side” of social capital to refer to the sometimes-negative externalities of social
capital between parties. The outcomes of the parties themselves, however, are still positive. This
is especially relevant in zero-sum situations, where the gain of one party is always and
necessarily at the expense of others. In Little League, for example, the selection of an
undeserving child for an All-Star team due to a relationship between coaches or parents is
necessarily at the expense of another, potentially more deserving child. This does not alter the
positive outcome for the child who made the squad as a result of social relationships. However, it
creates negative outcomes for those external to the relationship (a negative externality). I have contrasted this situation with what I understand as “negative social capital” proper, which involves negative relationships characterized by attempts to adversely affect the party with whom one shares a negative relationship. In this case, any attempt to damage enemies’ standing either within or outside of the league constitutes negative social capital. The effects focus on the parties directly involved in the relationship. Parties external to the negative relationship may or may not be affected by these attempts. In all situations – both dark side activities and negative relationships – the presence of children (either directly or as a rhetorical device) in the context complicates the matter considerably. In fact, this serves as the running theme of this project. Children can create social capital for their parents, but their presence complicates the creation, maintenance, and destruction of that social capital for their parents. The following chapters illustrate these processes.
Chapter 3 - “I guess you’re with him.” Trust, Distrust, Intrigue, and Getting to Know the People of the VCLL

The genesis of this project comes from my own experiences of youth sport, or at very least, my memories of those experiences. I played soccer from ages 6 to 12, baseball from 8 to 12, and tennis from 12 to 17. During that time, I met, interacted with, and befriended a number of teammates. My parents endured a similar process in the stands, though I did not make this observation at the time. I am not privy to their entire set of experiences, but three things stand out: (1) they preferred baseball to soccer, and anything to tennis; (2) they established a few enduring relationships, a couple of which are still active; and (3) the enduring ones are characterized by social exchange. One mother from my 10-year old baseball team continued to cut my hair at her home on her off days into junior high. Once they moved, they still visited my parents when they came back to visit. One of my teammates’ fathers from my 8-year old baseball team is still my father’s auto mechanic of choice on the rare occasion that he needs one. These relationships were exceptions, the same as they are in the VCLL. Of course, this does not make them any less significant. My mom will occasionally give me updates on my old coaches, or my old teammates (or their parents), even today. These segments of conversations often begin with, “Hey, do you remember…?” and continue with news of a chance encounter at the store, news of a marriage or, in recent times, the sad news of a death. Years and years later, their images leap vividly from the depths of my (usually sketchy) memory as easily as when they occupied more immediate positions.

These were rarely close friends, for either my parents or for me. I eventually grew out of the youth and school sport scene, and few of the friends I made while participating remained with me. If they did, it was almost always because we had some other bond; a love of music,
perhaps, or the same choice of college. My parents were the same way. With the exceptions of
the examples listed above, I cannot recall any other parents with whom they were particularly
close. But there were meaningful, important, and useful relationships. These seemed to have
occurred more often in my sporting experience more than other areas of my youth participation. I
do not always remember my old classmates, and I certainly do not remember all the
acquaintances that have passed through my life in other areas: day camps, Cub Scouts, my ill-
fated 10-week experiment in Tae-Kwon-Do, or swimming lessons. Most of these kids and their
parents never even met mine. But the memories of my old baseball teammates, soccer
teammates, and tennis teammates remain largely fresh.

The study of youth sport seemed like a natural site for the study of relationship building
and social capital exchange. Youth sport brings parents together, but it does not always keep
them too busy once they are “at the fields.” They have time to get to know one another, if they
are so inclined. They have a space within which to interact. On the whole, these are dependable
spaces, in that parents can reliably count on particular other parents being present (Dyck 2002).
In this respect, the sport fields are like Oldenburg’s “third places” (1989). More importantly,
they fulfill Small’s (2009b) conditions that facilitate the formation of social ties: (1) the
opportunity to meet people (availability), (2) a focus to their activity (their children), and (3) a
cooperative environment (within the same team, at least!). Like Small’s daycare centers in
Unanticipated Gains, the baseball fields (or soccer fields, or basketball courts, football fields,
etc.) in my mind represented ideal sites for parental social capital building and exchange. This
was informed, however, by my own experiences as a youth sport participant. Indeed, how could
it be otherwise? It seems axiomatic now that how we know and what we know is intimately
knotted together with who we are as researchers and what we have experienced as humans. Thus,
researchers increasingly are drawn into discussions of “how we came to know,” and engage
various aspects of this issue. It is not enough to understand the mechanics of participant
observation and interviewing – my two primary modes of data gathering. Questions about my
own biography, my demographic characteristics, and my interactions with the people of Valley
City are central to any understanding of how this project took shape, how I gathered and
generated data, how I analyzed it, and how I eventually came to write it. In this section, aside
from the simple mechanical issues, I also delve into the genesis (and evolution) of this project,
how I gained access to the VCLL, how I “sampled” the population, the effects of my own
biography and social identity impacted my data and analysis, and some ethical considerations
brought to light during my fieldwork.

THE BEST LAID PLANS…

Conceiving qualitative research before it begins is a little like painting a picture from a verbal
description: it may have some passing resemblance to what the speaker had in mind, but the
finished project is probably more different than similar. In this case, the verbal description and
the finished product come from the same source. This doesn’t change the lesson, however: how
we conceive projects often resemble only marginally the finished product. From research
questions to findings, and from an ambitious, large-scale magnum opus to small-scale, workable,
and modest project, this study underwent significant changes from conception to
implementation. I would like to think this results from the idea that a good ethnographer,“…does
not know what they are looking for until they have found it…” (Fine 1993:274), but I would be
remiss if I did not acknowledge that it may have been because I simply knew far less about the
setting than I thought I did when I entered it. Further, even if the change in focus was the result
of the former, my change in scope was most assuredly the result of the latter.
Changes in Focus

I began this project with a desire to understand the process of social tie formation and dissolution in the youth sport setting. I wanted to see how parents came together on teams, worked together and interacted over the course of a season, and then (largely) drifted apart after the season ended. For those parents who may have formed close bonds over the course of the season, I was interested in if (and how) they maintained them after the season was over. I expected a mixture of strangers, acquaintances, and close friends, and I wanted to see how the existing relationship dynamics informed present relationship formation. Not only that, but I also expressed a desire to evaluate the entire youth sport system through its externalities, as well as test Putnam’s (2000) bonding and bridging types of social capital through youth sport. By the time the fieldwork was over, I ended up with a project where the focus was the effects of children on social capital – both positive and negative – within youth baseball. So… what happened?

By the end of my first season at the VCLL, I knew that, while I could have offered an answer to many of my original questions (though still not all of them), my study would definitely suffer for it. During my time in the field, I recounted other qualitative researchers’ advice to “chase the story” or “follow the data,” wherever it may lead. This was extremely tough for me, as I initially had a very difficult time seeing what exactly “the data” could tell me about social capital. I was not really finding much about close relationships on the teams I was following. Sure, nearly everyone I spoke with had a sport friend somewhere out there, but they just hadn’t seemed to make any this season. Of course, I cannot say whether this had anything to do with my presence, or whether I had stumbled on two particularly poor-interacting teams, and one all-star team whose story I was just beginning to unravel. Instead, I was talking with people who seemed very willing to help people out if only they had the opportunity. At the same time, they seemed
very loathe to ask these same people for any sort of help. I was also deeply entrenched in the
machinations of the Board of Directors, whose members were embroiled in a power struggle
which would have fit quite well in the television soap opera of your choice. I often joked that if
this project did not out for me, at least I had a juicy screenplay on my hands. Of course, the
discrepancy between what I thought I might find and what I actually found led me to two
conclusions: (1) I had to go back for a second season, and (2) I needed to alter the questions I
was asking of people to fit what they had offered up to this point.

For the second season, I had 5 main (related) areas I wanted to pursue: (1) the fluidity of
social capital; (2) conflict as a source of social capital; (3) tie strength, benefactors and
beneficiaries, and baseline parent relationships; (4) child-driven social capital; and (5) negative
social capital. In the end, I settled on three major areas of focus: child-driven social capital
(Chapter 4), benefactors and beneficiaries (Chapter 5) and negative social capital (Chapter 6).
Why these? On the one hand, some data came more easily than others. This could be because
people were more willing to talk about those experiences, or that they were easier to observe. It
could also have been that I was never able to ask the right questions in interviews, or that I was
not observing the proper situations. This is the case for conflict as a source of social capital. As
an idea, I believe it has merit. Some board members joined up because they were dissatisfied
with the way the league was run. They brought their new ideas and a conflict-laden approach to
doing board business with them. This can, in the short-term, be very beneficial for the league. If,
however, their ideas are dismissed, then they are likely to leave the board (and the league) for
good. If they are accepted, the conflict that drove their initial participation dissipates, and they
settle into their role as a board member. That is, they were co-opted. On the other hand, once I
decided on the major thematic element of this project (the significant role of children in the
social capital levels of their parents), some elements fit more comfortably with that theme than others. The fluidity of social capital, so prevalent in this setting, did not fit as easily with the data I had as the elements that eventually made the final cut. I have not lost my faith in either of these ideas, and I believe a comprehensive theory of (youth) sport and social capital will be compelled to address them. They are like deleted scenes from a movie: perhaps including them would give a complete and full account of the ideas of the screenwriter or a director, but the editor has an important job as well. Much of the time, deleted scenes are cut for a reason: they do not add enough to the narrative, they are incomplete, or they are just filler. In these cases, I streamlined the narrative to fit with what I believe to be the most significant impact of youth sport on social capital building for parents: the impact – both direct and indirect – of children on both the amount and type of social capital their parents possess.

Changes in Scope

As I mentioned above, the scope of this project was originally far more ambitious – and implausible – in the beginning than the finished product. Like every other ethnographer, I did not include everything I thought, everything I saw, and everything I hypothesized. I made cuts, I sacrificed good ideas for thematic consistency, and I tried to be a good internal editor. Additionally, the original scope of my data gathering was of a similar, impressively large nature. I am equal parts amused and bemused at my own naivety. I became immersed in the Board of Directors, which added an element of observation and interviews on which I had not originally planned. Overwhelmingly, however, the study was continually pared down rather than scaled up. The scale of work involved in observations, fieldnotes, interviews, transcriptions, and analysis was a factor I simply guessed at in the beginning (comically wrongly, as it turns out). This project benefitted in nearly every way because of this loss in breadth. There were plenty of
“stories” in the VCLL, plenty of data to mine, and plenty of rabbits to chase down holes. In short, I got over, “the fear of thinking that there was nothing here,” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:154). Of course, what I lost in breadth was not entirely beneficial. I lost my comparative element, which was a significant portion of my original idea of what the project could contribute. It remains to be seen for future research whether or not this was a significant loss. As such, I can only speculate on the applicability of my own findings and analysis to other youth sports.

Ultimately, I believe that the changes in scope have benefitted the project. They forced me to dig deeper into the VCLL to uncover both its overt and hidden structures and fault lines. Going back for a second season was especially beneficial. First, it allowed me to observe the entire season cycle of the league. While the official “season” only runs from the beginning of April through the first part of June, the league never really stops. Following the regular season is All-Star season. After that, there is an abbreviated, scaled-back fall season which operates almost completely separate from the spring season. Many of those so instrumental in building the spring season every year are not involved with “fall ball.” There is some down time in the winter for parents and players, but the Board is already working on the next spring season, filing paperwork with the District and National offices, inducting and socializing new officers on the Board, and assessing their financial situation, constructing budgets, etc. Most of that activity would have remained hidden from me had I left the field after my initial season.

Once I asked permission for a second season with the league, people began to open up more to me than they had previously. My return made me a more dependable figure. My re-election to the board in July 2010 also confirmed that I was not as transient as the board members may have originally thought. Klein (1993) has noted the benefits of returning regularly, especially after layoffs, “The pitfalls of ‘git-n-split’ ethnography is that the picture presented to
the ethnographer is often contrived to reflect only the most flattering features of the person or group… informants felt less and less inclined to keep me at arm’s length when I returned each year, or season, or week” (p. 284). The full immersion technique followed by disappearance is perhaps not always the most efficient model, and my regular return after down periods in the league helped the board members view me as a regular feature of the league rather than a distraction or an imposition.

In many ways, ethnographers rely on these serendipitous moments in their early fieldwork to steer them in directions they may not have taken otherwise, largely because we enter the field not knowing precisely which way to turn, “This hope that all interactions in the field will be grist for one's analysis is, in part, a result of the fact that many of us asked very broad, undefined questions when we started researching...” (Burawoy et al 1991). However, these choices in the fieldwork by definition leave alternative choices unaccounted for. These counterfactuals can never be recaptured and it is unclear how different choices would have affected the end result. I can look back on these choices and see their benefit, but I cannot unequivocally say that the project is better off because of them. In particular, I am tantalized by the prospect of studying other youth sport contexts and the idea of examining multi-sport families to understand how multiplex ties in youth sports affect their friendship patterns both inside and outside the youth sport complex.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS: A CONSTANT PROCESS

Access to a field site is constantly negotiated, and its levels can constantly shift. Friendly informants can become stonewalling saboteurs at a moment’s notice, or even no notice at all! On the other hand, walls can take time to break down, and reluctant participants can slowly come around and become valuable informants. Gaining access to the VCLL was a separate process
entirely from gaining access to teams and to families or board members, any of whom had the potential to shut me out and deny me the interactions which were the major source of my data. Having the approval of the city did not hold much influence with the Board of Directors; having their approval held very little sway with the rank-and-file parents or managers, and in some cases my association with the Board led parents to be wary of my presence. In this section, I would like to discuss both my formal access to the site and the league, as well as the process of securing individual cooperation from participants, who were under no formal obligation to do so. As I make clear, formal access was very simple compared to the constant negotiation of cooperation with parents, especially where the Board of Directors was concerned. While their members had agreed to my participation, this in no way meant they felt obligated to cooperate when I turned my attention in their direction.

**Securing Formal Access to the VCLL**

In September of 2009, I formally began negotiating my access to the VCLL. I sat down with the Youth Sport Coordinator for Valley City and explained the project to him. In the end, I am not sure that I needed to secure the formal cooperation of the city in order to study the league. The city and the VCLL have a fairly complicated relationship. The league officially operates independently from the city, as Little Leagues tend to do. However, the city owns the fields and officially acts as a landlord for the league, meaning that, if they were so inclined, they could exert significant authority over the league and how it is run. Some VCLL insiders claim that they do exert this authority due to financial indiscretions perpetrated by league officials over a decade ago. For their part, however, city officials that I spoke with never referenced these events, and describe their relationship with the league in terms of support – both financial and intangible. I
felt it prudent to let city officials know what I had in mind for the project, however, and I never
received any word from city officials that my presence was causing problems in the VCLL.

Later, after the project had begun to take a more definite shape, I went to the VCLL
President, Javier. I interviewed Javier in February 2010. I employed the same strategy with
Javier as I had with the Youth Sport Coordinator of the city. I explained the project to him as
best I could, knowing at the time that my focus could and likely would change as the project
progressed. The interview served two purposes: (1) I wanted to view the league from Javier’s
perspective, as well as get his insight on how the league is run, its structure, its relationship with
the National Little League office, the city, and the league’s parents; (2) I wanted to secure his
cooperation and endorsement of the project to the full Board of Directors, which I would have to
secure in order to continue. Javier was a no-nonsense law enforcement officer whose close-
cropped, jet-black hair matched his clipped, sometimes short way of speaking. He was wary of
the project until I could assure him that I would not ask the league to provide me with any
information on its parents. I promised I did not want that information, and that I would find
people to cooperate with me on my own. The only thing I wanted from the league was their
approval. We agreed that I would go through the same vetting process as a normal volunteer for
the league (I would fill out a volunteer application and subject myself to the league’s background
check) and that Javier would then endorse the project at the next board meeting, which I would
attend to explain the project and attend the vote. I was confident that Javier’s endorsement would
lead to my desired outcome. As he explained:

So I’m not even a voting member, which is kind of ironic to me…. Like you can, you can
be the fall guy for this stuff. But you’re not allowed to vote on any of it. (Laughs). So I
usually submit very strong arguments as to why something should go a certain way, and
the pros and cons to such, and typically it goes my way. And I don’t think I’ve had
anything that hasn’t gone my way.
In the end, the board never formally voted on my presence, as Javier simply introduced me and I briefly explained the purpose of the project and how I would be conducting the data gathering.

Instead of voting, the board members immediately began giving me advice on the study:

The secretary then asked me if I was planning to study softball as well as baseball. I told her that I did not know, and that it would be one of the things I decided later on. She assured me that softball was an entirely different experience, and that my study would be woefully incomplete without a complete understanding of the softball experience. I assured her that I would give it some thought… On the way out, I was told by the umpiring coordinator that I shouldn’t take the secretary seriously when she tells me that softball was so different from the BB parents, as “They’re all crazy on both sides, believe me!” (Fieldnotes)

From that meeting on, the question of my presence was not formally discussed again. Even when Javier left the board and was replaced – and then his replacement replaced three months later – no one ever questioned my presence at board meetings, and I never was asked to justify my continuing study.

Securing Cooperation from Parents and Board Members

Choosing Teams

Formal access to the league was hardly the end of the negotiation, however. Once formal access was secured, I had to find teams that would allow me to observe them throughout the season. At the first level, this meant finding coaches that did not mind having me around, attending practices and games, and initiating conversations with parents. This turned out to be easier than I had anticipated, and there was never a shortage of teams whose coaches were comfortable with the arrangement.

In order to find volunteers for the first season’s worth of observations, I used two different processes. First, I followed the team of a board member, Lawrence. He had, very early on in the project, volunteered his team and I took him up on it. In hindsight, I perhaps should have held out for another team. Lawrence’s Pre-Tee-Ball team was comprised entirely of parents
who had requested him as coach, and several of them knew each other already. I am not certain to what extent this precluded some of the early relationship-building process that a team composed of those less familiar would have experienced. Had I chosen a new coach’s team, or a coach who had fewer requests and less influence on the process, I would certainly have gotten a different look, and perhaps one with more of the relationship building I originally envisioned.¹

For the other team, I sat in on the drafts for the older divisions (Minor and Major), both to observe how they were conducted as well as explain the project and recruit volunteers. After each draft was concluded (4 total, including Minor and Major Softball and Minor and Major Baseball), I stood up and explained the project to the coaches and asked if anyone would be interested in having me follow their teams around. My presence was met with varying levels of enthusiasm, and I ended up choosing Alana’s team, as her response was immediate and affirmative. I did not know at the time that Alana was also a member of the Board, (though she resigned before the season was out). As such, she was good friends with a segment of the board that became embroiled in a power struggle at the beginning of the 2010 season and continued through the course of (and well after) my fieldwork. Again, I found myself unable to escape the long shadow of the Board.

For my second season, I had only two criteria: (1) I wanted to follow a Minor baseball team, and (2) I would not observe a coach that was also a board member. The first part turned out to be easy; the second turned out to be a bit tricky. I had heard that the Minor baseball division was going to be, by far, the most competitive division in 2011. It had two rival Board

¹ As the Player Agent, Lawrence had a significant influence on the team creation process, not solely because of his position, but simply because he was the only coach in the division present when the teams were created. He had no formal power on the process, as he officially recused himself from it, but there were moments where his influence could be seen on his, if not that of the other teams.
members coaching teams, both of whom were known as very good coaches (as well as a third Board member coach). It had two other coaches known for their ability and competitive spirit. The teams from the VCLL were also going to have to travel to nearby towns to play their Minor baseball teams, which usually entailed high drama. I was working at the time on an idea (that I later discarded) that parent relationships might be more easily built when the competitive stakes were higher. It was an ideal scenario. When the time came, I presented myself as I had done the previous year, since few of the coaches knew me. All three Board member coaches volunteered themselves. I explained that I wanted to avoid Board members for coaches this year. That left me with three options. I ended up choosing Brent’s team (the Cubs) mainly because I had met him once or twice during the previous season and I had met his wife as a volunteer the previous year. Even still, I found myself wrapped in the interminable tentacles of the board of directors. For one, Brent was good friends with highly involved and somewhat controversial Board member Ron, and the two coached a club team together. Second, by the end of the season, Brent’s wife Sierra – who had significant ties to Board members of which I was unaware at the time – had officially joined the Board of Directors.

Negotiating Parent Cooperation

Unlike gaining access to the league, there was a continuous process of maintaining access to the actual team parents with whom I interacted on a regular basis during both seasons in the VCLL. As parents knew that they could revoke my access at any moment during my research, I was cognizant of my position within the team structure, and my relations with parents during the season. This had a significant impact on the role that I took during my observations and conversations with team parents.
I dealt with the initial issue of team access as quickly as possible, in case there were objections by parents. In the event that a compromise could not be constructed, I would have been forced to change teams to a more cooperative one. League officials were adamant that I secure cooperation of the parents on each team I planned to observe. It is customary that the coach call a parent meeting before the first team practice to hand out information, explain their coaching style, lay out the practice schedule, and set their general expectations for player behavior and parent involvement throughout the season. It was my goal to make my own brief presentation during that meeting in which I would introduce myself and the project, explain my goals, assure the parents that my presence was sanctioned by the league and that I had been through the same process as any other league volunteer, and allow for any initial questions they may have had about me or the project. For my first regular season, however, I was out of town for the first practice, and both Alana (manager of the Wildcats) and Lawrence (manager of the Twins) called a separate parent meeting during the second practice for this purpose.

For the most part, these sessions went smoothly, and parents had few questions. However, a seemingly innocuous statement by me intended to make parents feel more comfortable in my presence turned out to have the opposite effect on one of the Wildcats’ parents:

I began as I always do, having the spiel pretty well down by now. I told the assembly (which was really only 9 people) about what I was going to be doing for the season, that everything was voluntary, and that my primary concern was protecting their privacy, etc. Finally, I remembered to tell them that I had a volunteer form on file with the league, meaning that I had had a background check, was allowed by the league to be on the fields, etc. At this point, one parent interjected that if my research were primarily concerned with parents, then there was no reason I would need to be on the field with the girls. Alana interjected on my behalf, saying that my interest in on-field activities would most likely be confined to discussion and observations of coaches’ tactics and parents’ understandings and reactions to those tactics. She also looked over to me to make sure I had not taken offense to the man’s objections. I assured everyone that I had not, and the matter was dropped (Fieldnotes)
The incident was a good reminder of how my words could be interpreted in completely unintended ways. I had worried that these statements might be an indication that this particular parent would not be cooperative with the study. While he never raised any formal objections (that I ever heard) and was generally cordial to me going forward, I was never able to get him to sit down for a formal interview, as he was both difficult to schedule and did not show up for the one appointment I was able to make with him.

Once I had established my presence on the team, I began to try and get to know the parents individually. This process was enhanced on teams where I already knew a parent or two from the Board of Directors. They were able to act as both a further legitimation of my presence as well as someone able to introduce me to other parents. Lawrence’s wife, Christina was especially helpful in this regard during my first season. Christina was a tall and outgoing woman with straight brunette hair in her early 30s who also worked, like her husband, for the metropolitan police department. Her step-daughter played for the Wildcats and her son played for the Twins. Since I had already met her through Lawrence, she was extremely helpful in pointing out people she knew, people with whom she had shared a team before, and people with whom she had established a greater-than-acquaintance relationship. She introduced me to many parents on both teams. Where I had to make my own introductions, I tried to limit my initial interactions to practices, where parents were generally less engaged than in games. This was not always possible, however. Many parents – except for the Twins’ parents\(^2\) – merely dropped their children off at practices and used the time to run other errands. When this was the case, I

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\(^2\) It is league policy that, in the Pre-Tee-Ball division, parents were required to stay for the entirety of both practices and games. Not only does this make the players feel more comfortable, but the practices and games last no more than 45 minutes, and it is not a particular imposition for parents to stick around. Some parents with multiple children and practices made arrangements with coaches, but by-and-large, parents were present at practices.
attempted to introduce myself before or after games. Introductions were always aimed at minimizing the intrusion on their enjoyment of and attention to their child’s playing. More difficult, however, were the parents who watched practices and games from their cars. These parents were sometimes intentionally avoiding contact with other parents and, by extension, researchers. Approaching them required a purposive determination to violate their express desire to watch practices and games in as close to a private setting as possible. I always dreaded these introductions, and sometimes put them off longer than necessary. However, for the most part, I found these and other parents were generally willing to talk with me, engage in my questions, and generally tolerated my presence and my conversation throughout the season.

Eventually, I began to notice subtle signs of acceptance within both parent groups as well as with board members. Parents began greeting me with the latest news from the team, or with board gossip that they had heard. Board members began seeking out my opinion on contentious board issues, or asked for my help in league administration matters (once I had joined the board). For the men (and a few players), one particular indication of their acceptance of me was the way we shook hands. For men with whom I was unfamiliar a normal handshake accompanied our greetings. However, for more familiar and friendly participants, the form of handshake changed. Rather than a simple handshake, greetings consisted of a hand slap (at handshake level) followed by a soft fist bump. I only ever observed this greeting among males, familiar and friendly males in particular. As I got more involved in the setting and more settled and friendly with the people within, I measured my level of acceptance with the men in the group by how they greeted me. It was a useful indicator.
DATA GATHERING, “SAMPLING,” AND ANALYSIS

In the simplest terms, I gathered data through two tried-and-true methods employed in qualitative studies: participant observation and interviewing. As a supplement, I also utilized official league records, such as meeting minutes as a memory check and to establish accurate timelines where necessary. Of course, neither of those terms is as straightforward as they might appear at first blush. There are perils associated with participating in the situation within which one is observing, questions about the level or amount of participation, and the effects of that participation on the setting itself. For that matter, the word “observation” has its own freight to bear, particularly the effects of observation on the behavior of those being studied. For its part, the process of interviewing – formal and in-depth as well as informal and conversational – cannot be presented without discussion. Someone (preferably the researcher carrying out the project) must ask questions about issues like impression management in the interviewing situation (Goffman 1959), and about the difference between spontaneously offered statements and solicited comments from participants (Becker and Geer 1960). Further questions extending from these foundational issues surrounding participant observation and interviewing involve the manner of choosing whom to interview, whom to observe (widely understood as “sampling” procedures), what counts as “data”, and how the researcher analyzes such data. In this section, I recount how I navigated these issues throughout the project as well as how this project both avoided and fell victim to some of the issues inherent in such a data-making scheme.

Ethnography and Focused Ethnography

One of the foremost contributions of the Chicago School was the commitment of its scholars to study the city in situ, to participate as directly and as closely as possible in the lives of the people they were studying. While ethnography has its roots in anthropological endeavors, participant
observation closer to home in community settings rests historically in the community studies of members of the Chicago School, such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Nels Anderson, Louis Wirth, and Harvey Zorbaugh (to name a few). The idea was the same as it was for anthropologists: to understand anyone’s life, researchers must get some experience with the experience of simply living it (to the extent that that is actually possible). The tradition in urban and community sociology of employing ethnographic methods continued, and has produced some of the most enduring and engaging works in the discipline. The process of getting intimately involved in the lives of people in order to acquire an empathetic understanding of their lives and worldviews is difficult technically, fraught with ethical and personal dilemmas, and unlikely to produce accounts that are, on face, generalizable to the population at large. However, these methods, particularly participant observation and in-depth interviewing, fraught though they may be, are particularly well-suited to answer certain types of research questions.

Ethnography is “fieldwork committed to describing the social and cultural worlds of a particular group. Such descriptions are sensitive to the interpretations recognized and acted on by members of that group” (Emerson 1988:19). What is noteworthy about this definition is the insistence that the interpretations of the people being studied are paramount in understanding their social and cultural worlds. At its core, ethnography is about discovering meaning. Geertz (1973) used the example of learning to distinguish different types of eye movements, particularly winks (which have all sorts of meaning) and eye twitches (which may have biomedical meaning, but are less important socially). Geertz also set the tone for a number of ongoing debates about the nature of knowledge production in the ethnographic enterprise, the situated location of the ethnographer within the research, and its influence on the data produced. The behavior of respondents must be reconciled with the ways in which they specifically construct their own
reality. As such, a multiplicity of methods ought to be employed in order to capture the ways in which behaviors often exist in contradistinction from the individual’s accounts of them. The multitude of methods available to the qualitative researcher allows for triangulation through supplementation (Taylor and Bogdan 1998).

Ethnography has traditionally attempted to uncover institutions, groups, or societies as a whole, culturally speaking. The object of this project was not to uncover the cultural system operating in youth sports facilities, nor was it to uncover the culture surrounding youth sports. Instead, it was an attempt to uncover the characteristics of youth sport that facilitate or inhibit social tie and social capital formation amongst the adults who sustain it and the process by which this occurs. As such, it perhaps requires clarification as to where this project fits in with the ethnographic enterprise schematically. As a complementary subfield of ethnography in general, focused ethnography is a methodological tool that allows for the study of more specific areas of social settings. It also allows for the designation of the research problem and specific (though limited) advance research questions (Richards and Morse 2007). Further, as Knoblauch (2005) elucidated, focused ethnographies are important in increasingly fragmented and specialized societies, that they are appropriate where the researcher is familiar with the culture that encompasses the research setting, and that they are particularly well-suited to allow the researcher to delve into specific sub-areas of the research setting, “Thus, rather than study, e.g. the police as a field, one may focus on the question as to how police officers do their rounds” (ibid.:6). In this project, rather than study the VCLL as an entirety, I decided to focus on whether and how social capital formation occurred amongst parents participating in the league. As a study of the particular forms of interaction and processes that lead to social capital formation, this study is an example of focused ethnography.
Participant Observation

Participant observation is the *sine qua non* of ethnography. It involves the “…social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:24). Participant observation requires the researcher to take a role in the setting (anywhere from full observer to full participant) and use that position to generate data, either from observing, or through the interactions he or she has with other participants in the same setting. Utilizing this method produces data dealing specifically with the behavior of actors in a social setting. In some cases, where informal conversations take place, the researcher can delve into details of how actors negotiate the reality of the setting; but mostly, the method’s strength is in the way that “natural” behavior can be gleaned from the actors operating within. Participant observation is a time-consuming and labor intensive method of data gathering and production, but the payoff in terms of the honesty of spontaneous action is well worth the effort.

The term “participant observation” does not in itself capture what the researcher actually does in the field. There are varying levels of both participation and observation that the term does not specify. In short, the researcher may, “…be a member of the group he studies; he may pose as a member of the group, though in fact he is not; or he may join the group in the role of one who is there to observe” (Becker and Geer 1960:268). The level of my participation in the group depended on the setting involved. When I was carrying out observations with the teams, my participation was necessarily limited if only because I did not have a child participating in the game. While I pulled for and visibly supported the teams I was observing, my emotional connection to them paled in comparison to the parents involved. While this limited my level of participation in their activities, I participated fully in the conversations they had in the bleachers
and in the overall social life of the team at the fields. With the Board of Directors, I was a full voting member, and my participation was limited by a conscious desire to avoid becoming too embroiled in debates and conflicts, even if I felt strongly one way or the other. Because the emotional currency was different in this setting – that is, the league as a whole rather than to any child or team. I felt like my participation in board activities was closer to that of the rest of the board members.

I observed the VCLL for the 2010 and 2011 spring seasons. In addition, I played a part on the Board during that time, which allowed me access to off-season activities as well. I spent countless hours watching tee-ball, baseball, and softball practices and games from the same places as the parents. I also attended nearly every board meeting between May 2010 and August 2011. Sometimes, this meant I watched practices and games with parents from the bleachers. Sometimes, I watched practices from a parent’s car beyond the outfield fences. Other times, I was at a coach’s home, where practices were occasionally conducted. I observed scrimmages and team parties, parent meetings and rainouts. At all times, I was searching for and observing the phenomenon and the process of relationship building and expression. I participated in conversations amongst the parents. And while I tried not to spark too much discussion myself, my questions occasionally triggered responses from all parts of the bleachers and lively discussion. I tried to be the first one there and the last one to leave no matter what the activity. When my presence was no longer a novelty, I became privy to the gossip channels that permeated team and Board activities, and I listened as intently as possible, asking questions when I believed they would be acceptable. Especially early on, I treated every word and every interaction as a potential avenue to explore (Burawoy et al. 1991). As the study progressed, I began to increasingly filter that which did not seem applicable to what I was finding. On the one
hand, this closes off potentially relevant information germane to the study as well as new avenues of exploration. On the other hand, working without a filter for the entirety of one’s fieldwork is both exhausting and often yields disproportionately little relative to the energy required to gather and analyze it. As I focused, I became increasingly selective.

As returns to both observations and interviews diminished, I began to think about leaving the field site and focusing my energies on analysis and writing. Exiting the field paralleled entering it in that there were two phases: the team and the Board. Exiting the field from a team perspective was straightforward. The season ended, and there was no league-sanctioned reason for those particular parents to be involved with one another anymore. I faded from their view just like most of the other parents on their teams did. Leaving the Board was slightly more involved. I began by indicating that my study was coming to an end in casual conversations with board members, and that when I was finished, I would resign from the Board and end my official affiliation with the league. Some Board members expressed sadness at the news, and one or two attempted to persuade me to stay on even when I was no longer researching the league. I resisted, and I left the league in August of 2011.

Fieldnotes

Spradley (1980) wrote, “The major part of any ethnographic record consists of written fieldnotes” (p. 64). In theory, fieldnotes are a faithful retelling of the day’s observations. They present an accurate and full account of what the observer saw, heard, and thought while in the field. In reality, however, they are partial, selective, and inaccurate accounts of what the researcher thought important as it pertained to their study, “Never a simple matter of inscribing the world, fieldnotes do more than record observations. In a fundamental sense, they constitute a way of life through the very writing choices the ethnographer makes and the stories she tells…”
(Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:16). While the reality of fieldnotes is somewhat disheartening, they are hardly useless. In their construction, the researcher does recount scenes, builds a social world from what they have observed, recalls stories and interactions germane to their research interests, and brackets off their own thoughts and analysis of what they have seen so as to refocus their observations going forward. While they are imperfect as an objective insight of the day’s activities, they allow the researcher to make and analyze data that is the cornerstone of their projects.

Some of the earliest events I attended were multi-hour affairs rich in interaction. I was able to write the fieldnotes for these events soon after leaving the site for the day, but even the multi-page accounts I created were paltry recreations of what actually went on in those rooms and on the field. As I observed more and more at the fields and in the boardroom, I was able to develop a form of shorthand that enabled me to condense routine situations in my fieldnotes, and I was better able to separate the routine from the exceptional. This allowed me to focus my observations better and made for much better fieldnotes going forward.

I was able to easily take notes during board meetings. Several people did, including the league secretary. Given that we all had papers to look through, and many people brought pens with them, my note taking was not out of place in the room, and no one ever asked me about it, except when there was disagreement about something that may have occurred in previous meetings. In such cases, I never allowed anyone to see my written notes (which often had my own bracketed thoughts, memos, and analysis in them) but I did try and answer their question as best as I could. However, in my observations of parents in the bleachers and at practices, I chose not to take notes during my observations. While I believe that, because of my overt research intentions, I would have been able to take notes during observations without drawing too much
attention, I believe that the subtle yet constant reminder of my presence and my purpose would have posed a credible distraction to parents who were only trying to watch a game and cheer on their sons and daughters. I am as torn now about this decision as I was when I was in the midst of my observations. I do not know how much my notes may have suffered because of this decision. Additionally, there are ethical grounds for overt note taking (Dingwall 1980) that I had not considered before the project. I can only compare the fieldnotes I constructed with active note taking (during board meetings) to those constructed without (observations from teams). From that comparison, I believe that those notes created entirely after the fact are only marginally inferior to those where notes were taken actively during the observation. I also believe the latter notes got better as I became more experienced with both observations as well as writing up the field notes. I do not know if this says more about the notes written after the fact or those created during the observation.

**In-Depth Interviewing and Sampling**

The inherent weakness of participant observation is that it relies largely on the interpretations of the ethnographer to divine actors’ reality constructions that inform their behavior. Conversely, the weakness of the in-depth interview is that it allows the respondent a chance to manage their impressions without their behavior acting as a check against that impression, but its strength is in the ability it gives respondents to use make explicit what may only be implicit through observations. Thus, the in-depth interview is an ideal counterpart method to participant observation, as they each address the major weaknesses of the other. Specifically, in the interview process, I sought to explore how people saw their Little League relationships (and their youth sport relationships in general), how they made sense of those relationships, and the role that they and their children played in the building and maintaining of those relationships. By
allowing their interpretations of their actions to be juxtaposed in the analysis with their actual behavior and my own interpretations of such behavior, it was possible to develop a more robust picture of the social setting and compare and contrast the interpretations of their own actions with my own interpretations of those same actions.

I conducted a total of 30 interviews with city officials, league officials and parents. In total, I interviewed 5 parents from the Twins, 5 parents from the Wildcats, 3 parents from the Mariners, 8 parents from the Cubs, and 12 current and former board members. I had initially a far more ambitious interview agenda laid out, which was to consist of interviews with every parent on every team I followed, as well as all board members. It became quickly evident that this was both impossible and unnecessary, though it does leave holes in the conclusions I have drawn from the information available. On the one hand, I found that people will agree to an interview far more easily than they will actually show up for an interview. Small (2009a), drew a similar conclusion, “Of the 100 respondents, 60 hang up on her, 40 agree to do an interview, and 35 follow through with it (Experienced interviewers know these figures to be highly optimistic)” (p. 11). In total, I was “stood up” 9 times for interviews. In none of these cases was I ever able to successfully reschedule an interview. These parents tended to be less involved in their children’s teams, and I was not often able to confront them in the event that they backed out or failed to show up for an interview. Losing out on the vast majority of this less-involved population has substantial consequences for this study (Duneier 2011) that I will cover in depth in the discussion. On the other hand, as I interviewed more and more parents (as well as board members) and focused my questions to the emergent ideas, I experienced declining marginal utility on each new interview. I achieved some measure of “saturation” (Glaser and Strauss

3 The numbers add up to 33 because of the overlap between categories (a parent for the Twins also being a board member, e.g.)
1967). On that basis, while I lamented the loss of a significant segment of the population, I also felt that I was on solid ground to make certain claims about parents participating in Little League.

Interviews ranged between 40 minutes and 3 hours, depending on the gregariousness of the interview subject, their time limitations, and their positions within the league. Interviews were usually conducted in public places such as restaurants, coffee shops, or the baseball fields themselves. Others were conducted in the subject’s homes, and one was conducted in my own home. In one instance, a public interview became a double interview as another board member joined our table and, with permission of all parties involved and a signed consent form, he began contributing to the interview. It was the only instance where an interview was conducted in the direct presence of another member of the league. I covered a variety of background topics, sport and league experiences, parent relationships, and social capital exchange (See Appendix A). Between my first and second seasons in the league, I tweaked my interview guide to reflect the changes in my approach and my sharpening focus on particular questions that were emerging in my analysis. Thus, the interviews in the second season tended to be both shorter on average and more helpful for answering the research questions I set out. In general, the interview material was complementary to the observation material in that it both supported generally and added to specifically what I was observing. It also filled in the areas where I could not observe directly what was happening but suspected was happening away from my eyes.

Data Analysis

In ethnographic research, the processes of emergent design and theoretical sampling require that data analysis and data collection occur concurrently. Only then can inquiry and observations become more focused as a picture of the research setting and its actors begins to emerge. While I
coded the initial interviews and observations with an inductive eye and with a keen desire to utilize the language of my participants, the truth is that I had a general idea of what I was looking for when I started. Thus, there was always going to be an element of deductive coding as I was poring over the data. Specifically, I was looking for data that addressed relationship formation and expression, resource exchange, and conflict. While a great many other ways of looking at the data emerged, and I attempted to be sensitive to other readings of the data (inductive coding), these notions dominated the way I viewed the data. Further, because the language of my concepts and constructs differed significantly from those of my participants, I was not able to utilize native language categories as much as I would have liked. While it is true that the shift in proximity from “exotic” cultures to those closer to home has resulted in a de-emphasis on the problems of language, this tendency still leaves subtle differences in language between people within different groups, and the resulting loss of subtlety in interpretation and analysis is significant (Spradley 1979). I was left imposing many of my own linguistic terms on the data I was coding, such as “social capital,” “exchange,” and “benefactors and beneficiaries.” However, I also utilized, where possible, the language adopted by my participants. For example, the use of “kids” rather than “children” utilized in much of this writing comes directly from how parents and board members generally referred to the players. The overall lack of unity in nomenclature between parents even when talking about similar processes underscores first the diversity of the participants in the VCLL as well as the necessity for the researcher to sometimes bring together disparate terminology into a single unifying concept. Ultimately, data analysis at its core requires the researcher to make sense of data created by unique partnerships between the researcher and each individual participant. Where a dominant culture has not taken root, utilizing native language categories for data codes and themes becomes a far more difficult and less useful task.
As categories emerged from the initial data gathering and analysis process, they were used first to further focus the observations and modes of inquiry that I utilized and second to bring together increasingly disparate data into broader unifying themes. During the analysis of the first season’s data, ideas emerged that informed changes in emphasis in both observations and interview guides. Specifically, the idea of differentiating between motivations of benefactors and beneficiaries and the unifying theme of children’s role in creating, maintaining and destroying social capital emerged only after the first season of observation and interview. The process of simultaneous data collection and analysis means that the ethnographic enterprise is actually inductive and deductive at the same time (Lofland 1976). Bulmer (1979) labels this process “retroduction”. Additionally, I began the process of bringing together the initial coding into broader categories or themes. As themes became ever broader, they encompassed a greater breadth of codes and categories until they were large enough to encompass the main theme of child-centered social capital as well as coherent enough to fall within discrete units in the analysis (i.e., “chapters”).

GETTING IT RIGHT – THE PERILS OF VALIDITY, GENERALIZABILITY, AND THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL POSITION ON DATA MAKING AND INTERPRETATION

Origins of a Project

This project, as mentioned above, has roots in my own childhood spent on baseball and soccer fields, and on tennis courts. However, this project was also born of the necessity that begets invention. It is the product of the pragmatism not often spoken about when discussing how research ideas go from the mind to the field to the page. I discuss those origins and how the practical considerations that impacted the nature of this project could also affect its authenticity. The biggest consideration when designing this project was that I was able to be with and contribute to my family. At the time I was ready to write the proposal for this work, I had a wife,
a daughter, and a son on the way. How could my family *not* impact the design of this study? My wife, understanding as she was, had but one request for my fieldwork: she wanted me to undertake the fieldwork in our community, if possible. Given the location of Valley City, this was a valid concern. While I could have conducted the work in the metropolitan area nearby, it would have added an hour or more to every observation (with the drive) and a great deal of expense in the form of gas and auto maintenance. Going into the field in Valley City was a practical concern, but it also made sense for ethnographic purposes. I was able to be more spontaneous with observations. I would often get calls from members of the league telling me that something was going on at the fields, or that they needed an umpire, or that there was an impromptu board meeting. Sometimes, I would meet board members or parents at a restaurant or coffee shop for gossip. Other times, I could go to the fields when I had a spare hour or two and “hang out” in the grand ethnographic tradition. Had I attempted this research in the city, I might have gained some distance from my participants, but I would have lost much, much more in spontaneity and authenticity. People in the VCLL trusted me more because I was invested in their community, as it was also my own. One of the first discussions that took place when I met someone new in the league was “Where do you live?” It was a question that placed me both geographically and socially in town. Geographically, I established that we lived in the town, which made me immediately more visible, more trustworthy, and more accountable to the town and its residents. Socially, I established that by living in a newer development near the high school that we were likely new to the area but that we were also solidly middle-class. By locating the fieldwork in my “hometown” I was able to satisfy both the requirements of my personal self as well as satisfy a major criterion of my research self: that I had the legitimacy to study Valley City by virtue of living there as well.
As sociologists, we rarely talk about the impact on our research of practical concerns such as these, but in my case, they were important. The tension between our professional and personal lives is certainly handled differently by each researcher. Doubtless there are some researchers who are able and willing to disregard their own family situations in order to carry out their ideal research. I have not met those researchers. We are, after all, humans with feelings, emotions, and attachments. I cannot say with any certainty how much my overarching themes of “sport and social capital” may have been compromised by my decision to organize this project around familial and practical concerns. I do believe, however, that youth sport fields are ideal settings for studying this connection. Is that a post hoc rationalization? I am not 100% certain. Even if it is, however, it does not inherently make that statement any less true. I was able to observe social capital creation and consumption in the VCLL, and I believe that youth sport in general is the site of much social capital building for parents, based on a survey of the literature, my own observations, and conversations with parents. The extent to which my practical concerns affected the design of the project was enormous. The extent to which those design decisions adversely impact the overall conclusions I draw from the study are those up for debate. I would like to think that I designed a study that addressed the relevant questions and provide answers that are authentic to this setting and have applicability to other settings, especially child-centered organizations outside of Valley City. Ultimately, this is up to the reader to decide. Through the presentation of my analysis, however I hope to present a credible account of this process that resonates with those who have been involved with youth sport (as a player and/or a parent) and a plausible one to those who have not had such contact with youth sport.
My Social Position

In her book *Observing the Observer* (2011), Shulamit Reinharz documented the elements of her personal self that she felt had some impact on her research self. Her examination of aging issues on an Israeli kibbutz was fraught with potential peril because of her outsider status, as a Jewish woman (of a particular age), as a mother, and as a potential member (among others). While the kibbutz may have nothing on the Valley City Little League in terms of politics and intrigue, it is a place where overt distinctions may play a larger role in the perception of the researcher, especially traits such as religious affiliation, gender, political affiliation, and outsider status. The point, however, remains: our statuses, both ascribed and achieved, impact not only our subjects’ reactions to and interactions with us, but also the way we selectively record, interpret, and analyze our observations, conversations, and interviews. There is danger in studying those who are much like us (in terms of taking interpretations for granted and making assumptions; that is to fail to exoticize the mundane) and in those too different from us (see Duneier 1999 for another take on the impact of social position on the relationship between observer and observed). In the VCLL, I believe that elements of my own position impacted how I interacted with parents and board members and how they viewed me as an interloper in their midst. In particular, my statuses as: an outsider, an academic (and a social capital scholar in particular), a political liberal, a parent, and a white non-Latino all impacted how I carried out the project. Additionally, all of these statuses (and certainly more that I have not noticed) affected the type of project I produced, the data I was able to generate, my interpretations of it, and my writing of it.

To the long-standing residents of Valley City, I was something of an outsider. On the other hand, from the perspective of community researchers, I would likely be considered something of an insider. We moved to Valley City late in 2007 and, outside of knowing a few
neighbors, were relatively isolated socially in town. Our daughter did not attend regular daycare and was too young to play sports or engage in much independent social activity (she was barely a year and a half old at the time). By the time I began my fieldwork in the spring of 2010, not much had changed for us socially. Between family living in the area and work and school, we were not integrated into community life. We were not a part of local politics or any organized social groups or voluntary organizations. For my time in Valley City, I was still a cipher. This is a double-edged sword in a community like Valley City. On one hand, I had to start from scratch in obtaining permission and contacts to enter the field site and the VCLL. I vividly remember using the internet to look up various city officials and cold-calling them to speak with them about my project. I utilized the same method to engage Javier in the project as well. On the other hand, my status as an outsider meant that I was also not tangled up in any complicated community history that included no small amount of animosity as well. The family histories of Valley City contain generation-spanning grudges as well as friendships. As league Treasurer and longtime resident Marilyn explained to me:

When you grow up in the same town where you decide to raise your kids, people don’t forget everything you did when you were little. Like, I still kind of look at some people and think, “She still sees me as the 14-year old that didn’t have my clothes for cheerleading practice,” or something, you know. Like sometimes you look at people and you still know that they saw you at embarrassing moments. Cheerleading tryouts, I fell. You know, people still remember that (laughing). And these are the people I grew up with.

And in [another town], it was kind of like small, but nobody knew you. Nobody knew your history. You could be this whole different- nobody knew that you were a dork. Nobody knew that, and… that’s the only bad part, you know? And too, um.. because so many people know so many people around here, sometimes families that don’t like each other, it’s just inherent for their kids to grow up and… kind of be directed away from one another.

As an outsider, I could claim an ignorance that was both authentic and very helpful to the project, as I was blissfully unaware of the history I had walked into. While it was a hindrance in
the beginning of the project, it was I believe useful later on when I needed informants and interview subjects to spell everything out for me.

As an academic, I found myself separated from many of the people involved in the VCLL. Some, like Nicholas, a Canadian transplant with a Ph.D. in biochemistry who married a lifelong resident, had been involved heavily in academia in the past. For the most part, however, parents in the VCLL were unfamiliar with the process of graduate work. Those that had gone to college had either stopped before getting degrees or had stopped at an Associate’s or a Bachelor’s degree. There were a great many parents who had “gone back to school” and were pursuing various programs of study as older undergraduates. For the most part, this did not produce problems so much as it produced questions about the nature of the project, particularly its scope. For most parents, I was there to write “a paper” of varying lengths. For those who asked more questions, I resorted to saying that I was writing a book, which gave them a better idea of the scope of the project. For those with more advanced academic backgrounds, there were the usual questions about my hypotheses, control groups, and the like. It was not always easy to explain the vagaries of the qualitative social scientific process to those with backgrounds in biology or nuclear science, and I often felt after those conversations that I was failing to make a good account of myself as a social scientist. I also feared that this perception would carry over into my data generation, but if it did I failed to notice how.

It was also difficult to get across the theoretical and intellectual foundations of what I was studying: sport and social capital. The term “social capital” carried no weight with league parents and board members, so I generally utilized the better-understood if more vague term “parental relationships” leaving out for the moment their material and social benefits that make up social capital. Even still, there was a common misconception that I was there to study “crazy parents”
and I was subject to many second- and third-hand stories of poor parental behavior in parents’ past sport experiences. Parents were at their most enthusiastic regarding the study was when I would miss “drama” from games in other towns, when the competition and conflict elements of Little League would get the better of parents. It seemed that any game I missed was the game where the most drama was occurring, especially with the Cubs, where it became something of a running joke. If I was present at a game, the parents relaxed, knowing that there would be no conflict because I was there to witness it. The three games I missed that season were the same three with the most intrigue, conflict, and poor behavior from Cubs parents, opposing coaches, and board members from both Valley City and other towns in the area.

As a social capital scholar, I feel that my interpretation of certain actions and situations may have been different than those of my participants. In particular, I began to get the feeling that where my informants and interview subjects talked about social capital in an unsolicited way, they did so negatively. Most often, they referred to these instances as “politics.” It took me quite a while and much probing to understand what parents meant when they talked about “politics,” especially where it referred to the Board of Directors. I can distill it in a very clichéd (but also very apt) manner: It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. In some ways this is the essence of social capital, but it is also the essence of one element (exclusion) of the “dark side” of social capital (Portes and Landolt 2000), or social capital with negative externalities. To many of the people I interviewed, utilizing personal contacts to accomplish goals was often seen in a negative light, especially where Little League was involved. Parents talked about how board members only joined to get this child on the All-Star team, or how coaches on the board always got the best players, or that board members’ kids always got the best coaches, and so forth. They
intimated that this was because they had forged social connections through the board, and that they were using those connections for their own benefit, and at the expense of other children.

I believe this may have made them less likely to view their own participation as a potential social capital resource for themselves and their family, and also why there was such a push for each individual parent to be seen as being involved “for the kids.” “For the kids” was to be read with the unspoken conclusion to the sentence, which was always “not for myself.” This made instances of social capital creation and utilization more difficult to uncover. There is also danger that what I viewed positively they may have viewed negatively. While I definitely witnessed many instances of the “dark side” of social capital, I also witnessed acts of great kindness, dedication, and sacrifice for the league. Where the parents of the VCLL may have seen these as natural extensions of volunteering for the league (and thus not an example of social capital), I saw the flip side of the social capital coin. One side was positive; the other side was “politics.”

As a political progressive in a small town with perhaps more than its fair share of reactionaries, I found myself disengaging from a few discussions, avoiding a few others, and biting my tongue on a regular basis. As a sociologist, however, it was often presumed that I was a political liberal, and if asked directly, I never hid the fact. I was also not immune to the temptation to engage in political discussions. Usually, these were in good fun. But there were those for whom my own political leanings were the subject of conversation, if not active scorn and distrust. Early in my research, I was waiting on a coach to finish practice. When I got to the bleachers, I encountered Melody and we began to make small talk. My notes are sketchy on the

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4 The county had voted for George W. Bush in 2004 but had, by an extremely narrow margin, been carried by Barack Obama in 2008.
turn of events that led to our discussion of politics, but it began as a complaint of Melody’s that playing time on some of the teams was not based solely on merit, even on competitive teams for which there were no minimums for playing time.\(^5\) When the discussion turned to politics, she expressed views that I would characterize as extremely conservative. We argued back and forth for a good 10 to 15 minutes before the coach ended practice and I was able to conduct my interview. I do not know if that conversation had anything to do with her later reluctance to interview with me, but it was a source of rather regular comments from her during our chance meetings at the fields. I believe it to have been good-natured, but I cannot be sure.

Politics was also a more prominent issue with the parents on the Cubs team during the 2011 season. Early on during my time with the team, Sierra, the college-educated and professionally employed wife of Cubs manager Brent, expressed her unease with sociology as an academic discipline, “…owing mainly to her conservatism (her word, not mine) and that sociology was a liberal discipline where others were blamed for individual problems. She, on the other hand, preferred to blame individuals for their own poor lot in life, and said that people should think about taking responsibility for their own actions” (Fieldnotes). At the Opening Day ceremony that the league holds every year, Sierra and I had another chance to interact politically. The league had, in 2010, offered up the Pledge of Allegiance during the ceremony in both English and Spanish, a nod to the 60\% Latino population that resides in Valley City (incidentally, the elementary school my daughter attended also recited the Pledge in both English and Spanish daily). However, in 2011, the pledge was recited in English only. When I remarked on it, Sierra told me that she was glad, and that when they did it at school, she always sat down

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\(^5\) In Little League, players must play both a minimum amount of time in the field as well as have a minimum number of times to bat during each game. More competitive leagues usually do not have such provisions, and playing time is at the sole discretion of the coaches.
because it was “stupid” and “We’re in America!” I took the time to remind her that, in the United States, there was no official language. According to my fieldnotes for that day, she glared at me, and I smiled.

While these particular parents held political views diametrically opposed to mine in many ways, they were also some of the most willing, helpful, and useful informants I had during the course of the project. Sierra in particular was extremely helpful in pointing out relationships on the board and on other teams, explaining how people knew each other and how their families had known each other for generations. She also became the source of much board news when she finally joined late in the 2011 season as I was wrapping up my fieldwork. As we were both involved in the PTO at our local elementary school, even after I left the field, she was a wellspring of league gossip and information, and I learned from her that the power struggle that had characterized board relations since I had gotten involved in 2010 was still going strong by the time I left Valley City for good in the spring of 2012.

One of my earliest and most persistent concerns when entering the field of the VCLL was that I would not be trusted as a stranger around other people’s children. Parents are naturally protective of their children, and “stranger danger” (Gill 2007) and the sexual exploitation of children (Martin, Luke, and Verduzco-Baker 2007) are among parents’ greatest fears. I attempted to assuage these fears with a number of strategies. First, as a condition of my entry into the field site, I filled out a volunteer application with the league and underwent the same background check as every coach, Board member, and volunteer in the league. Formally, this should have given me the same credibility as any other volunteer. I found, however, that without a more “credible” reason for being at the fields, no one was particularly impressed with my volunteer credentials. Parents did not seem to extend to me any additional consideration, and the
volunteer application alone did not seem, by itself, to have much of an effect in easing the natural fears of parents. While I may have been viewed initially with less suspicion than a total stranger, I believe I was viewed with slightly more suspicion than a typical volunteer/parent. Second, when introducing myself to parents during early practices, I made sure to emphasize two key attributes of myself and the research: (1) I lived in the community, and (2) that children were not a focus of the study, and that I would never speak with their children without their permission and their presence in the conversation. I wanted to embed myself in Valley City in the parents’ minds as much as possible and distance myself in their minds from the on-field activities. During the course of the research, I only found myself on the field during practice when I was talking with a manager or an assistant coach and during games only as an umpire.

Finally – and I believe this was perhaps the most effective provision – I established myself as a parent. I accomplished this in different ways with the teams. With the Twins, because their children were the same age as my daughter, I engaged in a great deal of pre-school and kindergarten talk. We spoke about the perils of choosing an appropriate pre-school for our kids, and our apprehensions about them entering kindergarten in the fall. For older teams such as the Wildcats and the Cubs, I brought my family to occasional games and introduced them around. I believe this, more than any other strategy, made me a more acceptable presence with the teams. There are issues with involving one’s family in fieldwork, issues that are not readily discussed (Reinharz 2011). In particular, they can be distracting (Fine 1993). In one instance, I brought my 4-year old daughter to a Wildcats game, and she spent her time (and therefore I spent

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6 The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University had, in fact, given me permission to speak with children on the condition that they were of a certain age and that their parents signed off on the conversation and were present during the interview. As the focus of my research was on the parents rather than the children, my only conversations with players were both rare and informal.
most of my time) at the playground rather than rooted to the game. However, this was not always the case, and I believe that the investment was well worth it. Another time, I brought my entire family to a Cubs game and introduced them around. While I did not do much in the way of observations during that game, parents were able to contextualize me within the community, and my family became a topic of small talk and a conversational gambit for parents who may not have known how to approach me otherwise. I also got to know several other parents through my participation in the local PTO. Rooting myself firmly in the community and allowing a little of my own personal self to show in the field went a long way toward establishing rapport with both parents and board members. As it turned out, I probably did not have to take my family to the VCLL parents. We found ourselves running into them all about town. Being naturally gregarious, my daughter made easy friends with other children and became very helpful in outside socialization. She also played host to another child when their parent came to our house to interview. This was important, because some of the interview material was sensitive, as it dealt with the board conflict and rumors of a rather salacious nature. Sometimes, the separation of our research selves from our personal selves is a detriment to research, especially research in a family setting such as the VCLL. Establishment as a member of my own family greased the wheels of my acceptance and of the parents’ and board members’ trust in my stated intentions.

As I have stated already, the ethnic composition of Valley City as of the 2010 Census was approximately 58% self-identified as Latino compared with 42% identified as “Not Hispanic or Latino” (United States Census Bureau 2010). In my conversations with parents and board members, there is an undercurrent of ethnic tension that does not often outwardly manifest. As a member of the white population in Valley City, I was only able to capture part of this underlying tension. Clearly in my interviews, there is an element of white tension with the dominant Latino
culture in Valley City. I am unaware of any concomitant tension felt by Latinos at the increasing population of whites in the city. However, I was able to detect some racially-motivated discomfort between the Latino population and the relatively absent African American population in Valley City (they make up only 2% of Valley City’s population, and are virtually absent from the VCLL). Whether this tension between Latinos and an absent population was a proxy for tension with the white population is not clear. However, because so much of local politics was Latino-dominated, the discomfort may have been felt more acutely by whites, who often spoke with me about feeling like outsiders in the community, or felt as though they had been discriminated against during their tenure in Valley City. That the president of the league (Joshua) was one of the league’s only African-American members and was also the source of major conflict in the league may have been coincidental. The members of the opposition group (all Latino) went out of their way to establish two issues about their conflict with Joshua: 1) it was not racially motivated, and 2) they were absolutely certain that he trying to “make it a race thing.” In my role as a white observer and researcher, I am certain that I was not privy to all sides of the ethnic tensions in the town and in the league. I was not able to penetrate whatever feelings Latinos in the league may have had about the white population of the league. White parents were far more forthcoming with their stories, which were always situated in the larger town’s context rather than that of the league. I can guess that Latino parents and board members had specific feelings about the white population, and chose, if they mentioned it at all, to do so in the context of their conflict with the African-American member of the board. I can only guess also that they were not comfortable enough with me to voice their opinions about the white population in Valley City.
Researcher Role and Relationships

Of the many negotiations a researcher must undertake in the field, the role they will play is one of the most important. This issue can have far-reaching effects on who they meet, how they act in the setting and how people react to them, either as active participants or passersby. Because I was also studying in two distinct settings (the fields and the boardroom), I was constantly negotiating the role I was playing with my participants. My goal at practices and games was to seem open and accessible at all times, to seem engaged with conversation but not to contribute too much to them. This was not always easy, for two reasons: one, my presence in the league without a child meant that many people saw me as an “objective” observer, and two, my relationships with informants placed me in the line of fire during the great struggle for control of the Board that largely took place during the 2010 and 2011 seasons. With the teams, I was able to negotiate the “objective” role by offering non-specific opinions or by pleading ignorance. I compensated for my presence by attempting to help out where I could, such as helping with scoring games or with umpiring in the event that umpires did not show up for games (which happened surprisingly frequently).

Much more difficult, however, was taking on an inoffensive role in the boardroom. Part of this was because I walked directly into a major power struggle in the league, and I later found out I was seen as a potential ally (and thus enemy) to both sides. I wanted to avoid taking sides at all costs because I wanted to understand the views of each side. That part was easy, as I employed sage advice, “Throughout, I maintained the attitude of one willing to be convinced that the person addressing me was on the side of right and justice” (Dingwall 1980:880, quoting Rosalie Wax). However, appearing to be a neutral party to both sides was extremely difficult, and I failed miserably in the beginning. The conflict between factions of the board exploded
between my first and second seasons. During that time, I was receiving a great deal of information from one of the principals involved in the conflict. Because of this, I began to be seen as their ally. This created a great deal of consternation when I began trying to schedule interviews with members of the other coalition. Members of that faction became hostile to my overtures, and it took a couple of weeks of intense negotiation and a healthy dose of serendipity to change their stance. I tried to stay friendly with them, and tried not to take their sudden reticence too personally, “You should try to provide hostile informants with opportunities to change their minds. Continue to be friendly without pushing them into interaction” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:57). In all of those interviews, subjects mentioned that they had seen me as an ally to their enemy and were thus reluctant to talk with me in fear that I would distort their words and their side of the story:

   **Interviewer:** Well, what is it that makes you think that… um, that I support him?

   **Sonya:** Cause you have no… um, people that don’t support him usually have comments and things that they say to him. If you’ll notice the comments and things like that.

   **Interviewer:** What do you mean?

   **Sonya:** Oh, just like on certain things like that day, that meeting. Is, it’s just like what people were saying, and things like that… when things were going down… and, and, you just sat back. And I’m going, “Okay, I guess you’re with him.”

In the end, I spoke with all members of both factions and was able to (I believe!) reestablish a neutral image with the board. This was only made possible by a completely serendipitous happening during the middle of an infamous board meeting. During that meeting, many of the simmering tensions of the past 6 months came to a head in the form of public airing of personal (but not technically private) information about Joshua’s criminal background, coupled with insinuations that he was involved in the embezzlement of league funds. The tension boiled over, and when she had finally had enough, Marilyn left the meeting early. I had been having trouble
getting the opposition faction to speak with me, either conversationally or formally, and so I took the opportunity to follow Marilyn out of the meeting to speak with her about telling their side of the story. I had also recently become aware that they saw my association with Joshua as an endorsement of his position and a repudiation of theirs. In truth, Joshua had been passing me emails and text messages about board happenings for some time. I do not know for sure whether it was in an attempt to win over my political favor or because I was researching the league. However, for data purposes, I was well-served, by at least one side of the conflict. I was able to persuade Marilyn to speak with me by acknowledging that I had been fed only Joshua’s side of the story, and by convincing her that I was truly interested (which I was) in what she and her group had to say about the conflict. After she agreed to speak with me, she was able to convince both Sonya and Melody to speak with me, which allowed me to get their perspectives on the board conflict.

I cannot be certain whether I would have ever been able to get Melody and Sonya (or Marilyn, for that matter) to interview with me had I not followed Marilyn out of that meeting, but I do know that it would have taken far longer and would have been far more difficult. She actively worked on my behalf once I had interviewed her and she knew the types of questions I asked. Social capital, indeed! However, when we were speaking, I found out that she had agreed to interview with me based on a misinterpretation of my intentions. Marilyn mistakenly assumed that I had come down out of the meeting with her to check on her psychological well-being, which I had not:

I was furious at everybody for not saying anything, including Ron. And I said it’s funny that Sean doesn’t know me, walked me to my car. Can you tell me how that happened?

Except for Leanne, who was also a parent of a player for the Twins. I had interviewed her previously, and we had established a fairly firm rapport. My association with her, however, was not enough to convince either Sonya or Melody to speak with me as part of an interview.
Um… and I even talked to Leanne and Melody. And I said, “You’re my friends, hello? You let me… go here? What happened here? Friends [that] I have have threatened to kill people for- not kill people, but have threatened to punch people for talking to me like that. But you’re my friends and you let that happen.”

Frankly, I had underestimated the emotional toll that the meeting took on her – and I only gained full understanding of that toll once I had interviewed the entire opposition group – and had only followed her to get a private word with her about the possibility of an interview. I am ashamed to say that I let the deception stand.

Relationships are important not just in gaining legitimate access to groups (such as a team or a board of directors) but because key informants also provide a great deal of insight and inside information that might remain uncovered by the researcher, who can rarely penetrate fully the social worlds they wish to study. There is, however, danger in becoming closely linked with critical informants, “Close relationships are essential in field research. The right key informant can make or break a study. However, you have to be prepared to stand back from relationships formed early in a study if and when circumstances demand it” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998:55). Their enemies become your own, and your access can become restricted if you are seen as too closely allied with a particular informant (Reinharz 2011). This happened to me, and I was lucky to escape the association that others had built up between Joshua and myself.

At the same time, I became genuinely concerned for the league and its well-being. I met many wonderful people who simply wanted their children to have a place to learn the game, to enjoy themselves, and to learn lessons about life that sport is capable of teaching. I met many more sincere people than cynical people. I met far more people who were involved with the league for “the right reasons” (which always centered on the welfare of the kids) than for their own gratification. I came to want for the league what they wanted. As the research wore on, I began to offer more of myself, my opinions, and my time and energy to the welfare of the
league. This is not uncommon amongst ethnographers, “Nearly all ethnographers feel torn at times between their research commitments and their desire to engage authentically those people whose worlds they have entered” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:20). Some of these people became my friends. After all, I lived in Valley City too. I was subject to all sorts of kindness from people within the VCLL both inside and outside of the research environment. I participated in activities that were purely social (such as a fantasy football league). Over-identification with the research setting and its population is a major danger. Where there was major conflict, however, it was very difficult not to take sides. I tried to cope by treating everything I was told as conjecture, even that which I was fairly certain was true. The Thomas theorem holds particular value in situations like these. By engaging in people’s reactions and perceptions of various situations, rather than trying to gauge the veracity of those rumors, I was able to increase their trust in me, as I was not seen as judgmental or prying into their personal lives. I also felt better about my own analysis of their actions and motivations, because I was more interested in their perspective than “getting to the bottom of the situation.”

*Is this all true then?*

Since the end of World War II, qualitative sociologists and ethnologists have engaged themselves in a seemingly endless debate over several issues of qualitative work, including (but certainly not limited to): validity and generalizability, objectivity, and authority. In this section, I discuss these issues in more detail and how they relate to this project. Where applicable, I also talk about what steps I have taken to ameliorate these concerns in this project. In other situations,

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8 The Thomas theorem holds that, “If men define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” It was formulated in 1928 by W.I. Thomas and D.S. Thomas (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572), though it is generally credited only to William and not to Dorothy.
I will have to make do with an acknowledgement of the problem as inherent in the study design and execution.

Validity and Generalizability

Validity and generalizability are much-contested terms in qualitative inquiry. While the remainder of the issues to be covered in this section are often described as threats to the validity of a project (Maxwell 1996), others have questioned the utility of the terms altogether for use in qualitative research, opting for alternative terms such as credibility, applicability, and consistency (Lincoln and Guba 1995) or authenticity (Guba and Lincoln 2008). This is a logical conclusion of the decline of positivism in sociology and the attendant rise in antifoundationalism (ibid.) and similar movements. That there are multiple realities is well-established. Qualitative studies founded on notions of positivism (or even post-positivism) are increasingly rare. At the same time, researchers are not simply going into the field and “making it up” as they go along either. What we are really trying to get through are second and third-order interpretations in our work. When I spoke with someone about their experiences, I made interpretations of their interpretations of their own experience. Their experience was filtered through their own personal biographies and I interpreted their words and actions based at least partially on my own as well. Those were second-order interpretations (Emerson 1988). When parents and board members spoke of others in the league (and they often did), it added another layer of interpretation, making my own a third-order interpretation. Layers upon layers of meaning attend any given social situation. What criteria then are given in order to evaluate this particular study, and how might the reader know that such criteria have been achieved?

One the one hand, if we accept the term “validity” in a “commonsense” manner to indicate credibility or “accuracy” (Maxwell 1996), then there are useful ways to try and account
for potential threats to validity. Even if one doesn’t accept the tenets of validity and
generalizability as goals in qualitative inquiry, these still make good practice in determining
whether or not the researcher has told a story to which their participants can relate. First, the
researcher must make account (to the best of their ability) their own backgrounds (both academic
and personal) and presuppositions that attend them to the field. This is commonly understood as
bracketing. In the above sections, I have accounted for what I believe to be the most relevant
personal and research-oriented characteristics of my own biography that has impacted the study.
As I cannot “fix” those characteristics in any conventional way, I acknowledge them and attempt
to assess their potential (and actual) impact on the study. By doing so, it is hoped that those
impacts are minimized. Second, triangulation of data involves utilizing multiple data-generating
methods to account for the weaknesses of any particular method. I have discussed above why I
believe participant observation and in-depth interviewing complement one another quite well in
this setting. Their strengths help to account for the weaknesses of the other, and they provide
tests for the accuracy of the other. The league documents provided a good check on the
memories on the participants and helped to establish a timeline of the critical events in the larger
Board conflict.

Two other tests on the data would be invaluable to this study: member checks and the
search for negative cases. Member checks allow the participants in the study to comment on the
work that has been done in the field. It is a chance to see if the interpretations of the researcher
concur (or at least make sense) to the members of the site itself. It is a practice advocated by
various researchers (e.g., Duneier 1999; Maxwell 1996) and force a semblance of accountability
to the people who have opened their lives to study and examination. However, they can also act
as a chilling agent to what information the researcher can share. Additionally, if interpretations
differ between researcher and participant, whose viewpoint is privileged? A subject in Ann Arnett Ferguson’s (1991) ethnographic study of a collective bakery captured this sentiment, “One of the founding members said that my paper just goes to show that no outsider can really capture the reality of the bakery” (p. 131). If there are risks of reactive effects simply by virtue of being in the field setting, then certainly those exist in the reading of the finished product as well. What reactions may be given during a reading of the finished product may reflect a reaction against unflattering information, or the inherent “arrogance” necessary for the outsider to believe that they have a privileged place in the interpretive scheme for any given social setting (Reinharz 2011). I do plan to make available to the members of the VCLL the results of this study before attempting to publish any part of it. I believe their comments may offer some corrective to elements in the analysis that could undoubtedly use them. As for the search for negative cases, the reasoning behind such a search is sound, and has been recounted in various forums (perhaps most clearly in Duneier 2011). However, this – by definition – is a difficult population to locate and persuade to participate. In this setting, there are two potential sets of parents who would fit this scheme of negative cases: (1) what I call “Isolates,” those parents whose children play on a team but who are themselves so far removed from the action that they miss nearly all practices and games, and (2) those who have opted out of the youth sport system altogether. I was unable to secure interviews with parental Isolates, though not without trying. Of the times I was stood up for interviews, most of the time, it was a socially isolated parent who failed to show up. It goes almost without saying that the less-involved parents probably have vastly different experiences of youth sport than more-involved parents. This study is weakened by their absence. Any future research into this area needs to take account of both of these populations for their
experiences. The second population was also likely very difficult to locate, and no attempt to do so was made for this project.

Any claim to generalizability in a qualitative study must be taken with a grain of salt. By its very nature, qualitative inquiry has depth, but lacks breadth. These studies do not make claims of representativeness (or if they do, they should not), and even case studies of “typical” cases cannot yield comprehensive conclusions outside of the particular setting studied (Burawoy et al. 1991; Small 2009a). There are also alternative discussions of generalizability. Maxwell (2006) distinguishes between internal and external generalizability, arguing that internal generalizability is established when the findings apply more-or-less equally to all members of the studied population. External generalizability is established when the results of the study can be applied outside of the immediate context. Maxwell advises qualitative researchers that applicable results outside of the context studied is better produced when qualitative researcher establishes theory that can be applied to other areas. Of course, I can make no credible claims to the generalizability of this particular study. However, this does not mean that I feel that this study has no potential applicability outside of Valley City. Personal conversations with colleagues and others involved in youth sport outside of the Valley City area have given me greater confidence in asserting my conclusions within Valley City, but also in asserting that the theory of children and social capital I advance here might well stand up in other youth sport contexts, both outside of Little League and outside of Valley City. Obviously, my assertions will need to be extensively tested and no doubt refined. However, while it would be naïve to assert that the VCLL is a stand-in for every other Little League in the United States, it is equally unlikely that it is so unique as to invalidate completely the claims I make in the following chapters. Those specific conclusions and attendant hypotheses are contained primarily in Chapter 7.
Objectivity

It is axiomatic that social scientists (and really all scientists) cannot be purely objective, “The image of the fieldworker as ‘a self-effacing creature without any reactions other than those of a recording machine’ gave way to that of ‘a human scientist whose own self and relationship with subjects have become important factors in evaluating his observations’” (Emerson 1988:9, quoting Nash and Wintrob 1972). The issue is complicated in this study because I went into the field with an idea of what I wanted to find. Qualitative research is not usually so deductive; or, at least, it claims not to be. In fact, the vast majority of qualitative research is undertaken retroductively (Bulmer 1979), in which researchers work both inductively and deductively at the same time. I was constantly in the field attempting to build theory and alter what I had learned based on available evidence. All the while, however, I was working firmly in the framework of social capital. It was the driving concept behind my observations and interview schedule. This, of course, had an enormous impact on how I viewed, recorded, and analyzed data. That is the embodiment of the subjective perspective. However, it is a disservice to the discipline and the social scientific enterprise to abandon objectivity altogether (Burawoy et al. 1991; Fine 1993). Acknowledging subjectivity is not the same as rejecting objectivity, and vice versa. Instead, researchers have accepted that their values and their theoretical and ideological predilections impact their data. At the same time, I have attempted to be fair in my analysis, and not privilege any one particular interpretation of events and data. Where there was overt conflict, I have attempted to present both sides without judgment. Where there was no overt conflict, I accept that the way I viewed events may have blinded me to many aspects of their content. I could not achieve the (debatably laudable) goal of the tabula rasa. However, even in selectivity,
researchers are obligated to attempt fairness in their presentation and analysis of the relevant data.

**Ethnographic Authority**

In addition to the process of data gathering (or data generating), the researcher must interpret, analyze, make sense of, and ultimately write up the data. It is the extension of the question of validity above, another reason to ask: Why should the reader believe this account? However, in this case, the question shifts slightly, to some version of: Why should the reader believe this account of events any more than any other? There are three major positions regarding the authority of the ethnographic text. The traditional position regards uncritically the ethnographer’s interpretations and analysis as authoritative. Postfoundationalism began to cast, “doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any text an authoritative ‘corner’ of the truth” (Richardson 1993:104). Postmodern, or deconstructive ethnographers forfeit their authority altogether (Kincheloe and McLaren 2009). Certainly, there are alternative interpretations of the VCLL from what I have presented here. A researcher with another agenda could have documented parental behavior, volunteerism, or any number of issues relating to the impact of youth sport on the children themselves. Another social capital researcher could have focused solely on the negative impacts of social capital in the league, or the lack of mobilization of available social capital within the league. I happily join the chorus of scholars who acknowledge that our interpretations are partial, selective, impacted by our biographies, and incomplete. However, if I see omniscience as problematic, I also view forfeiture as such. I do not believe that mine is simply another voice in the multitude of voices in the VCLL, and that my interpretations carry no more

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9 Despite novel and emerging forms of representation, including but not limited to poetry, filmmaking, photography, and purely oral forms of representation, the dominant form of ethnographic presentation and representation remains the written form.
weight than a participant’s, particularly when dealing with the question of relationships and social capital. Klein (1997) sums it up thusly, “If I eschew the idea of the ethnographer as omniscient, I nevertheless still see myself as authoritative as a result of the research I carried out” (p. 264). I view this account of the VCLL not without authority, but with partial authority. To deny the authority of the researcher’s account is to deny our methods, training, the effort we put into our work and, by extension, the entire qualitative research enterprise. The time I spent with the parents of the VCLL has been spent with a conscious effort to obtain information about relationships, and I consider the work contained herein to be narrowly, partially, and selectively authoritative.

ETHICAL ISSUES
Every qualitative study must deal with ethical quandaries, many of which cannot be predicted in advance of the research. In addition to making the IRB process “tricky,” it also forces the ethnographer to think quickly in the event that ethically “dicey” situations pop up. Often, there is not time to contact an adviser or the IRB office for advice; they would not likely have enough insight into the research setting to be much help anyway (Dingwall 1980). The American Sociological Association has a code of ethics, but it is incomplete and largely post hoc in its application (ibid.). There is simply no way to avoid ethical dilemmas in qualitative research, especially participant observation research. If the goal is to embed oneself in the lives of the participants, then the ethnographer cannot shield himself from the unpleasant aspects of those lives. These unpleasant aspects are the basis for most if not all of the ethical quandaries qualitative researchers face. Very few would mind being associated with a “sunshine and rainbows” account of their time in the VCLL. I could probably go without changing the name of the city or the names of the participants. But the account contained herein is not all positive.
There are things in the writing that the participants would likely rather not see. There are many others not contained herein that I know for certain they would rather not see. At every moment, the researcher must decide where the study takes precedence and where the participants take precedence. I found myself making these decisions, particularly in Chapter 6, which deals with negative social capital and is based on conflict, rumor, innuendo, and serious criminal accusations. Nearly all of the ethically dubious situations I encountered derived from this chapter and these events. Specifically, I dealt with four particular ethical issues: (1) making my research intentions known, (2) protecting identity in a very small community, (3) how to report potentially embarrassing information given the extreme difficulty of (2), and (4) beneficence.

What was your topic again?

The debate over the ethicality of covert research may still be ongoing, but largely sociologists have sided with overt research as the strongly-preferred position. However, some manner of deception is often necessary, or at least unavoidable for the ethnographer to carry out their research. This has to do with lingering notions of reactive effects, or the idea that the researcher’s presence affects the behavior of those whom he or she is studying. The nature of this deception has nothing to do with the presence of a researcher as researcher, but instead the nature and purpose of the research itself. We engage in deception when we obscure the nature of the study, and when we allow the misconceptions of our studies remain uncorrected. Fine (1993) refers to this deception as “shallow cover.” While I attempted to explain the purpose of my study as explicitly as possible to anyone who would listen (Fine’s “explicit cover”), inevitably people in the VCLL thought I was there to study “crazy sports parents.” This, in fact, serves the ethnographer’s purpose, “…the researcher trades on the difference between what a subject thinks it’s significant to the sociologist and what turns out, in fact, from the dense stream of utterances
and activity, to be of analytic use” (Duneier 1999:340). Indeed, the popular media images of poor sport parent behavior has colored perceptions of youth sport parents as a whole, even as research indicates that these serious transgressions are very rare (Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Many parents were also happy to recount for me their own stories of such parents and their poor behavior. This behavior always seemed to occur somewhere slightly off-screen, in the annals of their own personal sports histories. I rarely witnessed such poor behavior that I considered it noteworthy. While board members eventually grew to understand the true nature of what I was trying to accomplish, fewer parents of teams I was actively studying did, and very few casual acquaintances thought I was studying anything but the crazy behavior of the rest of them.

One of the challenges in studying a public setting like Little League is that, while many of the “regulars” in the setting knew about my presence and purpose, many “irregulars” did not (Katovich 1987). This meant that my presence was often not fully accounted for in the setting. This was especially clear when studying the Twins and the Mariners. For the Twins, the presence of extended family in the setting meant that at any given game, I was a stranger to several of the members of the crowd. For the Mariners, as the All-Star games increased in stakes, the number of extended family again rose in anticipation of witnessing an important moment in the lives of their family members. I attempted to introduce myself to as many people in attendance as I could without interrupting their enjoyment of the game. Other times, parents took the lead and introduced me to their family members and friends as a researcher. Sometimes they would ask me for more information or details about the project, but most of the time the introduction was sufficient, and they only spoke with me if I initiated conversation with them.

Finally, I was occasionally subject to situations that participants considered “not research” (Reinharz 2011). Participants had a difficult time with the idea that I was always “on,”
always playing the role of researcher. This was particularly salient at gatherings that were purely social for the participants. One such gathering was the draft for a fantasy football league that I participated in during the 2010 football season. The draft took place at the home of one of the board members, and was attended by several board members who were not themselves participating. After the draft took place, I wandered into the kitchen for a snack and some of the board members called me over to the kitchen table to ask if I knew about a potentially embarrassing and extremely personal event that had happened to another board member at the table. I replied that I had heard the rumor but did not know exactly what to think of it. One woman pointed out that this would make great data for “your book,” but another said that since the gathering had nothing to do with the league, that anything said on this night was off limits. I replied simply that any time they were around me, I was researching. I never turned that switch off, and if they wanted me to ignore or disregard something they tell me for research purposes, they needed to tell me explicitly. At any rate, no one retracted the story. This and other situations occasionally made me feel like something of a spy. I cannot be sure if anyone felt this way and curtailed their conversations in front of me, or how self-conscious they were of my presence. However, as many people changed the subject in my presence explicitly to league matters, even outside of the setting, perhaps they did not mind sharing the information, as it was almost never about themselves!

*Protecting Identity*

Anonymity is an extremely tricky topic in qualitative research and discussions regarding the ethics of such research are not always satisfactory. Standard practice is that the researcher attempt to disguise, with some effort, the location and participants of their studies. Ideally, this is to protect the participants from potentially embarrassing or private information coming out that
might be used against them. While some ethnographers such as Mitchell Duneier may disagree, “… in my own work, when I have asked myself whom I am protecting by refusing to disclose the names, the answer has always been me” (Duneier 1999:348), in many cases the only way to secure cooperation of participants is an assurance of anonymity. I find Duneier’s position both narrow and cynical. At the same time, I come to see now how very easy anonymity is to promise and how impossible it can be to deliver (Bosk 2003 [1979]; Christians 2008). The danger comes, of course, not so much from without, but from within. I am not so much worried that a scholar in California or Massachusetts will fund the true identity of Valley City or of participants such as Joshua, Melody, or Brent. However, within the VCLL, I do not believe it is possible to effectively shield identities in this study. Identifying a person in the manuscript as the president of the league is a dead giveaway, and rendering the entire board as equals hides the power dynamic that inheres in the stratified VCLL board system. Likewise, referring to someone as the manager’s wife of a team of 9-10 year olds all but reveals her identity to anyone in the league who paid attention to my presence. I suspect that this is a more common problem in small-group ethnography than is generally discussed, but Ann Arnett Ferguson experienced similar issues when conducting a study of a cooperative bakery, “The bakery was a small, tightly knit organization, as one member described, ‘like a Village: you can't keep any secrets,’ so it would be clear to everyone who I was talking about or even whom I had heard a story from. I was worried that this familiarity, this transparency would cause ill feelings and be divisive among the members” (Arnett Ferguson 1991:129). Likewise, the core board group members (numbering around 13) will almost certainly recognize themselves and the others within the text. Many enterprising parents I spoke with may be able to similarly recognize themselves and other parents. The only defense I can conjure given that information is that I have quoted them
correctly, characterized them fairly, and represented their viewpoints in a way that seems familiar to them.

*Consequences of Imperfect Anonymity*

If informants only have good things to say about the institution and their fellows within it, then the question of anonymity is moot. However, where there is conflict and ill will directed from one party to another, the protection of identity becomes an issue. When my interviews turned to matters of a sensitive nature, I took the time to remind participants that I would be changing their names for the manuscript. The general response could be characterized as flippant. Most respondents stated that they did not care who heard what they had to say, since it was the truth. More than one offered to allow me to use their real names in the account, or to at least let them pick their names so that they would know when I was quoting them in the manuscript. I demurred on the matter, but I now find the attempt to use personal pseudonyms in this case as near-useless endeavor.

Thus, what to do with the potentially explosive information I was handed over the course of the 2010 off-season and throughout the 2011 season? Rumors, innuendo, and accusation of both a criminal and of a more salacious nature rocked the league during this time, and I was made privy to much of it, though to what extent I might never know. Many stories in informal conversation began with some variation of “You don’t know the half of it…” In some cases, I was aware of the “other half” of the story; in others, it was in fact new information. It became difficult to discern what probably happened with what most likely never happened. This was salient, however, because how people reacted to the rumors impacted how they viewed board matters, whom they supported on board personnel issues, and how they conducted their own business within the board and the larger league. In the end, by focusing on the reactions rather
than the veracity of any particular rumor, I hope I was able to sidestep the issue of what “really” happened. On some issues, I am virtually certain that the rumors were true; on others, virtually certain they were false. There were some with such credible and conflicting information that I have no idea what to believe. I began to treat them all equally as rumors, and weighting their importance based on who knew the rumor, how much they were likely to believe it, and how they acted upon that belief. I felt this approach avoided the ethical quandary posed by the impossibility of anonymity in the face of potentially damaging information, and jibed better with the sociological mission, focused as it is not on any “objective” reality, but on the Thomas Theorem: how people construct and act upon their own reality.

Beneficence

The emergence of participatory action research in the 1990s has highlighted the obligations of social scientists to those who have opened their lives to be picked apart and analyzed by researchers. Whereas in 1962 Herbert Gans could write of our obligation not to harm subjects who have graciously (and in some cases reluctantly) allowed us access to segments of their lives, we are more and more reminded that our work should go further. Of what good is what we do if we have no impact on improving the lives of those who have allowed us access in order to publish a paper, a book, or to get a degree or tenure? If access is a bargain (Bosk 2003 [1979]; Taylor and Bogdan 1998), what did or do I have to offer the VCLL and Little Leagues across the country? The explicit asking of this question can cause discomfort for the researcher who does not have a ready answer:

At one point, a local rancher asked: ‘What good will one of these, what did you say, “ethnographic studies,” whatever that is, supposed to do? What will we get out of it?’ Swallowing rather deeply, I countered with a longish speech that I, being relatively young and without authority over the youth, would be able to talk to ‘the troublemakers’ and figure out why they were so uncooperative. I argued that teachers and principals
lacked the time to do this sort of thing (Foley 1990b:207).

When I addressed the board, I was asked a similar question. I replied that I hoped to share my findings with members of the VCLL in order to improve the parent experience. To the extent that parents influence participation of youth athletes (Fredricks and Eccles 2004; Leff and Hoyle 1995; Power and Woolger 1994), improving their experience can only benefit the league. I argued that the members of the board already saw to the needs of the players, but that parents were largely neglected. This was reflected in low volunteer rates and high rates of attrition to more competitive leagues or to other sports. I hoped that my work might allow the league to implement policies to enhance the experience for parents, whose influence on their children might increase retention of players, especially in the older divisions, and might increase volunteer rates as well. I am not sure I can ever fulfill those lofty goals, but I will discuss possible courses of action for youth sports leagues in my conclusion. And while members of the VCLL never asked for anything from me, there can be no doubt that I owe them for what they have given me. Directly, I can only offer them my gratitude. Indirectly, I hope that the experiences of later generations of parents in youth sports are enhanced because leagues begin to pay closer attention to them.

Gary Alan Fine (1993) opens his article “Ten Lies of Ethnography” with a quote from Urie Bronfenbrenner: “The only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether” (1952:453). Anyone who has undertaken qualitative research will certainly sympathize. When reactive effects disappear – and they have a tendency to do just that, under the crushing weight of routine10 – the danger of hearing or

10 Duneier (1999) calls this the Becker principle after Howard S. Becker, who noted that most social processes were structured such that their occurrence was virtually assured, researcher
overhearing information of a sensitive nature increases. It is at that point that the researcher must begin making conscious decisions about what to include, how to include it, and how to protect the integrity if not the identity of the research participants. Ethical dilemmas arise when the researcher cannot properly identify themselves to everyone present in a public setting, or when they choose to let a misunderstanding about the nature of their study pass unnoted, or when the participants see boundaries to the research setting that simply do not exist for the ethnographer. I encountered all of these in my examination of the VCLL. Professional codes of ethics, by necessity, cannot properly address the multitude of potential situations a researcher may find themselves, and advisors may not be familiar enough with the setting and its participants to offer much more than vague and general advice, assuming there is even time to contact them. Situations arise quickly in the field, and are not always recognized immediately for what they are. When confronted, I have tried to be explicit, to be fair, and to offer participants control of what they did and did not include in the final product. In the end, my goal has been to present an account that VCLL parents and board members read and identify with, even if they do not agree with all of my interpretations and analysis. If I accomplished this, then I can comfortably claim that I have acted ethically in the field.

CONCLUSION

Every minute in the field is fraught with dangerous decision-making, even at the subconscious level. What becomes data is largely a product of our own personal biographies, our theoretical preferences, and even the sensitivity of our senses or the power of our memories. We truly play far greater roles in our data than we like to admit, and possibly larger than those whose lives we disrupt. These decisions play a role in the projects we select, and the projects with which we end presence or not. That is, things that need to happen in any given social structure tend to happen due to that very structure.
up. These decisions are driven by pragmatism as much as they are ideological or theoretical concerns. We can get caught up in the politics of the setting, which are occasionally activated by our presence and our actions. Access, data gathering, sampling, analysis, and interpretation are personal and political every bit as much as they are formal and academic. All of which a reader may look at and wonder just why the hell should they believe any of it? A methods section often spends the bulk of its time tearing down the façade of authority, methodological purity, and objectivity, and yet we present our findings anyway, and ask the reader to take them as legitimate, if not authoritative.

The hope, of course, is that through acknowledging the flaws of the method and the methodology, it forgives them as well. Like pouring out sins in a confessional booth, we hope to be able to achieve forgiveness if we ask nicely and perform a little self-flagellation. However, for the work to be taken seriously there must be merit to the method. Participant observation has a long and proud history in the social sciences because, when it conducted conscientiously, it can produce work of stunning detail and intimacy. In-depth interviews allow participants a voice, a way to articulate what the observer may not always notice or fail to interpret “properly.” Together, they provide a powerful and complementary combination of data-gathering methods. The methods section of a paper or a book may provide a corrective in that no study can be considered definitive anymore and that no method is infallible. True though that may be, it is also imperative not to lose sight of what the systematic examination of a social setting can provide in the way of information and insight into human behavior. The following chapters are all the evidence that I can provide. Their legitimacy is not ensured by the methods I used to gather data, nor the tools with which I analyzed it. In fact, they cannot be ensured by anything, really. By attempting to be open and honest about both what I have and have not accomplished in
terms of access, sampling, analysis, validity, and ethics, I am hoping that what is left passes muster by whatever criteria the reader chooses.
Chapter 4: Making the Case for Children and Social Capital

In this chapter, I examine the role that children have to play in the creation of social capital for their parents. While social capital theorists have noted the benefits children can accrue through their parents and their parents’ social connections, little work has been done tracing the reciprocal flow of said benefits through children’s activities and connections. I show how children’s participation in Little League provides social capital benefits for their parents. In the Valley City Little League, a child-centered voluntary organization, parents bring their children to ostensibly play baseball, learn life skills, and acquire valuable socialization skills. Along the way, they embed themselves in a network containing many people with similar aspirations for their own children. This both changes parents’ attitudes toward strangers within the league and facilitates relationship creation between parents, both of which contain the potential for social capital creation (see Small 2009b). Further, the specific friendship choices of the children can impact the access to resources available to the parent, by subtly steering their own choices toward some and away from other parent relationships. Such relationships can be very helpful when looking to obtain information, emotional support, child-care, and business contacts.

When a parent signs a child up for Little League, they are – consciously or not – placing themselves into a network of hundreds of other parents. Many of these parents they will never meet, yet some will become familiar through repeated interactions at the field or other league events, through volunteer activity, or chance encounters. A special subset will become even more familiar because they will be the parents of the child’s teammates. In some cases, these groups of parents will be chosen randomly; in others, the players will be chosen through a tryout and draft procedure (see Chapter 1 for details). Sometimes, the groups of parents brought together on a team already have a high degree of familiarity; other times they are complete strangers. On
average, the older and more experienced the player, the more likely that parents on a team will know at least a few of the other parents. One of the first things I ascertained when observing a team for the season was the baseline level of familiarity between the parents.

A TYPOLOGY OF PARENTS

As expected, on all four teams, there were parents who knew each other well. Some had already formed very close bonds with each other. These bonds often influence the selection process during the draft. In talking with a long-time coach before his first draft in the Minor division (players aged 8-10), I learned that many coaches choose players not strictly for their playing ability (though this is considered as well) but for the relationships already developed between families, or because of some knowledge that the parents are easy to get along with and will not cause problems for the coach. Ron, despite his reputation for competitiveness repeatedly told me in personal conversations that he drafts families as much as he does players, “I’d rather have a mediocre kid that’s coachable and has good parents that can get along than a talented kid with a bad attitude or difficult parents” (Fieldnotes). Other coaches expressed similar sentiments. Skilled players with either known attitude problems or difficult parents dropped in the draft, and their selection was often met with a round of “Good luck!” or sympathetic chuckles from one or more coaches with experience in dealing with the kid and/or his or her parents.

Other parents were far less familiar with the other parents on the team. In some cases, it was because their child had never played in the league or even the sport. In others, it may simply have been because they had never played for a particular coach in the past. The degree of their social involvement depended on several factors: their personalities, the degree to which other parents on the team had already formed close bonds, and their willingness to get involved with the various volunteer activities on the team. I developed a parent taxonomy on the basis of their
social and material involvement into 1 of 3 categories: Core, Fringe, and Isolated parents. Where any given parent ends up in this classification scheme depends on the aforementioned factors, and those factors’ influence depends largely on the team context and culture. These are, of course, ideal types, and no single parent possesses all of the traits described below. Further, the boundaries between categories can be blurry at times. However, these categories are useful because they help to clarify the social patterns amongst the parents on a given team, and they help to explain why some parents are better able to access any potential contacts and resources that may be available from other parents within the league.

Core Parents

Core parents were the most involved parents on the team. They were present at most, if not all team events – particularly practices and games – and they very often sat together, socializing during these events. They were always seated close to the action, usually in the bleachers. This indicated a sense of physical closeness between the parents and facilitated the easy socializing that characterized the group. Core parents formed a dense network, with all of the parents within the group well-known to one another. They were usually the first to volunteer for duties on and off the field, including uniform pickup, fundraising activities, and umpiring in the event that officials were unavailable for games. Their children were usually, but not always, from the group of more talented and skilled players. Core parents in the older age divisions tended to have the longest tenure within the league, and were often authorities on league history and/or gossip. Coaches’ wives, team parents, and board members were almost always amongst the group of Core parents on a given team. They also tended to be involved in other areas of their kids’ lives as well, both inside and outside of their involvement in sports. Close relationships that
extended outside of the realm of sports were most likely to form between members of this group, and their children, because of their status as players on the team, were often good friends as well.

*Sierra – The Coach’s Wife*

Sierra is a representative example of a Core parent. She was the wife of Cubs manager Brent and served as the team mom for the Cubs. In addition, she was usually called upon to keep the official score of the games, keep track of pitch counts, and help Brent with the player rotations to ensure that players received at least their minimum playing time. She sat in the bleachers and was usually the center of the socializing in the area. Because of her intimate involvement with the team, she either knew or had gotten to know nearly every parent on the team to some extent (though there were exceptions, covered below). Because Brent drafted a team based as much on the parents of the children as the children themselves, she had two close friends on the team as well as a neighbor that she and Brent knew fairly well. As a coach’s parent, she attempted to be inclusive with the other parents, but indicated that she followed the lead of other parents when establishing a level of sociability for the season:

> I personally try to take the cue from the parent on how much they want to share, how much they want to talk, how much the wanna come hang out, you know. So if they want to come to every practice and sit on the bleachers with me and talk the whole time, I’m glad to do that. I’ll share, I have no problem sharing personal stuff. But… you know, if you want to sit in your car and not, then that’s totally [fine].

At the same time, Sierra’s experience reflected the nature of most of the parent bonds that form in a single-season of Little League: that they were ephemeral, shallow, and time constrained. Close friendships were the exception in Little League, not the rule. The close friends that Sierra had among the Cubs parents were the result of previous interactions, either from her own childhood or from that of her son Timothy, who was close friends with Martin. Sierra and
Martin’s mother Katheryn were close friends through their sons and through their involvement in other organizations outside of baseball, and Katheryn is another Core parent on the Cubs team.

*Rita – All-Star Team Parent*

Rita was an amiable but largely soft-spoken woman in her mid-40s, and one of the team parents for the Mariners. She did not grow up in Valley City, but has lived in the town for a decade and a half at the time we spoke, having been born in Southern California. The oldest of her 3 boys, Anthony, was one of the better players for the team and, as an older player, was looked up to by many of his teammates. Because the amount of interaction and coordination required to successfully tackle the position ensures a very high level of socialization, team parents are by definition Core parents. Rita’s duties mainly included coordinating travel for the state tournament, fundraising, and procuring the end-of-season trinkets used to commemorate the All-Star season.

Rita spent a great deal of time on the phone with the other Mariners parents, making sure they knew their responsibilities, soliciting ideas, and generally communicating the details of the fast-paced All-Star season. She attended nearly every Mariners practice, was generally the first to arrive and the last to leave their fundraisers, and was the “go-to” person for virtually all parents’ questions regarding the season. This was her first time in the formal position as a team parent, but she described herself as a fairly involved parent. Having 3 children who participated in various activities throughout the year (two of her sons participated in youth rodeo activities, another raced BMX bikes, and her son who played for the Mariners also played football) limited her involvement in any one activity, but the All-Star season came at an opportune moment in her sports calendar, allowing her to dedicate herself to the task, “I’ve always been pretty involved. This is kind of the first time as a team mom, because I had boys with multiple interests and
multiple games and multiple activities that I couldn’t feel like I could dedicate myself to one particular area and, do well with taking full ownership of it. I was happy to help the team mom, and I did that. My other son wasn’t on a team, so we kind of had, in a way, less activities. And my other two boys aren’t part of an organized sport right now. So this one is kind of like the only one. So I had more time.” Rita’s involvement actually required her to get to know the other parents on the team, an aspect of the job that she enjoyed, “Well, some of the parents I already knew. The other six kids that came from last year. So, I knew them already, so it kind of reformed those bonds of friendship. And the others, some of them are open to friendships and some of them aren’t, so yeah, it’s been positive.”

Fringe Parents

Fringe parents exist on the margins of the social center of the team, both figuratively and literally. They tend to know many of the parents individually, but do not take part in the normal social activities of either practices or games. Instead, they are often seen standing off to the side of the bleachers, away from the Core parents. Occasionally, they will watch games from their cars. During practices, they will sometimes take their places off to the side of the action (or again in their cars), or they will drop their children off and return at the end of practice to pick them up. They will occasionally volunteer to help the team out above and beyond the normal snack obligations, but these activities do not bring them closer to the social center of the team. The ability and social status of their children on the team has the greatest variation, ranging from borderline all-star to the lower echelons of the team’s ability hierarchy. They often have friends in the league, but the likelihood of relationships extending outside of the fields is lessened because of their social distance. Fringe parents may actually be Core parents in other sport settings but limit their involvement in baseball or softball for various reasons. Sometimes, it is
because their child has lesser ability in baseball than another sport; other times, their heavy involvement in other sports leads them to seek a “break” during baseball season.

*Julianne – Fringe in baseball, Core in wrestling*

When I spoke with Julianne, she spent some time talking about her and her husband’s involvement with their son Sam’s other sports, which included commitment-heavy football and wrestling. For them, the baseball season was a time to “take it easy”. When I asked her about her relative lack of social involvement on the team, she responded:

Well, it’s nothing personal. It’s- Honestly, it’s more to do with coming off of two horrendous seasons. But like Sierra, she knows that if she asks me for anything, I would be there in an instant. And I’m there to help. But I’m not gonna be there holding her hand asking her the whole time, ‘What do you want me to do? What do you want me to do?’ But, I just talk to her, and I realized that I hadn’t paid- that there was a buyout on the concession [stand duty], and then she was talking about how we fired that one ump and hired that new, we had paid him $15, and then we had another buyout. I told her, ‘You know what? Let me just give you $20 to help out,’ because I have no problem whatsoever helping out. Anything she asks for, I will be more than happy to give her, because… well, this is so little compared to what’s required of us in the other two sports, especially being team mom in the other two sports, so I think I would be a little bit more involved had I not had two very long seasons and stuff, so this is kind of like I’m on vacation.

Julianne was the quintessential Fringe parent. She came into the season only knowing the coach and his wife, and while she had gotten to know several of the other parents during the course of the season, she had done so independently and without participating in the regular social activity of the team. She often dropped Sam off at practice and sat off to the side, rarely exchanging more than cursory greetings with other parents. At games, she and her husband either stood by themselves or watched games from their car. At the same time, she contributed both skills and money to the team: she embroidered all the boys’ names into their caps, and she gave Sierra an extra $20 to cover various expenses they were bearing on behalf of the team. These contributions, while expressing their commitment to the team and to their own involvement, did
not change their social status with the team, and they never fully engaged with the social center except in isolated encounters.

*Antonio – Likeable, shy, and busy*

When I first saw Antonio at the Wildcats’ practice, he struck me as somehow familiar. A first-generation immigrant from Mexico in his early-40s, Antonio played semi-pro baseball in his youth, and was delighted when his daughter Annie decided to take up the game, albeit rather later than most girls take up softball. Annie used her athleticism and coordination – developed largely by playing soccer in Valley City – to pick up softball quicker than might have been expected, but she still trailed many of the more experienced players in her abilities. Just before Alana gathered the parents so that I could explain myself and the project, it hit me: I had spoken previously with Antonio at a soccer game the previous fall. Antonio remembered our conversation, and was happy to speak with me again about the project, even though I was never able to pin him down for a formal interview.

Antonio was generally present during Wildcats’ games, but was only sporadically present at practices. The timing of practices – they usually started around 5 o’clock and lasted two hours – left many parents using the available time to run other errands or tend to other familial responsibilities. Antonio often worked past the beginning of practice and only returned in time to pick Annie up. At games, Antonio often sat with the other parents in the bleachers, but only late in the season did he speak enough to be included in the parents’ conversations. The Wildcats were a team drafted as they were because of the connections forged between parents on travel teams and past VCLL teams, so several of the parents already knew each other. It was a difficult clique to break into, and parents like Antonio, whose daughter was not involved in more competitive leagues and who was largely just learning the game, had to work extra hard if they
wanted to forge any kind of relationship with Core parents. Instead, Antonio made sporadic
cfriendships with other Fringe parents on the team, such as Harry who, like Antonio, was also an
electrician. Harry’s daughter Caroline was also of a similar ability as Annie, and the fathers also
talked about helping their daughters learn the game and bring their skills along. While Antonio’s
experience and skill in the game might have made him an invaluable asset to the coaching staff
and ensured his further social involvement with the team, he never volunteered his services to
them and never volunteered for any duties above and beyond the minimum for team
participation.

Isolated Parents

Isolated parents are virtual nonentities on the team. Their absence is so pervasive and
complete that it became a topic of conversation amongst the other parents. The way this was
most often mentioned is to say that the Isolated parent could not be picked “out of a lineup,”
meaning they were indistinguishable from any other parent at the fields on a given day. The tone
of these comments was often tinged with condemnation, and Core parents seem to regard
Isolated parents with a mixture of suspicion and pity. In my experience with the four teams, there
were no more than 2 sets of Isolated parents on a team. Parents in this group were very difficult
to meet, and more difficult to get to know, as not only were they absent except for drop-off and
pickup at practices, but they were also usually absent at games as well. Though my sample was
small owing to the small number of Isolated parents on any given team, their children’s ability,
with one exception, was in the lower group of players. Because of their isolation from the team,
they were highly unlikely to make any lasting or even ephemeral social ties on the team outside
of any existing ties they may have had with other parents outside of Little League. In my own
limited experience with the Isolated parents, it was often not their conscious decision to exclude
themselves from the social life of the team. It was usually the result of a work schedule or a language barrier, but there are exceptions. Because of this, they were more often dependent on other parents on the team or other family members to make sure that the children made it to practices and games. Such was the case with William, a player on the Cubs team.

*Liza – Consumer of Social Capital*

William was a player that had played with Brent before, and so Brent and Sierra were aware of his parents’ situation. They owned a business that kept them busy at all hours of the day and especially on weekends. Saturday games are a staple of Little League, and this excluded William’s parents from many team activities. Additionally, William’s parents were significantly older than many of the parents on the Cubs team, a factor that further isolated them from the social life of the team. Because of these factors, when William did come to practice and games, he was often driven there by an older sibling and dropped off. When his mother Liza attended games (she attended 3 out of the 18 games during the Cubs’ season) she sat on the bleachers away from the other parents and exchanged warm but short greetings with Sierra upon her arrival. I missed my early chances at getting to know her, and near the end of the season, I realized that the only way I would get a chance to speak with her would be to do so outside the context of baseball, explain my project to her, and hope that she would be willing to meet with me. I got her phone number from Sierra and left her a message. We spoke twice on the phone, but I was not able to successfully interview her. In our brief conversations however, she did express her sincere and lasting gratitude for Sierra and Brent’s willingness to ensure that William was able to play baseball. When I asked her what they did for her, she told me that they regularly came to their house to get William to take him to games or practices, and routinely brought him home after those events. When I asked Sierra about this arrangement, she responded:
My little William. And you know, we’ve formed a relationship with his mom and dad, so we understand their situation. We understand that their business runs on Saturday. Like that’s the way it is. And so um… for us as people, not even as coaches or whatever, just us as people, we feel like the kid should still be able to participate in sports even though his parents have to make a living. You know what I mean? He should not be punished. If there’s a way for us to accommodate to get him to and from, we should try to do that. Um, just as people we should try to do that.

_Denny and Ella – The Purposive Isolates_

In other cases, Isolated parents excluded themselves by design. Denny was a high-ranking official in the Valley City School system. Tall, impeccably-dressed with a professional demeanor and in his 30s, he looked as though he could have just stepped off the playing fields himself, and I often saw he and Hannah – the Wildcats shortstop – practicing at the fields before Wildcats’ practices. Denny’s position carried with it no small amount of controversy owing to its visibility and the passion with which the town carried for high school sports, and so it was difficult for Denny and his wife Ella to participate fully with other Wildcat parents, who often had opinions on his job and his performance of it. Neither Denny nor Ella stayed for practices and during games, they either watched from their car or far across the field from other Wildcat parents. In my brief conversations with them, both Denny and Ella pointed to the political nature of Denny’s job in Valley City as a primary reason they remained isolated from the other Wildcat parents. Because of his hours involved in the county’s school athletic department, it was Ella who was usually around during Wildcats games. I only spoke with Ella once, during an away game for the Wildcats. She had positioned herself and hers and Denny’s two sons across the field from the rest of the Wildcats parents. This placed her, technically, in “enemy” territory. She had, however, placed herself far enough away from them as well, and she and her sons were truly isolated from the crowds for both teams. Ella was tall, blonde, and athletically-built. She is in her 30s but looks considerably younger. Though she was civil during our conversation, I did not come away with
the impression that she wanted anything to do with either me or the project. She directed me to contact Denny to set anything up concerning a formal interview. Likewise Denny, who was polite with me when I spoke with him, never initiated conversation with me and never said any more than he had to when we did speak.

**YOUTH SPORTS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the relationship between children and social capital. While many scholars have examined this relationship, they generally fall within two broad categories: sociologists, who have seen this relationship as flowing one-way from parent to child, particularly in the realm of human capital acquisition, and demographers, whose conception of social capital centers on emotional support and closer familial relationships that children often facilitate. The latter position has the advantage of correcting the largely one-way conception of social capital flow that characterizes the sociological position. However, it does so without consideration of extra-familial ties and with very little consideration of the benefits accessible through such relationships. Thus, I explore the impact that this child-centered organization can create social capital opportunities for the parents involved. I argue that social capital, conceived as access to material resources from social relationships (Lin 2001a), can accrue to parents through their children’s participation in youth sports. It does so both indirectly and directly. Indirectly, parents benefit by embedding themselves in a context full of “like-minded” parents. By participating in a child-centered organization, parents make a public statement about their values and their commitment to their children. Thus, they often attributed similar values to the other members of the league who have made a similar commitment to their children. Such attribution of values changes the starting point for any two strangers meeting within the youth sport context from a point of typical stranger suspicion to a place of limited (but
significant) trust and affect. Directly, parents’ social networks are affected by the friendship choices of their children. Many parent friendships within this context were preceded by the friendship of the children and, additionally, many parents acknowledge the constraining effects of their children’s friendship choices on their own friendship options within the league. The benefits offered by these relationships depended on their closeness. To the extent that parents are more likely to build closer relationships with the parents of their child’s friends, those relationships stand to have benefits of greater value, such as direct material and emotional support. However, there are some benefits conferred on the weaker relationships provided for by the context of the league, such as information about jobs, child monitoring, and potential business contacts.

*Forms of Participation and Social Capital Creation and Consumption*

When a parent signed a child up in the VCLL, they were placing both their child and themselves in a setting with hundreds of other parents similarly committed to their child’s participation in the league. This commonality, though shallow, was very salient for the participating parents, as it altered their orientation to the presence of “strangers” in the league. While strangers were still strangers in the conventional sense, there was a sense among parents that the common values that brought together the group of children in the league indicated a similar value orientation between themselves and the other parents within the league. This allowed parents in the league to be slightly less guarded with each other when first meeting other parents, and provided a sliver of positive affect that characterized first meetings between parents, especially parents of new teammates, operating in a similar manner to the Imagined Community (Anderson 1991). Even when the potential relationships on a team never advanced, the attribution of similar motives and values allowed for the creation of certain forms of social
capital between teammates’ parents. What characterized this form of social capital was the limitation to the sharing of services and resources directly to the demand created by the setting, and to the limited sharing of emotional support and useful information. It is also characterized by an extremely low level of mobilization (see next chapter). There were several mechanisms operating within the league that facilitated the creation and mobilization of social capital: the team creation process, team practices, games, All Star participation, participation on the Board of Directors, and through the relationships that children formed amongst themselves, which affect the friendship choices of their parents as well. By mere participation in these activities, parents embedded themselves in a setting rich in social capital potential, even as the mobilization of such resources tended to be both setting-dependent and sporadic.

**Team Creation and Selection**

Social capital was mobilized at perhaps its greatest rate in the process of team creation. This occurred throughout age divisions. In the lower age divisions, where parent requests for coaches were honored (in full or in part), parents and coaches both could leverage their previous interactions and relationships to facilitate a desirable outcome. Parents could request a coach they have had in the past, or coaches with good reputations in the league. Likewise, coaches could ask parents to request them in the event that they wanted a particular player, either for his or her ability or because the families have a prior relationship. When I observed the team creation process for the younger divisions, there were several instances such as this one:

According to Javier and Leanne, there was one full team that came together through requests of various ‘business partners’. Another team came together because nearly all of the players were related. Javier joked that if I really wanted to observe the various social networks through Little League baseball, these two teams would be quite fruitful (Fieldnotes).
In some cases, however, the volume of requests was such that not all can be accommodated. In those cases the Board of Directors, who were collectively responsible for putting the teams together, faced a complex challenge:

At the end of the request phase, we find that 3 teams now have eight players. Some requests will have to be ignored in order to place the same number of players on each team. The question on who to move off of a requested team is a personal/political one in some cases. Where the consequences are negligible (read: the board doesn’t know any of the parties involved) then a random child is chosen and placed on another team.
However, this is the exception rather than the rule. The board, having been in place for a couple of years and thus being well-connected to parents and coaches throughout the league, find themselves having to play a delicate game in deciding whom to remove from which teams. They know (or they claim) that if the wrong people are moved, they will engineer their own off-the-books switches with parents to get back on their original teams. Additionally, the board wants to minimize the hassle involved with vocal parents not getting their way (Fieldnotes).

In these cases, the decision made between which parent requests were honored and which were discarded depended largely on the previous relationships between the board members responsible for putting teams together, the coaches involved, and the parents who were making the requests. As the number of spaces on any given team was limited, it can be likened to a competition for scarce resources. To the extent that the acquisition of said resources was dependent on their denial to other parties, and to the extent that the acquisition of said resources were at least partially dependent on previous social relations between the stakeholders involved, exclusion was a necessary side effect. Exclusion as a social process is generally considered as one of the elements of the ‘dark side’ of social capital (Portes and Landolt 1996; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) and was prevalent within the VCLL where competition was a zero-sum game between parties, such as the inclusion or exclusion from a team.

The process was less formal and more complex in the older age divisions, where all players participated in the tryout process and were then drafted onto teams. In these age divisions, coaches were given both more and less control of the situation. On the one hand, they
could use the system as a mechanism to avoid making guarantees to parents who often
informally asked them to draft their child. On the other hand, the draft behavior of the other
coaches was often unpredictable. While sometimes coaches asked their counterparts to allow
them to choose particular players during the draft, those coaches sometimes balked if the player
was of higher ability. In that case, a coach could be forced to take a player earlier in the draft
than they would have liked to in order to keep their commitment to a parent. Coaches often
found themselves attempting to balance the sometimes-contradictory goals of fielding a
competitive team while choosing a team that provided him or her with cooperative parents.
Existing social relationships and reputations that permeate a small community like Valley City
further complicated the situation for coaches:

When [Nicholas’ son] came up to hit, after already blowing the grounders and fly balls
portion of the tryout (and showing off a poor arm to boot), the coaches remarked that
they wouldn’t draft him under any circumstances because of Nicholas. I remarked that I
knew Nicholas, and he wasn’t such a bad guy… just a bit ‘type A’. I told Lawrence that
as a police officer, he should understand working with those types. He chuckled and just
nodded. At any rate, Nicholas had already asked Brent to pick his kid, and this eventually
happened. Their wives are apparently good friends, and they have known each other
since childhood. (Fieldnotes)

Despite these pressures, coaches tended to find ways to draft teams that they felt would be
competitive in the league and that satisfied whatever social obligations they had. In the event that
one had to be sacrificed to save the other, coaches usually erred on the side of competitiveness,
and use the draft system to explain their failure to choose a particular player:

Arturo had spent many of his previous seasons with either Ron’s team or Lawrence’s. He
is obviously talented, and I began to wonder why he wasn’t with either of them this
season. According to his father, he was the first player selected in the draft by Brent, who
chose before Ron in the draft. (Fieldnotes)
Practices and Games

Once teams were chosen, parents’ potential resource-sharing partners were limited – without extra effort to expand their social radius – to the other parents on their child’s team. The main areas for the development of relationships within these groups of parents were during team practices and games. While each form of participation was suited to certain forms of interaction between parents – and the way a parent choose to participate in the social life of the team in these contexts influenced their potential to form closer relationships with other parents – their child’s mere inclusion on the team entitled them to certain access to the resources possessed by other parents on the team.

As an example, even with a certain amount of familiarity between dyadic pairings of parents, the amount of parental interaction during the Wildcats’ season seemed extremely low. When asked about it, many parents noted that the amount of conversation and involvement from the parents was miniscule compared to other seasons:

With [her stepson’s] team (a team of 6, 7, and 8-year olds), everybody’s talking about the coaches, they’re talking about the players or what they did at work. We all kind of all get along and talk. But on Alyssa’s team, I’ll say hi to everybody, but they- Like, I’ll say ‘Hi how are you?’ and they’re like ‘Good.’ And they don’t… they don’t initiate any more conversation, so how do you keep talking if they’re not interested? And I don’t know if it’s because their kids are involved in that game and they’re so intent on watching their kid, or… (Christina, Mother of Wildcats player with two younger children involved in the league).

Likewise Harry, a boisterous parent who often led the cheers during Wildcats games found himself affected by the lack of interaction during the Wildcats’ season:

I think it was kind of quiet, kind of a quiet season for the most part. Um, didn’t see a lot of interaction. I think it was kind of a quiet season. Well, it was, and I wound up kinda quieting down towards the end. I got tired of being the only one cheering all the time (Harry, father of Wildcats player).
At the beginning of the season, I was not surprised at the lack of interaction between parents. It always takes some time to get to know people, even if there is some level of baseline familiarity. As the season progressed, I began to shift my focus to attempt to account for the lack of interaction during games, as well as the lack of both interaction and attendance during practices. The parents clearly viewed practice as a drop-off and pick-up situation, due largely to two factors. First, most of the parents had other children and thus other obligations, especially to other baseball and softball practices. When softball season began, the spring soccer season was in its twilight. By the end of the softball season, football season had fired up for the year. In between parents were also obligated to various club or traveling teams as well. Eight of the ten players for the Wildcats had siblings that were playing either baseball or softball or other sports that were in season. Of the parents with no other sporting obligations, one set included the coach of the team and her husband, and the other parents had only one child and were Core parents on the Wildcats’ team during the season.

Second, practices were routinely two hours long, and parents often used that time to run other errands involving either their other children directly or other aspects of their lives:

I had never met Julie’s dad before, so I began to head in that direction. However, with Christina in between myself and them, I struck up a conversation with her first. She had taken [her stepson] to the urgent care clinic with what appeared to be a rash on his batting glove hand. Turns out it was some sort of bacterial infection,” (Fieldnotes).

During other practices, parents would take the time to go grocery shopping or go back to work to complete any unfinished business. Practices were not viewed then as a place to socialize for most of the parents. Instead, they were viewed as another place to be in a seemingly-endless stream of places to be and as another thing to finish in an endless stream of things that had to be finished. That the practice was long allowed for them to complete other necessary tasks. There did not seem to be enough time for most parents to stop at practice to make small talk with other parents,
most of whom they did not know well to begin with. The parents who did stay at practice, when they did so, tended to isolate themselves as they watched, either in their cars (the Wildcats’ practice facility made this option quite easy; the prevalent wind during the spring often made it desirable) or in isolated pockets around the practice field. Even amongst Core parents from the Wildcats and the Cubs, practice was usually not a place for parents to forge or maintain relationships.

This was not the case with the Twins, however, for two reasons: first, practices lasted no more than 45 minutes; second, parents are not allowed to leave practices for the 4-year olds, and none in my time expressed a desire to do so. Those parents who missed practices for whatever reason made arrangements with either extended family members or with other parents on the team. This is one advantage in allowing these teams to be created based on pre-existing social relationships: it allowed for parents who would normally struggle to have their children at practice or games to make other plans for their children. Such was the arrangement between the parents of Louis and the Lawrence’s wife Christina. While Louis’ parents attended only one practice throughout the season, Louis was at most of them, usually arriving with Christina and her son. Christina explained to me that this arrangement was one of the reasons that they made sure Louis was on their team, because his parents could not make it to practices regularly, but they still badly wanted him to be able to play.

The near-universal presence of parents at practices in the 4-year old division also facilitated more parent discussion – though this claim is tempered by the presence of already-established relationships within the team. Twins practices were often lively affairs full of discussion of matters both on and off the field. The mothers – and it was always the mothers on the bleachers, as nearly all the present fathers were on the field as “assistants” – talked about
their kids and their siblings, about work, and about the league in general. It is difficult to tell how much of this conversation was enabled by previous relationships and how much would have taken place because of the proximity of the parents to one another. My experience with the Cubs and Wildcats leads me to believe that it was more the former than the latter. The Mariners All-Star team provided a middle-ground example of this phenomenon. Because All-Star teams tend to involve many of the same players on a year-to-year basis, the parents of these players found themselves in close proximity several years in a row. By the time the second-year Major All-Stars were playing, many had been on All-Star teams for three consecutive years. Thus, their parents had a level of familiarity through baseball that existed somewhere between the well-established patterns of the Twins and the relative unfamiliarity of the Cubs and Wildcats. My observations of the Mariners team early practices leads me to the conclusion that sociability at practices depended much more on established relationships than it did on the newly-built relationships that the team provided, in the short-term.

During games for both the Cubs and Wildcats, the Core group of perhaps three to five sets of parents – depending on the night – sat on the bleachers and had significant conversations. Because of the relationships already present before the Cubs season, their conversations tended to extend past the field of play and small talk to other matters than did the Wildcats’ parents conversations. They were occasionally joined by Fringe parents, who would often sit away from the bleachers, but wander over to the bleachers to ask questions or join in conversations for a few minutes or innings. The Isolated parents (when they attended) chose to seat themselves in their cars when possible, and across the field when necessary. At Twins games, while most of the families of the players located themselves on or near the bleachers, inter-family communication
was constrained. This was due, in my estimation, to the presence of extended family at the games:

Maribel, Luis, and Ryan have all had grandparents attending every game. Adam’s grandparents are regular attendees, and Jorge (Lawrence’s father) is an assistant coach. Naomi’s oldest sister Esperanza is usually at the games, and she fits in with the adult population. Rosemary had two other family members at the game, and she spent the majority of her time talking with them. The presence of extended family members alters the conversation patterns so that most of the interactions are between family members at the games. This limits the socializing between families, even among those who know each other fairly well (like Cecilia and Kelsey). I asked Christine about this phenomenon and when it might end, age-wise. She informed me that the situation is not nearly so pronounced at the Pee-Wee games, and she also remarked (drawing explicitly the conclusion to which I was heading) that the Major softball games ‘we can barely get the parents to show up’ (Fieldnotes).

During Mariners’ games, parents and extended family were often present, but they generally located themselves on or near the bleachers, making for a much more crowded scene during games. While there was plenty of parent conversation during these games, it almost always revolved around game situations, and what was going to happen if the team won or lost the game they were currently playing.

All-Star Participation

Participation on All-Star teams, in addition to the characteristics included above, featured significant unique characteristics in the VCLL. All-Star selection entailed a great deal of commitment – both temporal and financial – that affected the ways in which parents came together for the common good of the team. This was due to two factors: the overall increased level of competition, and the introduction of widespread inter-community competition. While competitive attitudes were prevalent throughout the VCLL, they were hardly universal. Especially in the younger divisions, values such as “having fun” and “learning the game” were seen as the noblest goals that the VCLL could achieve for the players. Throughout the league, even in divisions where scores were kept, there are no league standings and no post-season
tournament to determine the best team in a division. Few teams could lay definitive claim to first place, or any other place for that matter. However, everything changed where All-Star teams were concerned. Once a player committed to All-Stars, he or she submitted to the ultimate goal of winning: winning district and winning state (while there are levels above this, the Mariners never seriously spoke of any level past state). This commitment required familial involvement as well. Teams were announced in mid-June, and practices usually began the next day. Teams practiced about 5 days per week leading up the district tournament, usually for 2-3 hours per practice. If the team wins the district tournament, the process repeats leading up to the state tournament. Once the state tournament is over, the school year is getting close, and parents find that they have given up nearly any chance at a summer family vacation for the chance to participate in All-Stars.

Thus, the parents of the Mariners found themselves spending a great deal of time together in the month and a half that the team competed. In addition to practices and games, they coordinated fundraising activities, including a car wash and a food sale outside of a local store. After the team won district, they also spent several days together at the State tournament 3 hours from Valley City. While there, they stayed in the same motel, took many of their meals with other parents, and waited together as an August downpour cost the team two full days of gameplay. These events provided several opportunities for the team parents to establish relationships with each other and create bonds of trust that facilitated the development of social capital. During practices, for example, parents took turns making and providing dinners for the rest of the team and their families, reminiscent of the revolving credit associations prevalent in the social capital literature (Coleman 1988; Geertz 1962). When fundraising, they used both their own food-making expertise as well as social connections throughout town to find locations for
both the car wash and the food sale. During the downpour at the state tournament, many of the parents stayed together on the balconies of the rooms to watch their kids play in the rain and to hang out with each other. On the first night (a Saturday), they stayed up late into the night on the balcony drinking beer, laughing, talking, and socializing.

The uniting thread tying all of this together was the imminent inter-league and inter-community competition that pervaded the All-Star system. Though I did not study any other leagues directly, there was enough overlap of players and discussion of other sports amongst parents that a comparison seems justified. Often when I explained the purpose of my study, I was told of what sport I should really be studying to find out all about parents relationships. The most often cited sports were football and club softball and baseball. These sports, I was assured, offered all I could ever want when dissecting parent relationships. What separated these two sports was the role of competition in the culture of the leagues. In both of these sports, competition was much heavier and much more a central part of the team culture than in Little League. The competition, parents told me, and the increased commitment that competition drove in the parents, changed the nature of the relationships that were formed there.

**Melody:** For the most part, the competition brings us [together] ‘cause we’re all on the same page. We all want to win. You know, that’s what it’s about. We’re all there ‘cause we wanna win, and we’re all there ‘cause our kids… I don’t want to say better, but our kids, they excel at that sport. ‘Cause when we’re down on these lower levels, they stand out, and there’s no competition for them. But when they move up, everybody’s as good as they are.

And so, I think the parents kind of bond on that, cause you have to raise so much money. You spend a lot of time together. We travel together. And the bad parents kind of weed themselves out.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that playing like a lot of out of town teams helps to bring parents together?

**Melody:** Yep. Because you’re in hotels.
Interviewer: Because you’re no longer dealing with…

Melody: The crap

Interviewer: Well, it may be my friends on the other side or…

Melody: Yeah, mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: That you’re traveling together and that… I don’t know, maybe it just feels like a more hostile environment when you’re out of town or whatever.

Melody: It’s all competitive. And it’s great because you go back to the hotel room… Um, yes, and we’re competitive people if um- No cause when we’re out of town, it’s great because you’re all there about your kids. You all you’ve worked hard to get them there. And you go back to the hotel, and you guys all just get to hang out together. You- you have a couple of beers, you just sit there and talk. You go out to eat together. I love the competitive [teams] for that reason.

Other parents of players on competitive teams echoed Melody’s sentiment. In more competitive sports – particularly competitive baseball and softball as well as youth football, parents invested far more time and money into the team, they traveled more, and their focus was far more single-minded than in Little League. All of these elements combined to facilitate the formation of parent relationships in these more competitive environments.

In *Unanticipated Gains*, Mario Small (2009b) argued that tie formation between parents in the context of urban daycare centers was facilitated by the *opportunity* to interact, a *focus* for the interaction, and when the interaction involves *cooperative* rather than *competitive* processes. In the context of a Little League, and presumably in youth sports in general, the competitive element, rather than undermining the formation of parental ties, actually facilitates it. However, in conjunction with Small’s major idea, the tie formation occurs within groups of cooperating parents, as this comes at the expense of potential tie formation between parents on different teams. Competition can take place at various levels. Within the confines of the VCLL, competition was generally reigned in, and overly competitive parents and coaches were frowned
upon by most of the parents and board members. However, when the scope of the competition expanded outside of the league – and thus the community – to include other leagues, such as in All-Star participation, competition was heightened. This helped to create more distinct boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. In general, community is largely created through the expression of boundaries through rituals, as Cohen (1985) notes, “The symbolic expression and affirmation of boundary heightens people’s awareness of and sensitivity to their community,” (p. 50). When the rituals of the athletic contest included increased levels of competition – often defined by the stakes involved and the investments made by parents – old patterns of difference – such as those which may have existed between VCLL teams during the regular season – were subsumed both literally and metaphorically. Literally, they are abrogated by the fact that the players now wore the same uniforms instead of different ones. Metaphorically, difference was subsumed because the dynamic between competition and cooperation was altered. Former competitors became collaborators and apt to put aside past, regular-season differences for the chance to achieve in the higher-stakes world of All-Star season. Ritual conduct, such as team cheers before games, the announcement of team names and players, or organized parent cheers from the bleachers, served to establish the organizing principles of the groups by creating the boundaries between them, an idea with roots in Durkheim’s study of religion (1995 [1912]).

Thus, Small’s major thesis regarding cooperation is affirmed. Parents are, even in this case, far more likely to bond with those with whom they are cooperating rather than with those with whom they are competing. However, the competitive element can heighten this bonding. Competition is not anathema to parental bonding. In the sporting context, where competition is inescapable, it can also serve (particularly in team sports) as the basis for more intense
identification and interaction with those who are also participating. Increased competition draws parents further into the investment in the team both financially and emotionally. Both factors are significant when assessing an individual’s identification with an entity, be it sporting, social, or religious (Sosis and Bressler 2003). Through the increased competition of All-Stars then, parent can find themselves in environments that lead to the heightened sense of in-group and out-group, leading to a potentially increased sense of identification with those on the team and part of their immediate community. Parents across the board reported a greater sense of identification both in sports they found more competitive (especially football and wrestling) and in more competitive baseball and softball environments (such as travel teams).

*Board of Directors*

Participation on the Board of Directors represented the ultimate commitment to the smooth operation of the league. The Board ran all aspects of the league except for the coaching of the teams (and many Board members were in fact coaches as well). The Board formulated and implemented league policy, and ensured that the league adhered to Little League International rules, mandates, and by-laws. This was no mean process, to be sure. The list of skills needed to pull it off on a year-to-year basis was substantial, and dependent on the donated time and skills of its members. Thus, the Board of Directors was both the site of social capital building and social capital consumption, as the members of the Board brought their own time, expertise, and connections to the benefit of the other members and the league as a whole.

First of all, the decision to join the board entailed a time commitment. During my time, I spent two seasons as a Board member, and in my own minimal involvement, I spent time at board meetings, volunteering for board duties including registration, All-Star committees, by-laws committees, and the creation of a league-sponsored survey to uncover parent attitudes.
toward the league and its operation. There were other board members who spent far more time
than I did in my own capacity, such as Melody the league secretary. Melody was known for
always wearing her black hair up, for her ubiquitous glasses, and her blunt demeanor. She was,
by nearly all accounts, the most knowledgeable person in the VCLL:

I do everything. I schedule everything. I run Opening Day. I run tryouts. I run
registration… I run picture day. I run barbeque for the kids. I run the tournaments. Well, I
set up the tournaments. I set up concession. I set up the scorekeeping. I make sure
everybody’s here on time. I schedule people. I make sure the game schedules get out. I
make sure the rosters get out. I make sure the managers’ packets… I make sure practice
schedules get out. I contact coaches if I have to for everybody. I get all the information
out to everybody. And that’s just what I can think of off the top of my head. I am doing
Little League 12 months a year. I check the phone messages. I check the mail.

The fact that I interviewed Melody at the fields in the middle of January (2 months before the
start of the season) substantiated her claim that she “does” Little League at all times of the year.
Likewise, the president of the league when I started my research, Javier, listed his duties as the
following: submit the league charter to Little League International, create the safety plan,
schedule all practices and games, preside over monthly board meetings, run registration,
organize the raffle (including determining and acquiring the raffle prizes), run the tryout and
draft, create coaches’ packets and run the coaches’ meeting, run Opening Day ceremonies, file
injury reports, preside over game protests, run background checks for all volunteers, oversee the
concession stand, create boundary maps when league boundaries change (as they did between
2009 and 2010), oversee All-Star eligibility, and, “the guy that picks up all the jobs that nobody
else wants.” It was a common refrain amongst board members that they are “always at the
fields,” which was not much of an exaggeration for the more committed ones.

Board members also brought their own expertise and skills to the Board as well. In some
cases, this allowed the league to function more smoothly, and in some cases, this expertise
allowed the league to circumvent the control that the city had as owners of the fields. First, Javier’s position as a member of law enforcement meant that he had experience and expertise in running background checks on all of the potential volunteers in the league. Normally, that job was taken on by the Safety Officer. However, as Javier explained to me, the fewer people that had access to that data, the better. Because of that attempt to maintain privacy in a setting where gossip often runs rampant, he ran the checks himself:

We do backgrounds on everybody. I’ve taken on the responsibility of doing the backgrounds, because I’m already in law enforcement, and I don’t think it’s anybody’s business to know anything about your background. There’s no one better to do it than somebody that already has access to background. Um, there’s no gossiping, there’s no ‘Eh, you should see Sean. He’s been arrested like, eight times.’ I’m already entrusted to the public with that bit of information. It’s typically for the safety officer to do, but I just take them…

Likewise, the long-time Treasurer of the league Marilyn was a CPA. Her professional training helped to ensure the financial stability of the league for several years. In her words, running the finances of the league was more than “just balancing a checkbook” which is how several Board members described the position. She explained:

Well, definitely, I need to make sure that all money is accounted for, because most of what we handle is cash. You have a high risk of being audited, because it is cash and it’s a non-profit. And you don’t have a lot of control on it. My job is to make sure that we do have control on the cash. Beyond the money part, do we have our non-profit slips? Before I came on, they didn’t have their non-profit slips. I mean, all of these are considered non-profits. You should not be paying taxes in stores. Why are we paying taxes? So I had to go to the State, and stand in line - two days in a row - to get our non-profit tags. I have to verify that we have all documents for tax season. I have to verify that we have all sorts of security measures, to make sure we have all the raffle tickets accounted for, make sure they match up.

The registration forms, the registration money, which is always an issue, because you have kids coming in that are getting funding or scholarships from other places, and kids that come in that aren’t paying at all, and people that are registering and not giving the forms to you, people that are collecting money and not giving the money to you. I mean, I feel like I’m babysitting and running after people all the time. Checking logs, ‘Did you guys double count? You double counted, right?’ Yeah, and, and I think my problem- I think I might be a little extreme, because you take so many ethics classes because of
Enron and everything else, that every time I see something- it’s not just a bat to me. It has a value, so you’ve got to get the bat, because it’s got a value, don’t you understand? I mean if you take the bat, you stole from us.

And I think that’s always my perception. Like, when we’re gonna invest in something, I always have to remind them, ‘Oh, don’t forget this isn’t our property. Don’t forget, just so you guys know. I mean we can’t claim depreciation on that shed.’ And I think sometimes I overanalyze and people look at me like I’m crazy, but it’s not as easy as people think. It’s not just adding and subtracting. And that has been the problem in the past. It’s that adding and subtracting, and the lack of really being accountable for what we have there.

It is doubtless true that many Little Leagues around the country are able to maintain their finances without the expertise of a CPA. However, while Marilyn was the league Treasurer, the league amassed a reserve balance of $15,000. During my second year, when a dispute between various factions of the board led her to step back her involvement and stop keeping such a watchful eye on the outgoing expenses of the league, it lost over $5000. Once she left the position for good, the league found itself in substantial financial trouble.

As the league did not own the fields on which they play, they were tenants of Valley City. They paid a yearly “rent” of $5000 to the city. In exchange, the city paid for various expenses including field and clubhouse maintenance. However, when the league went to the city to ask for improvements to the clubhouse so that the health department would not shut down the concession stand – which operated on the bottom level of the two-story clubhouse – the city asked league to pay for half of the costs. As the league could not afford the expense, they backed off from the city and looked into less formal means for settling their problem. One of the board members, Ron, owned a construction company, and offered to do the job for the league during a meeting. While publicly this was politely declined by the board, within 3 months, the needed repairs had been made. I was not privy to the arrangements made between the board and Ron company, but the league never informed any city officials that the repairs had been made, and no
item ever appeared on a budget statement regarding any construction expenses. It was an open
secret within the Board that Ron’s company undertook the project, but no details were ever made
available to me. The league did, however, save a great deal of money and bureaucratic hassle by
having Ron take care of the repairs, and the building was in better shape when I left than it had
been in quite a long time.

Player Relationships

In addition to the baseline relationships that grew between parents, which were
categorized at the minimum by a friendly exchange of greetings, closer relationships did form
on a team. Most of these relationships were described by parents as “acquaintances,” but some of
them moved beyond this and into the realm of friendship. The homophily principle (McPherson,
Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) would suggest that parent relationships form on the basis of the
elective affinities people share with one another. In contexts such as Little League, where there
was a diverse array of life circumstances and characteristics on any given team, parent networks
could form on the basis of many different characteristics, whether they are ethnic, political,
religious, or some other characteristic. That is, homophily was expressed at the status or value
level (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954). However, in the youth sport context, it was not strictly
parent affinities and similarities that drove relationship formation. It was instead often driven by
the friendship networks the children creates amongst themselves. This was because children can
play a crucial role in the relationships that formed between their parents. In this particular
context, kids played the primary role in facilitating the creation and the dissolution as well as the
closeness of parent relationships. The evidence that children’s networks could either augment or
subvert homophily lies in the tendency of parents to emphasize the differences between
themselves and their close sport friends as much as they emphasize their similarities.
Additionally, they also often attributed primacy to the relationship of the children. This condition arises partially because of the importance to the vast majority of parents of intergenerational closure (Coleman 1988):

I make it my cause to know all of my kids’ friends’ parents. Cause I want to know who my children associate themselves with. Maybe the kids are really good kids, but maybe the parents aren’t that, and that’s it. So that way I know who they’re around and everything. I make it a point to know who they are. ‘Cause whether my kids enjoy that or not, I still do that (Leanne, mother of 4 children in Little League, ranging in age from 4 – 15).

This does not mean that they sought friendships with their children’s friends’ parents. In most cases, they did not. But they did seek closure within these networks, and for much the same reason as Coleman noted, particularly monitoring. Again, Leanne:

It’s funny how when they do try and think they’re gonna be sneaky, they forget that the parents talk (laughs) so we kind of like always seem to stop their little plans that they think they’re making. That’s fine, you know. We all thought we were smarter than our parents, but whatever. I think that that helps because sometimes I’ll call up the mom or whatever. I’m like “You know what?” Or I’ll just text the mom, and I’m like “Hey you know what? This is what’s going on.” She’s like “Oh no, that’s not what they told me.” And so I think it helps.

However, the network benefits of getting to know one’s children’s friends did not end with social control. In some cases, the children’s friendship spurred the development of closer relationships between the parents. It is important to note that, in all of the cases I encountered of close sport relationships, the children’s friendship preceded the relationships between the parents. While here the principle of homophily does operate, because parents generally had options for which of their children’s friends they create close ties with, parents were equally likely when I interviewed them to point out the ways in which they were different from their close friends. They tended to attribute the closeness of their relationship merely to the “niceness” or “friendliness” of the other party involved:
I’d say she was very friendly, very friendly, very nice and open and um… Also, different political views and I’m not anywhere near as religious as she is. I guess, it’s probably more of a, you know, [we] probably got to know each other more because of the kids at first… (Ruth, Mother of a Wildcats player, describing a close friendship developed when her child was playing basketball).

When people described their close friends, they were talking about people for whom they would go out of their way, both socially and economically. The relationships created in youth sports were not seen as any different in that respect from relationships developed in other contexts.

These were friends for whom my respondents would loan money, give a place to stay, take their kids for a time if necessary, and in general do anything necessary to see their friends through tough times:

Yeah. I mean, this one family, it’s crazy. We were coming back from Pueblo, Colorado, just last March actually. And the roads were snowy and icy. We actually all got snowed in back in Raton. Well, this family decided to leave early. And then they ended up getting into an accident. And… they lived in their fifth-wheel that they were pulling when they got into the accident. So we found them a place to live, bought them all groceries. We took care of them. (Arlene, Board member)

These close relationships did not form often, and they usually did not form over the course of one season. Consequently, I did not witness firsthand the formation of close friendships taking place within the youth sport context. However, nearly every parent I spoke with had at least one close friend that they had met through baseball or softball, and they tended to speak of the formation of those relationships in terms of time spent with each other over multiple seasons:

It’s a progression, yeah. ‘Cause I’ve known Jack since…his son is the same age as Miguel, so we coached Pee Wee, I mean tee-ball together. That’s where I got to first know him. And then we coached, you know, a fall ball team together. And then we didn’t coach together for a few years, but we’re still kinda general friends. But this year, actually, we’ve actually become real good friends, where we’re doing things together. In fact, we’re going out with them tonight, so (laughs). So it’s a progression thing. It’s not an overnight thing, you know? (Scott, board member and coach)

Not only did the kids involved play a role in friendship formation, they also played a role in relationship dissolution. In some cases, parents preempted the end of the kids’ relationships by
avoiding investment in the relationship. This was done with the explicit knowledge that the end of the children’s relationship meant the end of the parents’ relationship. Rita and Maria served as co-team mothers for the Mariners during their season. The coordination of an All-Star team in terms of fundraising and tournament travel were immense, and the women spent a great deal of time in contact with one another during the season. During my interview with Rita, she was either called or text messaged by Maria no fewer than six times. They began to develop what I thought to be a close bond. I was certain that their relationship would continue at the conclusion of the season. However, when I asked Rita about it, she was quite certain that it would not:

**Interviewer:** Do you see yourself continuing any sort of relationship with Theresa past the end of the season? You know, you two have been interacting so intensely for a while.

**Rita:** Mmmm… Probably not, because the kids go to different schools and, there aren’t any other common bonds between the boys after the season ends.”

The effects of children’s sometimes roller-coaster type relationships on parental relationships extended outside of the youth sport context as well. Leanne detailed this process when talking about a tumultuous relationship her daughter shared with one of her friends:

Recently, they had a falling out, were mad at each other, and you try and not let it affect how you speak to the person but it kind of made it a little awkward for the time, because we both said we knew the girls were mad at each other, so we kind of um… still talked, but it made the relationship slightly awkward at the time, until the girls decided they were done being girls and made up. And they were fine, and so me and her started to talk again normal. So I think that sometimes when there’s a falling out with the kids, if your relationship’s based solely off of… you became friends because your kids were friends, I think that it tests that or messes with that a little bit like, you’re not real sure where you stand, if you should stay being really good friends, even if your kids hate each other (laughs). Or if maybe your relationship should end because their relationship ended.

While sometimes parents attempted to keep a relationship going when their children have a falling out, it was extremely difficult to do so, and the relationship status of the children had a significant impact on the relationship status of the parents.
When kids participate in Little League (and other sports and extracurricular activities as well), in most cases, their parents participate as well, though the extent to which they participate varied widely. Outside of All-Stars, there was very little in terms of commitment that a parent needs to make outside of registration fees, fundraising obligations, and making sure their child arrives at practice and games on time. There was not a sense of obligation to socialize with the other parents on a child’s team, even if niceties were regularly observed between both Core and Fringe parents. Even within these spaces, however, there was a sense that the parents whose children played on the same team constituted some sort of group, with benefits and privileges accorded to its members. To the outside observer, the patterns of interactions between all of the parents on these teams probably would not look like relations upon which one could depend in a bind. In other words, it did not appear to me during my first season – in which I was observing the Twins and Wildcats – that parents viewed each other as much more than strangers, and that social capital creation lay only in the close relationships that I had heard formed, but had not actually witnessed forming in the three and a half months I had spent with the teams. My interviews, however, revealed a very different process within the parent group. The ties that parents were forming were, in some cases, weaker than Granovetter’s (1973) “weak ties,” but they served similar purposes. While parents were very much in agreement with my observations that they did not interact very much, they still visualized themselves as a coherent group. They identified with each other, and seemed quite willing to help each other out in the event that it was warranted. What emerged in my analysis was the view that there was a baseline level of social trust, cooperation, and willingness to help (indicators of social capital within a relationship) that existed even within a group of relative (or even actual) strangers whose kids played baseball or softball together. While there did not often seem to be any all-inclusive groups of parents
forming on a youth sports team – that is, there were always specific networks, groups within
groups, cliques within a team, etc. – this did not preclude the willingness to offer help to other
parents on the team, even those whose relationship was hardly any stronger than strangers (that
is, even weaker than the “nodding” relationship described by Granovetter). While the demand for
much of the helping behavior described in these relationships was *created by* the participation in
youth sport (such as ferrying kids back and forth, child care, etc.), there was nothing precluding
the expansion of such helping behavior beyond the sporting context, and parents often indicated
that this was the case.

Taken as a whole, these elements within the VCLL should be examined in light of the
work undertaken in Small’s (2009b) *Unanticipated Gains*, particularly his understanding of how
institutions can facilitate social tie formation amongst parents through both *opportunities* and
*inducements*. Child care center activities such as field trips, parents’ boards, spring cleaning, and
fundraising exercises functioned not only as center activities, but as opportunities for parents to
get to know one another. For Small, daycare centers in New York City offered a fertile context
for parental relationship formation because they both required parents to take an active role in
their functioning, but also because this participation offered something to parents of the children
attending the centers. Small noted that these institutional elements can succeed in fostering
parental relationships as a byproduct of participation, and when parents were not necessarily
motivated in their participation by their desire to make friends with other parents, “Friendship
formation depends not just on the actors’ motivation, but also the opportunities and inducements
to interact produces by their social contexts,” (p. 62). The VCLL functioned similarly in all of
the elements mentioned above in this section. In the team creation and selection process, in
practices and games, in all-star participation, in board participation, and through their own
children’s relationships, parents had opportunities to interact with other parents. Further, like Small’s daycare centers (but perhaps to an even greater extent), the VCLL relied on the volunteer work of its parents for its very survival. Finally, Small astutely noted that the center activities served as a form of parental multitasking, whereby parents combined time with their children with other activities, such as center participation and parental socialization. The VCLL worked in an identical manner. Parents, especially those with multiple children participating in the league, often spent many hours per week at the fields. They had dinner at the concession stand, and sat in the stands with other family members. And they socialized with other parents they met through the league. Like Small’s centers, they were “…the answer to the multitasker’s prayers,” (p. 77).

However, there were also distinctions to be drawn between the VCLL and Small’s centers as well, owing mainly to the difference between the institutions under study. These differences, I argue, suggest that other institutions may well offer other, distinct possibilities when it comes to facilitating social ties. For one, Small’s centers focused primarily on the mothers who were responsible for their children’s day-to-day activity at the centers. The VCLL, on the other hand, involved fathers at a much higher rate than do the daycare centers in *Unanticipated Gains*. In my experience, fathers in the VCLL formed relationships in a similar fashion to the mothers, though they were more likely to do so while coaching the team on the field, providing a further focus to their activity. One would expect that activities that can facilitate both parents’ participation in a similar manner would show similar results. Second, while the VCLL offered plenty of opportunities for parents to meet and interact, they offered far fewer inducements. While volunteer activity was necessary for the survival of the league, such duties were not often looked on by parents as desirable activities. In particular, volunteering as
an umpire was not seen as particularly rewarding, and the board relied on its coaches, already overworked in their current capacity, as umpires as well. Parents likewise tended to stay away from board membership largely because of the time commitment it took to be a board member, and the dysfunction (rightly) perceived by many parents, often referred to as its “drama.” When I spoke with Therese, a young mother of 3 who worked for a local educational nonprofit and whose son played on the Mariners’ All-Star team, she spoke of the vague but persistent feeling on many of the uninvolved parents surrounding the VCLL board, “I’ve heard like little… rumors or like… mumblings of like their own drama. I think they got even other stuff than just money going on within them, but… um, I know I just hear little things, and I never asked for, for clarification or anything, you know, I just kind of mind my own business.” Not only does the board drama keep some parents away from participation, but it also drove some existing board members away from their positions, “I asked Joshua [the league president] if he knew why Ryan [league Vice President and Chief Umpire] was quitting, and he told me that it was because of all the drama associated with the board. Ryan had told Joshua it wasn’t fun anymore. Joshua has taken his leaving as confirmation that the problems with the board would be very costly” (Fieldnotes) Were the league so motivated, they would be able to benefit from increased participation in their volunteer activities by increasing the inducements of volunteering. Such increases could benefit the league in both the short-term and the long-term (see Chapter 7).

The league mechanisms for bringing parents together either through team construction or through board involvement – these were the primary devices through which parents could reasonably form relationships through their participation – can be viewed in light of general theories of network formation. Broadly, research on network formation has taken a few major directions. In one strain, rational actors develop networks in accordance with their own needs
and desires as well as the constraints of the social context (see Snijders, van de Bunt, and Steglich 2010 for a recent example of the balance between rationality and exogenous factors in network structure). The principle of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), on the other hand, posits that people are simply more likely to create relationships with those who are “like” them on some critical variable. Still another strain of research offers that in order for people to form relationships, they must first meet, and that for any given individual, their dispositions, routines, and patterns of behavior mean that they are more likely to meet some and less likely to meet others, known as the principles of meeting and mating (Verbrugge 1977). Once meeting has occurred, Feld (1981) noted that ties are more likely to form in social contexts where action is focused. Mario Small (2009b) then applied this theory to his study of mothers’ relationships in daycare centers.

Within the VCLL, there were multiple sets of actors engaging in the process of both meeting and mating, and multiple factors converging to facilitate or constrain relationship formation. In this setting – and likely in most others – these processes illustrated a mish-mash of these various network formation theories at work. Underlying all of these processes, however, is the focused nature of the activity. Feld defined a focus as, “…a social, psychological, legal, or physical entity around which joined activities are organized (e.g., workplaces, voluntary organizations, hangouts, families, etc.),” (1981:1016). Little League, through its mission as an organization dedicated to serving children, is assuredly a focused organization. That focus allowed parents to have a natural starting point for conversations, as well as a trait in common. As there was also an attribution of value similarity between many parents in Little League – the idea that parents whose children participate in Little League had similar or at least compatible
values to their own – allowed even strangers to start from a position of amiability rather than suspicion, which eases the process of moving from strangers to acquaintances.

However, because the players themselves had a significant impact on the potential relationship partners for their parents in this context, parents may find themselves with what they might consider less-than-ideal choices to move from acquaintance to friend. Children on sports teams may not base their friendships on the same criteria as their parents might, instead creating a hierarchy based largely around playing ability (Fine 1987). My own conversations with parents revealed not only that their children significantly impacted the social networks they formed in the league, but that they could form close friendships with people they were apt to describe as “different” from them as much as they were “similar”. To the extent that Little League drew a diverse cross-section of a given population, it may be that it is a productive site for the construction of “bridging” social capital (Putnam 2000).

What will be made apparent in the following section – the actual benefits exchanged within these budding relationships – is that the particular focus of the activity (the kids) undermines the rational investment of actors into potential social capital relationships. The prevailing ideology of the League leaves, in many parents’ minds, little room for personal gain and benefit. While some may accept the idea of benefits as a by-product of their participation, there is disdain for the idea that parents could use their child’s participation deliberately to further their own ends, be they personal or professional. This affected the level and types of resources exchanged in the setting.
Social Capital Benefits of Little League Participation

Childcare

Most often, the types of benefits that parents could expect merely by signing their child up for Little League revolved around the types of services often created by the participation in Little League itself, particularly the care for children in the absence of the parent (whether at practices or games). This was the explicit responsibility of the coaches who, if the event arose, were obligated to wait with their team until they were all accounted for. Coaches universally expressed a willingness to engage in this type of waiting (which was quite rare), as well as an enthusiasm for helping kids get to practice and games as well:

Yeah, on our Minor team, [Manager] gives kids rides every single day. I’ll pick one or two up once or twice a week, or give’em a ride home, you know. And that happens a lot. This year especially. Last year I gave couple kids a ride home, not too often. But uh, this year we give a lot of kids a ride home. (Scott, coach and board member)

Yeah, there’s a manager, and team coaches… but kids always need to get picked up. There’s always times when kids are gonna have to have a ride home, because dad had to go to work or whatever. So you get that core group of parents together, and as long as they don’t keep the other parents out, it works out great. (Ryan, former coach and Board member)

This was not, however, the exclusive domain of team coaches. Parents, especially Core and Fringe parents, also expressed a near-universal willingness to provide the same type of help. In many cases, however, parents framed the help not in terms of what they were doing for the parents of the player, but what they were doing for the players themselves:

That’s just something that- and I don’t do it for the parents. I do it for the kids, cause I don’t want the kids to miss practice. I don’t want them to miss a game. If somebody needs help buying a uniform, we would pick it up, you know, stuff like that. Oh yeah, in a heartbeat. (Melody)

If there was a kid that needed a ride home from practice or needed a ride to practice, I would. I would definitely do it. Because, like I said, it’s all about the kids. Like for wrestling, there’s a boy that lives down the street from us, and he lives with his
grandmother who’s, I think she’s 87. His mom is a mess. She’s on drugs really bad, and she shows up once a month for about a week, but she doesn’t take care of’em, doesn’t do anything. And Derrick picked him up every day for practice, and took him to wrestling. And we took him to all the tournaments and paid his whole entire way and stuff. Just because you see a kid like that, and just like… you see the need for this kid to have something to do. But that was completely voluntary. I mean, nobody asked that of us. (Julianne, parent of Cubs player Sam)

While these parents may have, in fact, seen what they do for these kids as benefits to the kids themselves – and they are no doubt correct – they were certainly benefitting the parents as well. However, the notion of being available “for the kids” was pervasive in this environment, and many parents saw this helpful behavior as an extension of the commitment to their own children, and there was a sense that other parents who have taken the time and committed their children to Little League were in some ways like themselves:

    There’s a commonality. You see them putting in just as much work as you, you know, so... Even if it’s brand new people every time, you spend a lot of time together, you know? So… you do end up building some sort of relationships. (Therese)

This general feeling of commonality toward parents of youth sport participants allowed parents to start from a position of trust in stranger relationships, rather than the guarded skepticism that characterizes typical stranger relations. Certainly conflicts occurred between parents, and those fractured relationships had a negative effect on the level of trust and willingness to help between the two parties. On the whole, however, these conflicts were rare between parents on the same team.

    The expansion of social capital resources outside of the direct demands of youth sport participation was less common if only because the demand arose far less often than did the need for the occasional ride to or from practices or games, or the need to wait with a child until their parents made it to the fields to pick them up. The extraneous social capital resources that were typically shared in this context included emotional support, information, and business
transactions that resulted from the familiarity generated by youth sport participation. More direct material transactions existed in the realm of the hypothetical much more than they did in actuality, but many parents at least expressed a willingness to offer that kind of support in the event that it was needed. However, the actual mobilization of such social capital was never observed directly and rarely expressed in casual conversations or formal interviews.

**Emotional Support**

Emotional support is one of the most prevalent and important social capital benefits (Van der Gaag and Snijders 2004). While the terminology of social capital may be of recent vintage, the idea that social ties have effects on mental and physical well-being is far older, dating to the foundational works of the discipline itself (Durkheim 1968 [1951]). While there is a certain amount of consternation over empirical results, causal directions, and generalizability, there is enough evidence to conclude that having emotional outlets can lessen the burden of psychological stress under the right conditions (Kawachi and Berkman 2001). To the extent that friends can act as a replacement for therapists, the emotional and the material are quite blurred. However, the ability to turn to a friend in times of psychological need is one of the most valued elements of friendship. Many relationships that developed in the VCLL did not merit the sharing of personal information that would indicate emotional support; those relationships were too shallow and ephemeral to develop this kind of sharing. However, there were relationships that did develop amongst parents. When they did, they were a valuable source of social and emotional support. Leanne, a board member with 4 children playing in various age divisions was a very familiar face throughout the league. This occasionally led her to be called upon for emotional support from parents, even those she did not consider to be close friends:

That happened like the other day at the fields. I had like three different women come up to me. One was a school teacher at my kids’ school, and the two other ones I just like
know from the fields and stuff, tell me about their marriage problems, and I was like wow, do I have a sign on my head that says I want to know? (laughs). I’m all... I was like, I was like I had no, I didn’t know what to tell people... I’m all really. I’m sorry... you know? But I just listen; I don’t really say much.

Coaches in particular were seen by parents as valuable sources of emotional support and advice. They were not always comfortable with this role in these relationships. Ricardo was a tall yet rotund man who worked intermittently as a glazier who coached for Brent in 2011 and for many others in previous seasons. He recounted for me being put in an awkward position by a mother who wanted relationship advice:

Well, we had a lady last year when I was coaching… She didn’t go to [manager] to talk. She didn’t go to anybody, but she came to me to talk to me about her kid’s dad. I didn’t know how to handle it. ‘Cause I was like, “Well, I don’t, I don’t want to be put in the middle of…” I don’t know how crazy this dude is, you know what I mean? What if I tell the lady something and then she goes and tells him, “Oh well he told me to tell you this?” You know, then he comes after me, or you know what I mean?

And I just told the lady, I was like, “You know, I understand where you’re coming from and stuff, but really, I’m here as a coach, you know, and I don’t want to really get involved in… you know somebody’s personal life. You know, talk to me about your kid, if your kid needs a little encouragement at school or to get through this class or whatever, I can sit down and talk, Maybe try a little bit harder for your parents, you know, or whatever.” I’m not gonna go in there and try to council no lady on her marriage, you know what I mean?

Other parents shared similar anecdotes from baseball and other sports. What was most interesting about this form of support was that, for the people I interviewed and spoke with casually, they were always the benefactors in the transaction. Only hypothetically – and even then only sporadically – did people acknowledge that they had friends or acquaintances in the VCLL that they would feel comfortable calling on in the event that they needed emotional support. Just as Ricardo was uncomfortable providing a parent on his team with advice on her marital struggles, he was equally reluctant to share his own personal struggles with other team parents:
Interviewer: So of the friends that you’ve made in sports, have you ever been in a situation where you’ve sort of gone to one of them for like emotional support, or just needed somebody to talk to, that kind of thing?

Ricardo: No, not really. I mean, basic friend stuff, you know what I mean? But no, never like… I mean if I’m gonna go to somebody to talk to somebody like that, I’d go to the doctor, you know what I mean? Talk to a shrink if I need to, you know, or whatever, you know? I mean, I’m not the type of person to really open up or talk to just anybody about, you know, like personal stuff like that.

Interviewer: So there are none of your friends that you’ve made from Little League that you’d feel comfortable doing that with?

Ricardo: Mmm, maybe like Eduardo. And I know Graciela would be the same with Carolina. That’s kind of funny, ’cause Graciela says we’re almost seeing them as a couple is almost looking at us as a couple, you know what I mean?

This imbalance between benefactors and beneficiaries was prevalent not only in the creation of emotional support as social capital, but in most other areas as well. In the end, it may be that respondents were reluctant to share their emotional vulnerability with me as an interviewer, and so they spoke of emotional support in terms of what they have provided rather than what they have sought out. Their willingness to, at the very least, listen to the problems of other parents indicates that, were it to be sought, emotional support for parents would be available. In all of these cases, Core parents were the benefactor in the transaction, lending further credence to their status as social centers of the team.

Information Sharing

One resource that did pass more freely between parents on a team was information, particularly about jobs, but also about goods and services throughout Valley City. With the high proportion of parents involved in the construction industry, the economic crisis hit Valley City as hard as or harder than surrounding areas. Unemployment was a fact of life for many families in the league, and information about job opportunities was especially valued. The passing of employment information as a form of social capital is well-established (beginning with Granovetter 1973).
The advantage of this type of social capital is that it was extremely low-cost for the benefactor and required very little in the way of affect toward the beneficiary in order for the possessor to be properly motivated to pass the information along. In other words, it was a potentially very valuable form of common courtesy passed between friends and acquaintances.

One parent in particular had a great deal of information passed along to him as a result of his involvement in Little League and his intermittent unemployment. Ricardo has worked on and off for several years as a glazier in commercial developments. With commercial construction at a standstill in the area, Ricardo found it difficult to find regular work. Because he served the past two years as either a coach or a manager of a team, he was a Core parent on his son’s teams and thus in regular contact with the other parents on these teams. When managing his son’s team in 2010, he informed that parents that, because of his unemployment, he would be readily available to pick up kids for practices and games and the like. He found that, during the course of the season, he was subject to a great deal of concern and information passing from the parents on his team. During the 2011 season with the Cubs, his information was less well-known, since his position as Brent’s assistant rather than the manager left him feeling less obligated to share the information. For the people that did know, however, he still was the recipient of job information, assistance, and concern:

Ricardo: A lot of the parents know that I’m currently unemployed, you know what I mean? So there’s, yeah, I talk to parents about… ‘Oh well, try this place. They might be hiring here. Or have you tried this place,’ or… ‘You know, try this place, I know this guy,’ or something like that. This year not so much as anybody else, cause last year I felt like I was more of a head coach than as an assistant, so I felt like I needed to share that with the parents, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: So you don’t think the parents here know as much about it.

Ricardo: Yeah, like this year’s parents don’t really know. A few people have asked me, “Hey well, what do you do?” You know, and I’m like, “Oh I’m a glazier. I do glasswork for a living. That’s what I do.” And that’s pretty much been, been it, you know what I
mean? But like last year I felt I had more of a responsibility to the team, maybe. So, you have your little parents meetings. “Well I’m unemployed right now, so if anybody needs any help getting their kids to practice or… you know whatever, just give me a call.”

**Interviewer:** And you found that they sort of volunteered that information to you throughout the year.

**Ricardo:** Yeah, yeah. They like giving out- I mean I’d see parents, and they’d be like, “Hey you found a job yet?” I’m like, “Yeah, I got a job.” You know, they’re like, “Oh, ok good. Good for you.” People remember, you know what I mean?

Sierra, Brent’s wife, was in a particularly useful position in her own company to pass along information to contractors and skilled construction workers throughout the league, working for a company that was initiating building contracts all over the state for its projects. She was an especially valuable resource for not only Ricardo, but Ron as well, with whom she and Brent were close:

Yeah, like Ricardo. Um, you know, he’s out of work, and so… we’re building this solar field here and they’re having a job fair, so it’s like, “Brent, call Ricardo and tell’em to go to the job fair.” Um, Ron got a couple of jobs from me. So, I mean, if I know what your business is and I see an opportunity that may fit, then I’ll put your name on the list, but I won’t go out of my way for you. Like, I’ll say you know if somebody asks, “So is Sean any good?” “This is how I know him. That’s, you know, his kid plays sports with me and… um, I see him at the ballpark, you know.” But… nice guy, how he runs his business, what his quality of work is… I don’t know, but I’ll put him on the list.

So, you know, I won’t vouch for somebody unless I know. Like if somebody’s built a porch for me, then yeah. He built a porch for me, did a good job. But otherwise, I’ll help you in a way that – and this might seem stupid to you – in a way that, you know… That’s why you know people, is to help you get leads and stuff that you wouldn’t otherwise have. And so like if I know you’re a painter, and I know somebody needs their house painted, you know, I might put you together but then it’s, you know, you guys work it out kind of thing.

Sierra’s quote is telling because it also illustrates the low-cost nature of information versus actually vouching for someone for a job. The nature of her relationship with Ricardo was not such that she would recommend him for a particular job. Such a benefit was only allowed for people who were closer. Information costs very little and is potentially very beneficial. A
recommendation, or a ‘good word,’ while potentially even more valuable, also comes with a considerably greater potential cost to the benefactor:

That’s a bit different. Yeah, I really think you’d have to get to know’em a little bit better, you know because… You always want to have the most qualified person in a position, period. So… I’d have to know a little bit more about the individual to refer him for a job. (Nicholas, father of Cubs player)

Information passing, however, did not end with job information. There were also circumstances where parents passed along other information to parents that could be quite helpful to those parents, especially if those parents were in need for particular services that they were having trouble acquiring on their own, or at a better price or better value. In such cases, again, the cost to the benefactor in the transaction was minimal. If the tip turned out to be a bad one, it may perhaps have cost the benefactor in reputation or prestige, but in most cases, the costs would be minimal:

You know I just saw Dean, you know, Dean? He’s a good guy. I just saw him at Wal-Mart when I was getting dog food. And I said, ‘What’s going on Dean?’ And he said, ‘Oh, I chipped my crown, and my damn dentist, he can’t get me in for two weeks’. I said, ‘I know a guy: Dr. Jones right down here, County Dental. Nice guy, young guy. Very good dentist. He’ll take you. Won’t make you take two weeks, I can guarantee that. Call him.’ I share information like that all the time. (Nicholas)

The cost of passing this information along to Dean was minimal to Nicholas, and the benefit to Dean was far greater. In the event that Nicholas’ tip was bad, or if the dentist could not deliver on his promises, then perhaps Nicholas would suffer a loss of prestige in the relationship. However, even then, the cost compared to the potential benefit offered would have been quite small. In other situations, passing information along stood to benefit the league as a whole, as when a new Board member suggested a better way for the league to maximize the value it gets from its sponsorships:

The meeting agenda turns to the 2011 registration dates. The official registration committee is Marilyn, Melody, and Leanne. They first talk is of needing banners, and
then the talk turns to when to open up online registration… One of the newcomers (soon-to-be-elected board members) suggests that they can get banners much cheaper than what the committee was discussing. They get their banners from a guy in El Paso. You send him what you want, and he will send you a mockup before sending the banner out to you. For $10, they claim they can get the same size banner that the committee claimed was going to cost $40. There is then a lengthy discussion about what exactly to put on the banners. (Fieldnotes)

Had this tip turned out to be a bad one, or if the sign maker had not delivered on the banners the way that the newcomer had suggested, he would have faced a more substantial loss of face and prestige on the Board. However, by passing the information along in the first place, he stood to gain standing on the Board and position himself as an influential member of the Board going forward. This may have positioned him as a serious candidate for the Presidency which, at the time, he was considering. While in both cases, the benefactor may have had other motivations in mind, including friendship and altruism, increased prestige has been hypothesized as motivation for passing along information and/or services when there was no quid pro quo expectation, either in terms of specific or generalized reciprocity (Lin 2001a).

**Business Contacts**

Finally, the VCLL, because it brought together a diverse array of people with all sorts of skills to offer, and a great deal of demand for services rendered, and because it placed strangers in a context with a baseline level of trust above and beyond that of strangers, it was a place where useful business contacts could be made, both for people who were offering services as well as people who were looking for them. For parents who were on the same team, in both the Core and Fringe groups, there was often considerable knowledge of what people do for a living. In many of these cases, there was not an opportunity for those people to leverage contacts for an increase in business. Max, for example, worked for a large corporation as a mid-level manager. His company is well-known and has extensive advertising. The amount of business he could generate
for his company was miniscule to the business it already generated, and so he was unlikely to profit from any other parent knowing his profession.

However, for the people in the league who were self-employed, it could be a profitable decision to make it known what their professional skills were. Adam, a barrel-chested, outspoken, and very gregarious and popular manager and Board member, is an independent mortgage broker in the area. Because of the housing crisis, his business had become a difficult one. However, he found that Little League provided him with a way to give his business a boost, and he financed mortgages for many people in the league, especially for the parents of kids he coached in the past. Scott, a coach and Board member who was an insurance agent in Valley City, also has seen his business benefit from his association with the league:

Scott: A couple of times. A couple of times. I can’t say a lot.

Interviewer: I mean I know you don’t go into it for that. I know you don’t see Little League as a business opportunity.

Scott: Yeah, you know. Yeah (laughs). That’s- but that’s not why I’m there (laughing).

No, I mean, yeah, you know I’ve gotten a couple of clients from interaction or meeting other parents or… things like that, from there. But again, that’s not my intention, and I don’t solicit- I’m not the type- I’m even with my friends and family and stuff like that, I don’t solicit myself, saying ‘Hey, you know…” That’s not my primary thing. I’d rather be your friend than sell you a policy kind of deal. Now if you ask me, I’ll, I’ll do that and I’ll do it to the best of my ability. Um… but that’s not my first intention, you know.

While no one would admit to purposively utilizing contacts to benefit their own businesses, it remains likely that, were they to do so, that they would find themselves with a great deal of potential new clients. Every parent who was asked about their preference in utilizing parents within the league for services they might need (because of the high proportion of electricians, plumbers, and contractors in the league, I used these professions as my examples; I presume that their preferences would extend to other professional services, such as lawyers, doctors,
accountants, etc.) indicated that they would be far more likely to trust a parent of a child on their child’s team than someone chosen by other means, given (of course) that they did not already have their own connections to the services needed:

Oh yeah, I totally take advantage of that. Especially around here, how else are you supposed to know anybody? Everybody will rip you off faster than you can blink. So if you don’t know that, then you’re gonna get screwed. Like, the way you get in around here is by asking people who they know and who they’ve had do other things, and it’s like the ripple effect… So a mechanic, you need a mechanic, you need a plumber, anything. You, you got a hookup. You just got to talk to enough people, and figure it out. (Katheryn, mother of Cubs player Martin)

At the same time, the mobilization of this type of social capital was quite low according to my interviews. This could be because people were so reluctant to attribute any benefits of youth sport participation to any entity outside of “the kids,” who are seen to be the first and only beneficiaries of their participation in Little League. Thus, any social capital benefits accruing to the parents of the league must be presented as a byproduct of participation, and parents’ were reluctant to view their participation in these terms.

There was some potential for abuse of profession-based social capital, however, and this was occasionally exasperating for service providers. This occurred both when people took advantage of generosity and begin abusing it (e.g., when they ignored the acceptable boundaries between professional and personal life, such as calling at all hours of the day, calling personal phone lines when business lines are not being answered), or because people attempted to utilize relationships in a way that makes the potential benefactor uncomfortable with their role. In the case of Julianne, who, with her husband run a plumbing company, the abuse of the relationship led to significant changes, including having to pay to have their home phone number unlisted after people began asking for professional advice and services on their personal time:
It, it’s frustrating, it’s frustrating in, in the fact that it’s, you know… call during business hours. Our phone number’s unlisted because when we did service, they would call the business phone. I mean, you’d be there, you know, watching a movie, and we used to run it out of our house. And the business line would ring, and the answering machine would come on, and they’d hang up, and then within just a few minutes, they were calling the home phone. I mean, they were looking, Tanner Plumbing, and then, they’re like, “Oh yeah, there’s Derrick Tanner right there.” And they would just call the personal phone, and it’s just- don’t do that. You know, we ended up changing our personal phone number and un-listing it, because it was frustrating.

The situation was especially sticky for those in law enforcement. There were many parents involved in youth sports throughout Valley City who were also involved in law enforcement in the area. They were seen as a wellspring of legal information, some of which they did not always feel qualified to answer. They sometimes downplayed their involvement in the profession in order to avoid some of the questions. To those who were known, however, the questions were plentiful:

Christina: Oh like everything from “Is it illegal if you’re driving 3 miles over the speed limit, would you arrest me?” Or, you know, “You know this cop did this, and why did they do that?” Or they’ll come up, even simple things. Just the other day, someone came up, “How big does your child need to be to um, not be in a car seat?” Those kinds of things. So, they will ask… zillions of questions. Or it might be something legal, like, “Hey my sister in law’s going through a rough battle with child support”… Um, you know they will ask anything from legal questions to civil questions, opinions. They ask anything.

In an interview with another member of law enforcement, Christina’s husband Lawrence:

Lawrence: Oh, I get, I get everything from… “Hey um… my car got door dinged at Wal-Mart this weekend. Uh, what can I do? Do I need to file a police report?” Um, anything from that to… Uh, you know, domestic stuff like uh… custody issues

Interviewer: So you get some more serious types of inquiries as well?

Lawrence: Yeah because a lot of parents uh, are either divorced or separated or stuff like that. And they’ll have a question about custodial stuff or… um, ‘You know this happened this weekend, what should I do?’ Um, so sometimes I get some serious stuff. Uh, other times it’s just basic uh, you know, ‘Hey, I got a ticket. Um… do you know this officer?’
These questions, as they became more complicated or demanding, sometimes placed the officers in uncomfortable positions if they were unable to properly answer questions or if they were unwilling to use their position to help their friends out of minor legal difficulties, such as a traffic violation.

In *Lone Pursuit* (2009), Sandra Smith explored social capital among the urban black poor who were searching for (or had) jobs. She found that those who had jobs were often willing to share information about openings in their own company, but reluctant to move from information-sharing to “vouching” for someone who had applied – much as Sierra’s own distinction above of information vs. advocating in her own employment dealings. Smith articulated 3 conditions which were weighed by job holders when deciding whether or not to vouch for a job seeker: their assessment of the job seeker’s reputation, their own reputation within their company, and the strength of their relationship with the job seeker (p. 60). One can see these elements operating as well in the stories of Julianne, Christina, and Lawrence, though with their own jobs rather than simple information passing. In these cases, violations of norms by requesters put off the potential benefactors, such that they felt discomfort or annoyance at being put in such positions. For Christina or Lawrence, they may have felt that their distant relationships with those asking precluded answering legal questions outside of their duty as police officers or simply answering questions they were not professionally qualified to answer. In other cases, they became annoyed when people “overstepped” the bounds of the relationship, such as when (as Christina explained) “…people that aren’t necessarily my friend but my acquaintance, but they’re getting pulled over by the cops and they want to call me and bitch about it, or they want me to get them off of it. I’m like, ‘You know, I’m not here for that, you know? If you, you were speeding and you were a jerk to the cop, don’t call me and throw my name out there.’” Such violations by individuals without
sufficient personal history may have caused the individuals to withdraw from such exchanges altogether, as Julianne explained when she and her husband changed their home phone number and made sure it was no longer listed in the phone book. Personal history certainly mattered when exchanges were requested and made. While Smith emphasized three relevant criteria when evaluating potential exchange between job seekers and job holders, parents in the VCLL were more likely to emphasize the strength of the relationship and the magnitude of the exchange—which are strongly related.

CONCLUSION

Investigations of the social capital labyrinth have not ignored children and their role. Demographers have made significant headway into understanding the ways in which children can serve as sources of social capital, detailing both the direct emotional benefits to parents as well as the ancillary benefits of extending and strengthening familial networks. Further, demographers have detailed how parents acknowledge the social benefits of children, and how that value factors into fertility intentions and behaviors. Sociologists, for their part, have detailed the ways in which children benefit (or fail to benefit) from their relationships with parents and significant others, especially in the acquisition of human capital. While recent research has begun to act as a corrective to this one-way flow of social capital benefits, it is still an emerging idea, and little research has explored the mechanism by which this occurs in situ. In this chapter, I have argued that we can and should look at children and social capital in other ways. First, it is certainly true that children can and do serve as sources of social capital for their parents. This process is not always the result of a rational investment in social relationships through children, but rather (in the sociological tradition) as a byproduct of children’s participation in day-to-day activities. In this case, I detailed their participation in youth sport. I have also argued that the
benefits to parents from their children’s participation in youth sports can come about through several mechanisms: the team creation process, practices and games, All-Star teams, volunteering (particularly on the Board of Directors), and through the children’s friendships themselves. Benefits of this participation and the relationships built through it include context-related benefits such as a parent taxi service and supervision as well as extracurricular benefits such as emotional support, information about both employment and services within the community, and potential business contacts for both the self-employed and the substantial array of potential customers looking for providers they can trust. These benefits tend to arise because participation in youth sports embeds children and parents into an organizational structure that allows strangers to start from a position of trust rather than from a position of mistrust. The need for intergenerational closure leads parents to engage in relationships with their children’s friends’ parents, which can lead to closer relationship amongst parents. The implication of this desire is that children’s friendship networks in Little League and other youth sports can have a significant impact on the networks of their parents, even when this influence pushes them into relationships with people “different” from themselves.

While there is no reason that youth sport would be the only context in which this process occurs (certainly, there are parallels with any youth-centered organization, such as Parent-Teacher Organizations), it is important to consider some of the unique features of youth sport in terms of social capital creation. In particular, the structure of youth sports leagues and the creation of teams and competition naturally facilitate the formation of in-groups and out-groups. The self-contained micro-drama (Sage 1978) that the sporting event creates is a very powerful catalyst for the formation of in-group sentiments between participants and spectators. I have been told repeatedly that higher levels of competition lead to higher levels of parent interaction and
stronger relationship bonds. The VCLL was widely considered as a middle-of-the-road league in terms of competition emphasis within the city. Many parents whose children also played football told me that the parent identification and relationship formation was much greater in that league, because it was considered the most competitive league in town. Within Little League, the All-Star season as far more competitive than the regular season, and the parent interactions within that season also tended to be more prevalent and more intense.
Chapter 5: Benefactors and Beneficiaries

In the previous chapter, I outlined the ways in which Little League served as a site for social capital building, and some of the specific benefits that can be derived from participation in such an activity. In this chapter, I want to explore the relationship between donors and recipients in the exchange of the benefits outlined in the previous chapter, including the motives of both donors and recipients, the role of the league in facilitating or constraining the exchange of benefits, and the role of children in facilitating or constraining the exchange of these benefits. The motives of donors in these exchange situations have been explored by other social capital theorists, particularly Alejandro Portes and colleagues, Charles Kadushin, and Paul Adler and Seok-Woo Kwon (see Chapter 2 for a more substantial exploration of these works). However, social capital theorists and scholars have for too long ignored the motivations of recipients in these exchanges, dismissing them as obvious or given. The study of the institutional backing for social capital, particularly where children are involved, has been studied extensively by Mario Small (2009b), and I will examine this work in relation to his throughout the chapter. Finally, as noted in chapter 2, the study of the impact of children on social capital exchange, especially that of their parents, is critically under examined. This work will provide both a foundation of such lines of questioning but also point to potential fruitful directions for future researchers interested in these types of questions.

The study of motivations can be a problematic endeavor, due to the idea that what we generally understand as “motives” have been described as merely linguistic endeavors used to rationalize or, in some cases, justify behavior which might otherwise be viewed negatively. Thus, in place of “real” motives, which are often set up as inherently biological, we end up studying rationalizations for action which fall into the trap of infinite regress, as Mills (1940)
cautions, “We cannot infer physiological processes from lingual phenomena. All we can infer and empirically check is another verbalization of the agent’s which we believe was orienting and controlling behavior at the time the act was performed” (p.909). Even some scholars more friendly to the study of motives in social networks, such as Kadushin (2002) place fundamental motives as residing in individual psychology, rather than in social context, “…we suggest a psychological rather than biological theory of basic drives… and show that the same drives towards safety on the one hand and efficacy on the other are also invoked as fundamental motives by contemporary academic psychologists…” (p. 78). However, I have undertaken the study of motives for social capital in this context for two reasons. First, there is a precedent set for trying to understand the motives for a social exchange of resources, through the work of Portes and his colleagues, but also repeated in other works (Schmid 2000; Kadushin 2002). Second, it seems desirable to try to understand motives because they, whether biological, psychological, or sociological, underlie the very actions we wish to study as a discipline, “Many sociologists are skeptical of the existence of any identifiable drives, needs, or impulses that might inspire volunteerism. They dismiss the idea of motivation altogether from sociological discourse on this topic. This is a mistake because talk about motives is a key organizing feature of everyday life. Humans impute motives-to themselves and to others-and thereby validate or challenge identities, strengthen or weaken commitment,” (Wilson 2000:218).

In Chapter 2 I introduced some of the literature on help-seeking to underscore the complexity of asking for and accepting help, even once the need for help is acknowledged. While some of the resource exchanges taking place in the VCLL conformed to expected patterns given what we know about requesting, providing, and receiving help, there were also forms of resource sharing that did not conform so comfortably to what many exchange theories expect.
These need to be explored, especially in child-centered environments. In the subsequent sections, I will explore the specific types of benefits denoted in Chapter 3: emotional support, child care, information sharing, and the cultivation of business contacts with particular care taken to explain the motives of both donors and recipients in these situations. I look additionally at the import of both the institutional environment as well as the presence of children on the exchange of benefits.

Recall Chapter 2 and the discussion on Portes’ dissemination of the motives of donors in social capital relationships (Portes 1995; Portes 1998; Portes 2000; Portes and Landolt 2000). Portes divided motives into two general categories: consummatory and instrumental. Consummatory motives are guided by norms and values that govern smooth social interaction. Instrumental motives are driven by cost-benefit calculations and investments in social relationships for future gain. Portes further subdivided the general category of consummatory motivations into Value Introjection and Bounded Solidarity. Value Introjection involves the internalization of general norm patterns involving helping out fellow human beings in times of need. Bounded solidarity involves the identification with a specific group of distinctive individuals such that when one member is in need of help, their mere membership in the group is enough to afford them a certain level of benefits from other members (think ethnic groups as a simple example). Portes also subdivided the general Instrumental category into the specific motives of Reciprocity and Enforceable Trust. Simple reciprocity involves the idea that favors in the present will pay off in the future. Portes likened it to the accumulation of “chits” which can be called upon at later dates when necessary. While this may initially sound like a simple economic exchange, it is distinguished in the following two ways: (1) the currency of repayment can be of a different form and may even be entirely intangible (approval, esteem, prestige, e.g.),
and (2) the timing of repayment is unspecified (Portes 1998:7). Enforceable Trust again invokes membership in a group as a guarantor of trustworthy actions by parties. In this case, the potential sanctions against violators of trust and social capital donations – such as ostracism, excommunication, or expulsion – is such that the donor can be assured of repayment, either from the original recipient or from other members of the group. While Portes only applied these motives to donors in social capital relationships, it might be useful, based on the conclusions drawn by the help-seeking literature, to look at this schema from the perspective of recipients as well, in order to glean its usefulness as a taxonomy of recipient motives as well as donor motives.

Kadushin, on the other hand, provided a psychological foundation for the motives for building social networks: safety drives and effectiveness drives. The safety drive “…clusters the motives and feelings of dependency, trust, and support,” and the effectiveness drive, “…clusters the motives and feelings of mastery, competition, and envy,” (p. 80). As such, we would expect social actors to cultivate two general types of ties, both weak and strong for different types of needs. In general, strong ties fulfill our need for safety, and weak ties fulfill our need for efficacy. Social actors will utilize strong ties to “get by” and utilize weak ties to “get ahead” (Pettit and McLanahan 2003).

In the next section, I explore the four classes of benefits offered in chapter 3, but with an eye toward a different set of questions. In particular, I look at both the professed and speculative motives of both donors and recipients, especially where there is reason to believe that extant social capital theory is left wanting in the face of the ethnographic evidence. I will also look to each category of benefit in terms of whether or how each is impacted by the institutional legitimacy of the league (i.e., how the league facilitates or constrains this particular type of
exchange above and beyond normal expectancy based on the strength of ties), as well as how the child-centered ideology of the league impacts the exchange of resources. Finally, I will make special note of a particular category of benefit (child care) that is characterized by a glut of supply and a relative paucity of demand, in contradiction to the expected balance between them offered by conventional theories of social capital and its motivations. That is to say, sometimes it is more difficult to account for the decision of recipients to engage in social capital exchanges than it is to account for the decision of the benefactor to do so.

INFORMATION SHARING

Information sharing, as I observed it in the VCLL, generally fit quite comfortably within the existing social capital theory framework, and seems to be least affected by the child-centered context nature of the league. Information generally passed freely between both weak and strong ties, and information was generally viewed as a low-cost way of helping other team parents out. This sharing of information took on two major forms: information about employment opportunities for those who were looking and information sharing about services available around town. Because they encompass distinct processes as well as different motives for donors and recipients, I treat them both separately in this section.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rates for New Mexico were 7.9% and 7.5% in April of 2010 and 2011 respectively, peaking at 8.0% between June and October 2010 (http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST35000003?data_tool=XGtable). The state’s current unemployment rate of 7.2% placed it below the national average of 8.1% (both figures as of April, 2011). However, the rate was high enough that it was a topic of conversation amongst parents during both seasons I was involved with the league. Of the four teams I followed, I was able to ascertain the employment status of the parents of 28 children (of a possible 41), with 3
having some sort of employment struggle. Of course the sample was too small to make any claims – even speculative ones – about the nature of employment in the league; they were, however, in line with the employment numbers for the state. Various people I spoke with, however, had experienced unemployment during their time in Valley City. For those who were currently employed, several spoke of the availability or utilization of social connections in job searching, such as Matthew, the official liaison between Valley City and its youth sports leagues. Matthew was a young-looking and well-educated Latino whose daughter played on a soccer team with my own. I spoke with him before entering the field about how he viewed the youth sporting scene in town. In speaking about his educational background (he had a business degree) and his current position, he told me:

No, not even close to business. (laughs). I’m transferring out of this area and somebody else is going to take it over and I’m going into a whole other area. More to do with business. I’m getting my Master’s degree, I should get it in June… I’ve talked to a bunch of people who are like, “What are you doing here, Why are you here?” Especially in the leagues, because there are a bunch of dads, a bunch of coaches. Once I get talking to them, they’re like, “Oh, well, you know come and talk to me or come, you know I know this guy and…”

This was not atypical, and job searches via friends came up sporadically and spontaneously during casual conversations and through my interviews.

For donors, the transmission of information about potential job openings within their own or another company would seem to be a very low-cost way of helping out fellow parents. Appeals to Value Introjection, a sense of Generalized Reciprocity, or Bounded Solidarity between team parents might to apply to information-holders that would motivate them to share such information with team parents. And, in fact, such information sharing did occur with regularity. Ricardo, the assistant coach for Brent’s Cubs team, was a professional glazier who often put window in at commercial developments around the state. However, during the 2010
and part of the 2011 season, he found himself out of work for periods of time. As he was a manager during the 2010 season, he announced to his parents that, due to his employment status, he would be available to take kids to and from practices and games in the event that their parents were unavailable. This revelation facilitated much sharing of information from his team’s parents on potential job leads, as noted in Chapter 4:

Yeah, yeah. I mean I’d see parents, and they’d be like, “Hey you found a job yet?” I’m like, “Yeah, I got a job.” You know, they’re like, “Oh, ok good. Good for you.” People remember, you know what I mean? And they remember you for the good and the bad. If you do something to piss them off, they’re gonna remember you for life, you know what I mean? If you do something that’s gonna- that makes’em feel good, they’re gonna remember you too.

Sierra, Brent’s wife and the Cubs’ team parent, worked in a position that privy to potential job opportunities for various contractors and tradespeople, and she routinely sent out this information as it came up:

With school, I know that Sandra - I don’t know if you’ve met Sandra but – Sandra’s husband has a storm water company, and we needed some silk fencing, so I’ll call Sandra’s husband and get a price from him. So, I mean, if I know what your business is and I see an opportunity that may fit, then I’ll put your name on the list.

While both donors and recipients saw this as a form of social capital benefit that enhanced both the status of the donor and the job opportunities of the recipient, recent research into the nature of job-seeking and information provision indicates that this type of information sharing lacks one crucial element: vouching. While Newman (1999) and Anderson (1999) cite both the importance of information channels and networks in the job-seeking process and the relative paucity of such assistance in low-status networks, Sandra Smith (2010) has conducted extensive research into job-seeking as a networked process and the specific limitations to that process. In essence, she asserts that information about jobs without accompanying support for that job is no more effective for a job-seeker than finding the job in a classified ad, which makes
this type of information transfer far less useful than one might surmise. And while I heard about a great deal of information sharing about the existence of potential jobs for out-of-work parents, the influence factor, so crucial to the link between contacts and jobs (Granovetter 1995 [1974]) was missing. Unlike Granovetter’s mostly white-collar workers and much like Smith’s (2010) low-wage urban workers, weak ties did not routinely “put in a good word” for those who might benefit from the job information they passed along. In the VCLL, this was largely because the weak ties characteristic of many Little League relationships meant that potential donors had little first-hand knowledge of the work ethic or skills of job seekers. Such was the case with Sierra:

So, you know, I won’t vouch for somebody, unless I know. Like if somebody’s built a porch for me, then, “Yeah he built a porch for me, did a good job.” But otherwise, I’ll help you in a way that, and this might seem stupid to you, in a way that, you know… That’s why you know people, is to help you get leads and stuff that you wouldn’t otherwise have. And so like if I know you’re a painter, and I know somebody needs their house painted, you know, I might put you together but then it’s, you know, you guys work it out kind of thing.

This form of helping reduced the potential costs to the donor, who will not be “on the line” for the work of the people they might recommend. Smith cites this as one of the reasons that job-holders are reluctant to vouch for job-seekers, even those they know on a personal level. They feel that it is a reflection on them as employees if the person they vouch for does not work out. While Smith’s research deals specifically with the low-income labor market, the extension of this line of argument to anyone who feels that their reputation might suffer – whether they are in fact secure in their position or not – is not out of line. Nicholas, a very well-educated father of a Cubs player, felt the same way:

Nicholas: Yeah, I really think you’d have to get to know’em a little bit better, you know because… You always want to have the most qualified person in a position, period. So… I’d have to know a little bit more about the individual to refer him for a job, because I don’t… I won’t refer somebody who I don’t [know].
Interviewer: Maybe not even refer, but I mean maybe just pass on information, like, “I saw there was an opening... you know, at this place or whatever that you should apply to or that kind of thing.”

Nicholas: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Thus, it seems that a relationship exists between the level of benefits offered and the closeness of the relationship, particularly in this area of social capital exchange. Where the relationships are close (and the donor has a positive view of the recipient’s potential for working out on a job), information sharing is more likely to be augmented by an attempt to influence the hiring process. Where this closeness is lacking, it is far less likely that such help would extend past mere information-sharing, which has extremely limited utility. Relationship closeness and knowledge of work ethic are two of the components of Sandra Smith’s (2010) criteria for job recommendation among the black urban poor. It seems likely based on my experience that this relationship would hold up in this context as well. Again, the data here are not sufficient to test this as a hypothesis, and much productive future research may be conducted in this area.

At the recipient level, there are competing motivations. On the one hand, providing for a family is perhaps the paramount responsibility for parents, and any information that may lead to a job could be extremely beneficial without much in the way of cost. However, two strands of research suggest that there are still barriers to the free expression of need by job-seekers: (1) the potential ego-relevance of unemployment (Clark 1983) and (2) an ethos of individualism that views this sort of help-seeking as a form of dependence (Smith 2010). Add to this the notion that mere information without influence is not especially beneficial, and one begins to wonder if the very limited likely payoff is worth the investment of a public declaration of joblessness or job-seeking. While on the surface the breadth of connections in the VCLL and the low cost for donors seems like a recipe for extensive information sharing with strong payoffs, the complex
motivations of the potential donors and recipients inhibit the free flow of social capital benefits that might bear better net results for job seekers.

For some, the lack of a job is extremely ego-relevant, because work is such an ingrained value in American culture. We would not expect those for whom unemployment is a major threat to their self-concept to publicly declare their unemployment in an effort to garner job leads. However, due to the prevalence of unemployment and the state of the larger American economy in 2010 and 2011, it is possible that much of the stigma associated with unemployment had been removed, and ego concerns could be sublimated due to the commonly acknowledged structural conditions that produced it. Clearly for Ricardo, joblessness was nothing to hide from the parents on his team; his team’s parents responded by encouraging him and pointing him in the direction of jobs that they heard about. It is worth considering, however, that Ricardo could have presented himself as offering help (rides for kids) when he was really asking for help (mentioning his joblessness).

Others, however, were far less forthcoming with their own situations, though the reasons for this are less clear. Brent, the manager for the Cubs, was also an out of work contractor. However he, unlike Ricardo, never mentioned this to his team parents. Some of Brent and Sierra’s closer friends of course knew their situation, but it was not a part of the team’s general knowledge of their manager. While joblessness may have been ego-relevant for Brent, there is another possibility as to why he was not as forthcoming with his situation than Ricardo: an ethos of individualism. Smith (2010) writes about the defensive individualism espoused by many of the job-seekers in her study, noting that they use this ethos as a defense mechanism to either hide their own deficiencies, or to reject their potential benefactors preemptively. While this may holds in certain sectors of the VCLL as well, it does not seem likely to explain Brent’s individualism.
Brent’s individualism was of an assertive type. In my conversations with him and Sierra, they both revealed themselves as staunch conservatives with strong individualist orientations. This was made clear to me during the Cubs’ first practice, when Sierra told me how uncomfortable she was with sociology as a discipline, which she described as “liberal.” She then proceeded to relate her impressions of her own Introductory Sociology course, in which “…people were taught to blame others for their own problems.” She told me she much preferred it when people took responsibility for their own lot in life (fieldnotes). Brent spoke much less directly about politics during my conversations with him, but he did display several popular conservative bumper stickers on his truck, including one which read, “I’ll keep my money, my freedom, my bible, and my guns. You can keep the change.” Regardless of the origin of their feelings, the outcome was the same: Brent’s joblessness did not become a part of his identity within the team as it had for Ricardo in 2010 because he did not make the information known on a wide scale. Because of this, the team parents were not able to provide him information about possible jobs.

Where closer friends were concerned, that is, those who knew about Brent’s situation as a contractor, the relationship actually hindered their ability to help, regardless of their intentions. When friends of Brent and Sierra had household jobs, such as storm door or flooring installation, they naturally turned to Brent for advice and/or help on the project. However, because of his relationship with them, he and Sierra did not feel it was appropriate to introduce a contract element to the relationship, and he would end up doing the jobs for free. Thus, a situation that could have seen Brent as a beneficiary instead saw him become a benefactor, as Sierra explained to me:

**Interviewer:** Um, so Brent as a contractor, so he’s never, he’s never generated any business for himself through these contacts?
Sierra: Hmm-mmm. I want to say he’s never… And like for him it’s hard cause like the friends that I told you that we’re still friends, like he went and laid their hardwood floors, but it was like, “Oh, they need to lay their floors and he’s doing it by himself, so… we need to go over there and help them.” It wasn’t like a job or anything.

Interviewer: So that had value to them. It didn’t really have any value to you.

Sierra: Right. I mean… (laughing). Katheryn wants a new door. And I told Brent like, “You can’t charge her to put in a door.” Like, we’re friends with them, like you can’t do that. And so that’s where I think that, we’ve never gotten a job. I don’t think- we’ve never ever gotten a job from contacts that we made.

Thus, there were situations where closer contacts inhibited the employment search. In these cases, especially where job-seekers had expertise in trades such as construction, plumbing, electrical etc. with potential residential consumer benefits, the close bonds that cemented the friendship inhibited the creation of contractual elements within the relationship. Of course, this inhibition likely had its limits, especially where large-scale jobs are concerned. In the situation described above, however, the close relationship reversed the role of benefactor and beneficiary.

Information sharing regarding services about town, however, passed freely between parents in the VCLL. The need for such services could come from anywhere, but were not usually ego-relevant, and thus the expression of need for such services was likely not inhibited in the help-seeker. The information was generally low cost to the donor, and was thus passed without regard to the nature of the relationship between parties. While there was some risk involved if the recommendation leads to an unsatisfactory business transaction, no one in my interviews expressed concern over this possibility. While this became a useful source of information regarding the procurement of services about town, because it was so freely passed between individuals, it was unlikely to be the source of further relationship formation, even as it was a small exchange. This could have been because it did not depend on any particular reciprocity, but instead generalized reciprocity. When, as I described in the previous chapter,
Nicholas provided information about his dentist to another youth sport parent, he did not expect repayment from that parent, but instead understood the donor role as a part of basic human decency – that is, he was motivated on the one hand by Value Introjection (in the Portes model) or the basic communal relationship shared by the majority of human beings, as he shared, “I share information like that all the time. If you can help somebody out, why wouldn’t you? I mean really, why wouldn’t you? Why would you suppress information like that that can be helpful to somebody? I, I don’t have that ill will in me.”

For recipients, motivation for seeking this type of help did seem to be mostly unproblematic. The problems tended not to be ego-relevant, the help-seeker was usually not at fault (thus eliminating any potential embarrassment in asking for help), and the cost of inquiring was low. Sometimes, the help-seeking process was straightforward. People used their contacts in youth sport to advertise their need for some service and solicit opinions and information about where to acquire them, as Katheryn explained:

Oh yeah, I totally take advantage of that. Especially around here, how else are you supposed to know anybody? Everybody will rip you off faster than you can blink. So if you don’t know that, then you’re gonna get screwed. Like, the way you get in around here is by asking people who they know and who they’ve had do other things, and it’s like the ripple effect. And that’s what I mean by you say one bad thing; it ripples, and like everybody knows everything about everybody. So a mechanic, you need a mechanic, you need a plumber, anything. You, you got a hookup. You just got to talk to enough people, and figure it out.

However, help-seeking in either form could take on a less-than-straightforward form, what Blau (1955) called “consultation in disguise”: “In his (Blau’s) observation of workers in a federal agency, he noted that agents working on a very intricate and difficult problem sometimes described their problem to their co-workers during off-work hours in the vein of telling an interesting story. This quasi-story-telling strategy would provoke comments and suggestions from interested and attentive listeners” (DePaulo 1983:7). This is how Dean received help from
Nicholas when they serendipitously met in the grocery store. By presenting his problem as a story (“I said, ‘What’s going on Dean?’ And he said, ‘Oh, I chipped my crown, and my damn dentist, he can’t get me in for two weeks,’” from Nicholas’ retelling) – that is, not specifically asking for help – he received advice on his predicament from a sympathetic and able listener. In this way, parents could get help without actually asking for it. This reduced the exchange nature of the help given, and also further inhibited the formation of a closer relationship when the information was exchanged, as the volunteering of information (rather than the request for) lessened the need for reciprocation. This did not, however, reduce the utility of the information-sharing network in the league which acted not only as a mere information network, but also as a quasi-screening service, as few people would knowingly recommend someone for a service if they did not themselves have a good experience with that provider. In some ways then, information-sharing was the most egalitarian form of social capital benefit passed regularly through the league, because even the relatively unconnected could have access to it without a heavy investment in relationships, as the closeness of a relationship mattered very little in the donor’s decision to share relevant and useful information with recipients.

This area of resource exchange seemed to me to be the least impacted by the child-centered nature of the league. If there was an area of social capital exchange that “the kids” did not seem to have a significant effect on, either directly or indirectly, it was in this area. Parents did not mention a particular concern with the kids when discussing either the sharing or the receipt of information regarding jobs or services. It is possible that parents shared information about jobs in part because the others who stood to suffer, including and perhaps especially the children, were present, but certainly no one expressed those views in interviews to me. Additionally, it is possible that parents shared information about child-centered services about
town. If so, the fact that I did not uncover it may have been an artifact of the way I asked the questions, which perhaps shifted the parent’s thinking toward the experiences regarding services they learned about for themselves, or in which they shared information about services for the other parent’s benefit. Research into information sharing within networks might be able to better uncover these processes and the specific information which flows from parent to parent in child-centered contexts.

Further, it seems the league itself played very little explicit role in the sharing of information. Based on Small’s discussion of trust built in these child-centered contexts, one might have expected more vouching occurring from those who might put in a good word for a job-seeker, but I did not see this, and my interviewees gave me no indication that they would vouch any more for Little League parents than any other parent of a similarly close or distant tie. It is possible that the short season, the sporadic nature of meetings of Little League parents – who only saw each other a couple of time per week compared to the nearly every weekday that Small’s daycare mothers met – may contribute to the caution expressed to me in my interviews. For other types of resource exchange, however, both children and the league itself altered the “typical” understanding of these exchanges. For the other three categories of benefits, conventional thinking about their exchange is inadequate in some way to fully understand them as they occurred in the VCLL.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

The exchange of emotional support presented a number of interesting questions in this setting. First, given that most of the relationships formed in this environment are not close ones, when and with whom was emotional support exchanged? Most of the people I interviewed were very reluctant to expose themselves emotionally to others in the league except for the few close
friends that they had made, but some still relayed stories to me detailing instances where they provided some amount of emotional support to someone with whom they were not close. How did these contradictory instances of close friends and not-so-close acquaintances providing emotional support for one another reconcile, and how did these instances fit with extant social capital and help-seeking theories? Where this type of support was mobilized, what were the potential motivations for the recipient? Conversely, what were the motivations of the donors, especially considering their sometimes obvious discomfort with being put in the position to provide the support in the first place? Finally, what can be tentatively stated about the closeness of a relationship and the willingness to both ask for and receive emotional support in this setting?

It was interesting that, through the course of my interviews, no interviewee actually described mobilizing emotional support for themselves. Instead, when the topic was broached, the parents I interviewed instead focused on the times when they were donors of such support rather than the recipients. There are a few possible reasons for this: (1) they had never actually engaged anyone for this type of support; (2) they had engaged another parent in this manner but did not recognize it as such; (3) they had engaged another parent but did not want to disclose to me. By portraying the situations as they did, however, they presented me with an interesting paradox: when they place themselves in the position of being a possible recipient of emotional support, they insisted that they would only do so in the context of a close friendship, and this is consistent with much social support and social capital literature (Cantor 1979; Clark 1983; Smith 2010; Uzzi 1999). However, when describing the times when they provided emotional support in the VCLL (or, in some cases, in other sporting organizations) they had done so for people whom they presented as relatively distant acquaintances, despite nearly every Core and Fringe parent having at least one close friend met through youth sport. Whether they were distancing
themselves from the emotionally vulnerable situations of their friends or protecting their identities and stories is not readily apparent. This discussion of emotional support is also vital because it demonstrates that a distinction between potential (accessed) and actual (mobilized) social capital (Lin 1999) is important because the willingness of *potential* donors of emotional support is seemingly much greater than their comfort with providing it in actuality. This, of course, complicates the measurement of social capital, since it so often only exists in potentiality. If researchers thus rely on informants and interviewees for this type of measurement, the potential for measurement problems cannot be overstated.

Of the types of emotional support offered by those who shared stories with me, dealing with family problems, either in the guise of marital strife or more general family dysfunction, was dominant. Small (2009b) characterized much of the resource exchange in the daycare centers he studied as being what he termed “domain-specific,” meaning that much of the discussion between mothers that met in the daycare center limited their discussions to their children, even as they became closer and closer. He termed these relationships as “Compartmental Intimates” owing to their closeness and willingness to share very personal information, but only within the domain of their children. These instances seem to me to be distinct from Small’s compartmental intimates, perhaps because one of the parties did not view the relationship as having progressed to the point where sharing of any personal information, even domain-specific information, was appropriate. Even still, these instances were relatively rare and it is thus difficult to draw even coarse conclusions about the nature of emotional support in this. The direction of these instances can, at the very least, suggest some further exploration of the phenomenon. Julianne, for example, was a benefactor to an acquaintance in another sport (wrestling) who sought her counsel regarding her marriage:
One of my wrestling parents, she… she, I mean, she finally got a divorce, thank god. But, I mean, it was during the wrestling season, we threw a matanza for a fundraiser. And it was at the end of the matanza, she’s helping me clean up, and she tells me, “I want a divorce.” And so, my way of dealing with it is to tell her, “Oh, so soon, we just barely met,” (laughs). And no, she was serious.

Ricardo, the assistant coach for the Cubs, also found himself in the middle of another parent’s relationship drama:

Well, we had a lady last year when I was coaching… it was… Junior in the older, in the majors cause I was with Joshua last year. And we had a parent. She didn’t go to Joshua to talk to. She didn’t go to anybody, but she came to me to talk to me about her kid’s dad.

Sierra found herself listening to another parent’s discussion of family problems that were not strictly marital, “There’s a parent that… shared too much, but not um… not on like the personal level. They just like talked and… ‘Well, my kid’s still up with pull-ups and she’s 6.’ And I like go, ‘Really? Ok.’ Like [the parent would say], ‘My husband’s not had work forever.’” In all of these situations, my interview subjects stressed the distance in their relationship with their beneficiary, which is what made the interactions noteworthy for them. There was a broad understanding that such emotional support would be happily provided for closer relations, but providing such support to acquaintances, even just as willing listeners, was considered noteworthy by the benefactors. In these cases, the donor of the support expressed a certain discomfort with the sharing of intimate details of someone else’s personal life with whom they did not feel particularly close. The production of emotional support is an essential component of social capital. However, because of its often intimate nature, it seems perhaps counterintuitive that such sharing would take place between mere acquaintances. Thus, distinguishing between the motives of the help-seekers and the help providers in this context can shed light both on the

1 A traditional matanza is a community gathering focused on the slaughtering and processing of a large animal such as a pig or cow for consumption. Valley City still celebrates the winter tradition with a matanza that includes team competitions in slaughtering and processing these animals (Martin 2004).
willingness – even the possible necessity – of sharing such personal details with distant relations as well as the corresponding discomfort with the donor at being exposed to them.

In these situations, because they were second-order recounting of the events, the motives of the recipients were difficult to discern, but based on the help-seeking literature, they can be speculated. Such speculation, coupled with additional research dealing more directly with the matter, may shed light on the relative disconnect between benefactor and beneficiary. In terms of the decision to seek help from either close relations or more distant ones, the ego-relevance of the problem is crucial. Where the deficiency in need of amelioration is considered relevant to the self-concept of the help seeker, they are less likely to seek out help from closer relations (Clark 1983) and less likely to view the help received as a pleasant experience capable of maintaining or building upon the existing relationship (Nadler, Fisher, and Ben Itzhak 1983). To the extent that familial problems could be considered ego-relevant, those seeking either support or a willing ear may be more likely to turn to an acquaintance. Though this would not be the case for all parties going through these issues, those without ego attachment to this type of problem would either not seek help at all or would not be reluctant to do so from closer relations. When, however, the problem is seen as salient to the self-identity of the parties, turning to closer friends or family may not be seen as optimal. In such instances, sharing information with acquaintances such as other Little League parents may seem like a very rational choice given the time that parents can spend at the baseball complex and thus the time spent consistently with the other parents on the team.

To apply the Portes schema to the provision of emotional support, we might look to the notion of Bounded Solidarity, Value Introjection, or Simple Reciprocity. Recipients may be appealing to a sense of togetherness of team parents and identification as such, which would
allow them access to benefits that may be conferred by other parents within the same group.

Further, they may be appealing to notions of simple human decency and the obligation many feel when confronted with a person in need of support. Alternatively, they may be simply appealing to reciprocity, believing that since they have asked for such benefits from another parent that they would then provide such support from that (or other) parent in the future. Without acknowledgement of their own search for such support, it is an impossible task to impute motives to those who have sought out this help from the parents on the teams I studied.

However, given the motivations of those who spoke with me in terms of donating such support and the discomfort with providing it to such acquaintances, it strikes me that help-seekers of emotional support are, in terms of Portes’ schema, dependent on internalized norms and values in order to assure them that they are provided with the support they seek, at least at a minimal level. To cite the help-seeking literature, they may be appealing to their potential benefactor to establish closer relations, as the trading of resources and support tends to be part and parcel of the relationship building process (Blau 1964). However, in the situations described above, the donors either did not see their support as the beginning of closer relations, or saw the appeal to their emotional support as moving “too fast” thus dooming the relationship going forward. The situations described above resulted in certain levels of discomfort for the donors, indicating that they felt the appeal was inappropriate for the strength of the relationship. Thus, support that they would have provided for closer relations without a second thought became uncomfortable situations when the relationship was not well-established. Thus, they did not see their beneficiary in an attractive light, which did bode well for the future of the relationship.

For the donors in the relationship, providing emotional support to mere acquaintances felt more like an imposition than a favor bestowed on a friend or family member. Hearing tales of the
emotional turmoil of acquaintances sometimes made the listener very uncomfortable, and this was expressed in interviews. For some, this meant a lot of nodding and noncommittal responses like, “Mmm-hmm” or “Yeah.” The most they were willing to contribute to the conversation in these instances was their capacity to listen. Certainly, for some beneficiaries, this would be enough. An ear to listen may have been what they were looking for. To apply Portes’ taxonomy in this situation is tricky, because the precise motives of donors are most likely variable depending on the individual. In general, however, we can look to Value Introjection and Bounded Solidarity as two likely motivational factors. Value Introjection arises from the general concern people tend to have for one another. In her typology of human relations, Margaret Clark (1983) distinguishes between communal and exchange relations, each operating with their own distinct set of norms and values. Closer relationships are characterized as communal, and more distant relationships are characterized as exchange. Within this distinction, however, Clark concedes that, “…most people have some humanitarian concern for others. Another way of putting this is that most people tend to have very weak communal relations with everyone and are often willing to provide low-cost help without expecting anything in return” (p. 210-211). This corresponds with Portes’ Value Introjection, provided that the cost of helping out another is low-cost. On the other hand, donors could be motivated to provide help because of the in-group feelings created by the inclusion of the parents on a single team, though these bonds tend to be weakened by the amount of turnover in the VCLL (see Chapter 1). In such a case, parents feel a sense of communal relations with the other parents on a team, even as their actual interpersonal relationships with them may be weak, as Katheryn’s comments illustrate:

I guess if they’re willing to care about their kid enough to put’em in baseball or be there at every practice and spend the time same as I am, you have to respect them some for that. Even if they’re a shithead, right? So, you have to respect’em somewhat that they’re
at least willing to give some of their time to their kids and not just be a selfish parent.

Where such communal relations exist on a team, even in a weak and primitive form, parents unwilling to share their ego-relevant (in these cases marital or familial) problems with intimates may find support – or at least a willing if uncomfortable ear – during the long practices or games of the Little League season.

In these instances, while the benefactor may not have felt entirely comfortable in their role, as long as they were not asked to contribute actively to the discussion or the amelioration of the problem, they seemed willing to engage in such activity, “I think they were like over-sharers. Like not really seeking any response just blah, blah, blah. Like yeah, that’s ok,” (Sierra).

However, when pushed to actively contribute to the situation, there is a tendency to push back and withdraw from the exchange, as Ricardo did when a mother from one of his teams sought advice regarding her husband:

> And I, I just… I told the lady, I was like, “You know, I understand where you’re coming from and stuff, but really, I’m here as a coach, you know, and I don’t want to really get involved in… you know somebody’s personal life as far as… you know, talk to me about your kid, you know, if your kid needs a little encouragement at school or, you know, to get through this class or whatever, yeah, I can sit down and talk, ‘Maybe try a little bit harder for your parents,’ you know, or whatever.” I’m not gonna go in there and try to counsel no, no lady on her marriage, you know what I mean?

Neither the request for help nor the support provided were explicit from the descriptions given by Sierra or Ricardo above. It is also possible that these situations, like Ricardo’s announcement of his unemployment, that parents are employing Blau’s (1955) “consultation in disguise.”

Furthermore, while benefactors were loath to actively offer their advice, the mere act of listening is a critical component of social support (Shumaker and Brownell 1984). Shumaker and Brownell listed both short-term (emotional release; feeling cared for) as well as long-term benefits (strong self-identity and lowered anxiety) of listening as a form of social support.
However, they note also that listening as a social resource carries potential harms to the beneficiary, namely embarrassment in the short term and lowered self-esteem in the long term. Both such harms also support the idea that, in some cases, an acquaintance is a better resource than a friend for such support, especially if the cost to the benefactors is low, as listening is.

In all of these situations – and characteristic of all instances where people provided emotional support to mere acquaintances – the relationship tended to end with the end of the sport season. There was no effort (at least on the part of the donor) to maintain the relationship after the season ended, and none of them characterized those relationships as close or even continuing. This is perhaps because the airing of emotional problems to acquaintances made the recipient appear unattractive as a future companion. However, since most Little League relationships, both those types where emotional support was exchanged between acquaintances and those where it was not, also ended with the season, it would be premature to draw any conclusions. To the extent that help-seeking can be thought of as a mechanism for relationship-building, the type of exchange initiated becomes very important, “There are at least two types of help that should not (and probably are not) sought in order to form a close relationship – help that is costly to the donor and help that makes the potential recipient appear unattractive” (Clark 1983:212). Initiating closer relationships on the basis of exchange typically starts with small-scale exchanges and builds upon that, with each iteration building bonds of trust and reducing uncertainty between the parties (Blau 1964; Smith 2010). Exchanges that begin “too large” are likely to cause one party to back away from the relationship, either because the cost of providing the help is too large, as in the Ricardo’s case, or because the recipient becomes an unattractive companion, as with the case of Julianne:

But we’d be sitting there at a tournament, and she’d come and sit next to me. And she was one of those parents that you’d kind of try to avoid ‘cause you just wanna, just relax
a little bit. She was like all, wigging out all the time. And so he’s like sitting down like, the next row down, and like a couple feet this way, and she’s here, and she’d just flat out start talking about him [her husband] just as loud as she could be. And I mean you’re like, “Oh my gosh, don’t do that.” It would put you in a very uncomfortable situation. I mean, just like holy cow! So yeah, I’ve had that, and I’ve had some other parents that haven’t been as vocal as her, but yeah, just feel that they should just tell me everything. I’m just like, “I really don’t wanna know all this shit. I’ve got my own problems, man.” And even if I don’t, I don’t wanna hear your problems, you know, really, so… (Julianne, mother of Cubs player)

While help-seeking in these situations might have been sought because the relationships were not close and the recipient could speak freely, benefactors may have viewed these exchanges as impositions which were doubly burdened with a high cost of participation that, by its very nature, inhibited the probability of a long-term relationship and, therefore, of reciprocation. It therefore is difficult to apply any notions of reciprocity benefits to the motives of donors in such situations. The data I gathered on this issue are not sufficient to assert this conclusion, but it is plausible in light of the previous research on this topic, and an intriguing hypothesis for future researchers to test in related settings.

What impact might the aims of the league as well as the institutional legitimacy of the league have on the sharing of emotional support? I have detailed above that participation in the VCLL afforded parents a position vis-à-vis other parents of at least a minimal sense of value sharing, which could lubricate social interaction and trust between parents among relations that were essentially no closer than strangers. Participation in the league allowed parents to bypass much of the work required to get to know one another to build even small amounts of trust. Instead, the legitimacy of the league coupled with repeated encounters between parents, created a sense of bonding and trust among them. This is not the only context that provides such feelings amongst its participants. Small (2009b) noted a similar process in his daycare center study, observing that the centers under his study shared several characteristics that fostered trust in the
setting. They were: noncompetitive, nonhierarchical, homophilous, and offered space for interaction. With the possible exception of homophily, a team playing Little League shares these characteristics. The parents on a single team work cooperatively rather than competitively (ideally) to make sure the team functions properly. Aside of the manager, the relations between parents are nonhierarchical, at least formally so. I have argued elsewhere that the VCLL was a diverse setting, but this is not based on systematically-collected data. It is instead my impression of the league as a whole. However, since parents were willing to ascribe amenable values to others participating in the league, they may instead see the league as homophilous from that perspective, which may subsume, for the purposes of everyday interaction, more substantive and noticeable differences between them. Finally, “the fields,” as they were commonly known, and the way that parents are spaced during practices and (more distinctly) games offer a dependable space for interaction.

That children were the focus of the league may have constrained the type of conversations that took place when emotional support was shared, at least for acquaintances. Part of what differentiates acquaintances from close friends is the subjects about which they speak. Closer ties are more likely to share more intimate, personal details of their lives, which acquaintances are more generally characterized by “small talk,” as Harry described to me:

Your close friends, you love’em, and you cherish their company. And they’re almost like family to you. And you have to not take their friendship for granted, because it’s a special thing. It’s a thing you know you can count on them, and they can count on you. And you look forward to spending time with them, they look forward to spending time with you. An acquaintance is somebody uh, you’re together, let’s make the best of it, let’s uh- well, not make the best of it, let’s have a good time while we’re doing it.

However, Small described a form of relation which typified his setting but also to an extent defied the conventional wisdom of the relation between the closeness of the tie and the information or resources shared with them. He termed these “compartmental intimates.” In
essence, compartmental intimates would be likely to share very intense and intimate information about *domain-specific* subjects. In his setting, these conversations took place regarding the children. In the VCLL, these conversations, where they took place, concentrated on family matters, encompassing both children and spouses. Perhaps because the space delineated for interaction allowed more easily for whole-family appearances and interaction, people felt more comfortable sharing information about their entire family, which could then be thought of as domain-specific for the Little League setting. This, coupled with the notions of the help-seeking literature that some people may, for specific reasons, seek out acquaintances rather than friends for certain forms of help, may begin to explain both the subject matter spoken about as well as the acquaintances from whom the support – or maybe simply an ear – was sought. There is a great deal of work to be conducted in this area, and enterprising researchers may find it fruitful to explore in greater depth just how and why parents exploit these activities for emotional support.

**BUSINESS CONTACTS**

The VCLL was also a place for the cultivation of business contacts for both producers and consumers. From the consumer side, not only could parents find potential service providers through secondhand information sharing, they could also be put into direct contact with those providers if they happened to be on the same team with them or otherwise involved in league activities. From the producer side, those who stood to benefit from such contacts included those who owned their own business or who worked on commission. Their regular contact with other parents in a supportive environment such as youth sport placed them at a distinct advantage locating potential customers or clients. These benefits, unlike many other relationships, tended not to disappear when the season ended. Instead, they were cumulative. This was likely due to the fact that these relationships were not entirely personal, but professional with a personal
element attached, or vice versa. The personal element, even when the relationship was barely existent, increased trust beyond the level of two strangers, leaving parties more likely to trust doing business with one another. While the motives of both donor and recipient in these relationships appeared to be straightforward, the question of exactly which party was the donor and which party was the recipient was unclear. Further, because parents were uncomfortable with seeing themselves as a potential beneficiary of their children’s activities – which were, ostensibly child-centered – there was a tendency to downplay this type of exchange, which benefitted them rather than their children. Because it is difficult to impossible to distinguish between donors and recipients (or benefactors and beneficiaries) I choose to label the parties “producers” and “consumers,” where producers are business owners, salespeople or other professionals who relied on client-based exchanges, and consumers were their potential client base, or those looking for professional service of some sort.

One of the clearest trends spotted during my two seasons with parents in the VCLL was that of increased trust between parents on the same team. While the relationships between parents were often weak and ephemeral, the parents on the teams I observed nearly universally agreed on two critical points: (1) they did not regard the other parents as strangers (even those whom they would not recognize away from the ball fields), and (2) because of this, they began interactions with these parents from a position of trust relative to interactions with strangers. The first time I saw evidence of this was with the Wildcats softball team. I noted in Chapter 1 the lack of patterned and close interaction among the parents on this team, and the surprise I felt upon finding out that the parents often saw themselves as part of a larger, coherent group. As part of this group, there was a base level of trust that distinguished the Wildcats parents from strangers. As an example, soon after telling me how over-protective she was of her kids, I asked
police officer and mother of 3 Christina whether she trusted the majority of the parents on her kids’ three different teams (her step-daughter played for the Wildcats, and she had step-son and a son playing in younger divisions) to bring her kids home from practice in the event that she and her husband (Lawrence) were called away:

**Christina**: Oh yeah, absolutely.

**Interviewer**: Most of the parents that could bring Justin or Adam or Alyssa… Like if you got called away and you asked…

**Christina**: What, like, “Hey would you bring them home real quick? Or keep an eye on them?”

**Interviewer**: Yeah, would you trust most of the parents on those teams to do something like that?

**Christina**: Yes, absolutely. There’s very few that I wouldn’t. Maybe at the very beginning of the year, I probably wouldn’t because I don’t know them. And not saying that they would intentionally harm my child. But let’s say they didn’t make’em sit in a car seat, or put their seat belt on. Or, “Oh my God, I was supposed to take Christina’s kid home and I forgot, and they’re still at the field.” Maybe the first couple of games. But once you get to know these people, there’s not very many people that I would be like, “Oh no, you’re not takin’ my kid home, or you want them to McDonald’s with your son? Hell no.”

That this type of trust would extend to a business relationship is no stretch. Parents routinely indicated a willingness to trust a team parents more than a stranger in the event that they needed help in some sort of professional capacity. Andy, an Asian-American transplant from the West Coast was a former assistant coach who, because of a changing work schedule, was unable to participate in the Cubs’ season much in 2011. He had gotten to know very few other parents on the team except for those with whom he had met during 2010. However, he still expressed a preference, were the necessity and opportunity arise, to utilize team parents as a business resource:
Interviewer: Do you find that, were that need to come up, you’d be more willing to go to those people, or would you still feel more comfortable like… going through the yellow pages or whatever?

Andy: No, if I needed the help, I’d probably go to one of them first. I mean… yeah, I think I would go to them. Definitely Brent. Mainly because…

Interviewer: Why is that, you think?

Andy: Well, because I built a relationship with Brent. I mean I would trust him more, you know?

Harriet, a widowed mother of two who worked in the local school system, also expressed similar sentiments, “Sure, than somebody I just found through the phone book or something? Yeah. I think that um… You know, you can always give someone a try, and if it doesn’t work out, then… you don’t go back.”

One of the interesting elements to this type of exchange was that, in being both personal and professional, and with both parties receiving benefits, it became quite difficult to disentangle donor from recipient. This was in large part due to the exchange nature of the transaction. It was a quid pro quo transaction in which ultimately the motives were instrumental in nature. In this way, it was identical to a simple economic exchange. I understand these transactions as examples of social capital, however, for two reasons: (1) the personal (or sporting) relationship pre-dated the professional relationship, and (2) the professional relationship grew out of and was a by-product of the personal relationship, as Lawrence, chief umpire of the league, police officer, and popular manager explained to me, “Oh, one of my coaches, he’s an electrician. And he didn’t do any work for me, but I had a question, an electrical question, and then I just enquired to him about it. And this was when- early uh, when I first started coaching his son.” Because trust of the person on a personal level was involved, the economic transaction was “lubricated” (to borrow Putnam’s phrasing) by personal relationships, as Ricardo, Brent’s assistant coach, explained, when I asked him if his Little league relationships made him more likely to turn to those people
for business transactions “Probably more likely, cause I know him from Little League, you know what I mean? So I’d feel like I had a, like a personal relationship other than just calling him and be like, ‘Hey I need a porch built’, you know what I mean? But like, ‘Oh well, I’ll just call Brent, cause that’s what Brent does,’ you know.” If that relationship did not exist, then the economic transaction, were it to occur at all, would require different channels which might have nothing to do with personal relationships, such as a phone book or internet search.

There is a rather vast literature documenting the importance of social networks in entrepreneurial success, from startup to establishing a stable, successful business venture (see Hoang and Antoncic 2003 for a useful review). In such ventures, both social capital and social competence are important. Social capital, predictably, provides only access to potential investors, customers, and other forms of support. Social competence provides the ability to leverage those ties for actual gain (Baron and Markman 2003). This work echoes the earlier work of Nan Lin, who distinguished between accessed and mobilized social capital, which also emphasized the difference between what resources social actors may have access to vs. that which they actually mobilize for their potential benefit. This distinction is important in the Little League context as well.

Further research into voluntary organizations – particularly as it relates to the networks of entrepreneurs or small business owners – is also well-developed and instructive. The logic of such work rests on the idea that participation in voluntary organizations expands the network of the entrepreneur, thus providing them with increased access to support. In accordance to the differing types of ties – close (strong) and distant (weak) – entrepreneurs may benefit distinctly from different ties. Voluntary organizations can benefit the entrepreneur through increasing
network diversity and decreasing network density. This provides the entrepreneur with a greater range of resources and fewer redundant ties.

Davis, Renzulli, and Aldrich (2006) note two competing threads of literature on the subject of social networks and voluntary organizations: segregation and integration theories. Segregation theories emphasize the homogenous characteristics of many volunteer organizations which would imply that such organizations reduce network diversity. Further, since many individuals share memberships in various organizations, they are likely to meet the same people (or the same types of people) even if they join various organizations, thus increasing their network density as well. Both of these properties, if true, decrease the utility of voluntary organizations for entrepreneurial success. On the other hand, the integration view suggests the opposite: that involvement in a number of voluntary organizations increases diversity and decreases density, especially if entrepreneurs join a variety of organizations or organizations that are diverse. Davis et al find that participation in single organizations does not, in fact, benefit entrepreneurs unless the organization itself is diverse. However, participating in several organizations can help the entrepreneur increase diversity and decrease density. If Little League is a diverse organization, as I have argued above, then participation would benefit small-business owners increase diversity and decrease density. Where entrepreneurs or small-business owners rely on clients for their livelihood, then participation in Little League could provide access to a larger customer base that is predisposed to trust them more than strangers. However, the child-centered aims of the organization can constrain the ready exchange of producer and consumer services throughout the season.

The motivation for both consumers and producers in this situation is relatively straightforward, but complex. They can consist of both expressive and instrumental concerns.
Instrumentally, consumers were looking for a good (possibly discounted or even free) deal for a service from someone whose work they could trust. Expressively, they may have been interested in helping out a friend or acquaintance. In such cases, the consumer leveraged a personal relationship for their own benefit. In my interviews, the major theme of utilizing team parents for professional services was the trust that migrated from the personal realm to the professional, as Katheryn explained to me when I asked her for examples when she and her family had created business ties from sports relationships:

Well Lester (a former coach of Martin’s) is an electrician, so I called him to put lights in our back yard. And because I trust him more, even though he’s probably the biggest shyster ever, right? But I didn’t know (starts laughing). (Katheryn, mother of Cubs player).

In this and other instances, potential (and actual) consumers of services indicated willingness and a history of transferring personal trust into professional trust. Even as they did this, however, there was an understanding that their trust may be misplaced, as Katheryn illustrated above, and as Harriet intimated as well when I asked her if she thought she would be more willing to enlist services from a team parent than from another type of search, “Sure, than somebody I just found through the phone book or something? Yeah. I think that um… You know, you can always give someone a try, and if it doesn’t work out, then… you don’t go back.”

The motivation of the provider in this case again seemed very straightforward (and instrumental): the desire to increase their business. There may have been some expressive concerns regarding helping out other team parents, but it would be impossible to deny the benefits to their bottom line unless they routinely performed services for discounted prices or even for free. This was rarely discussed during my conversations with producers, however, with Brent as a notable exception. And while some producers were very comfortable with the business they generated from their association with the league, others had certain reservations.
For one, there was a concern (like with consumers) that the introduction of a professional element to a relationship could harm the personal relationship in the event that the business association did not work out to both parties’ satisfaction. Secondly, there was a concern that the introduction of professional associations within the league distracted from the central mission of the VCLL: the benefit of the players. It was made clear to me in interviews and conversations that any benefit that parents may derive from the league were secondary concerns or by-products of their child’s participation in the league and not the reason they associated themselves with the league.

In order for producers to be able to benefit from their association with a team, the other parents need to know what they do for a living. This topic of conversation was more likely to come up the more parents talk, and thus Core parents are more likely to benefit from this exchange, because it is more likely that people will know what they do for a living. Coaches, in particular, because of their repeated interaction with parents, had a leg up in this area. In my conversations, the three biggest producers of business for themselves were all coaches in some capacity, either as managers or as assistants. In particular, a gregarious manager and board member, Adam, had generated a great deal of business for himself as a mortgage broker in Valley City through his association with the league. The bulk of his business, he told me, came from the parents of the players he has coached in the past. I failed to ask him at the time how his team’s parents came to know about his business. However, he had gained a reputation in the league of being one of the most involved managers in the league, and he had told me previously that his team’s parents were a close bunch because he kept them involved and made sure everyone “felt included.” When I attended his team’s end-of-year party, I saw that this was true. His team’s parents socialized comfortably with each other and with Adam, leading me to believe
that he frequently spoke with the parents on his team, leading to a greater likelihood that they
would know what he did for a living. However, Adam was quite insistent that his sole focus was
the benefit of the kids, both as a coach and as a board member, “To me, I think the right reason
to be involved is to provide an outlet for kids to play, you know, to play sports. To learn the
game. That, that’s the reason why leagues are there. It’s for the kids.” At the same time, Adam
mentioned to me in casual conversation that he had, as a mortgage broker, served several parents
on his teams in a business capacity. This was also confirmed during my conversation with Scott,
a goateed insurance agent in the area who had been coaching for several years, when we spoke
on the same topic, “Adam, you know, being in the mortgage industry – one of the few mortgage
brokers down here – he knows a lot of these people and, and he’s like, ‘Ah, I did their mortgage,’
or you know, those kind of things, I think he’s met a lot of people just by that, you know.” It
seemed that Adam was comfortable with both the central role of the league as he saw it
ideologically (the kids) and the benefit that it provided him as a business owner, strictly as a by-
product.

Some producers were far less comfortable with their role as beneficiaries of their
children’s youth sport participation, either because they though it distracted from the central
purpose of the league (helping the kids) or because of the potential harm such dealings could do
to the personal relationship that instigated it. In the former case, this could manifest as an explicit
insistence that business interests were secondary to their involvement as a concerned parent, as it
did with Scott, who seemed very uncomfortable with the idea of mixing his business as an
insurance agent with his life as a father and a coach in the league:

Yeah (laughs). That’s- but that’s not why I’m there (laughing). No, I mean, yeah, you
know I’ve gotten a couple of clients from interaction or meeting other parents or… things
like that, from there. But again, that’s not my intention, and I don’t solicit- I’m not the
type- even with my friends and family and stuff like that, I don’t solicit myself, saying,
“Hey…” you know. That’s not my primary thing. I’d rather be your friend than sell you a policy.

In a more extreme version of this stance, other business owners not only refuted the possibility that they could benefit from their participation, but also distanced themselves from the idea of social capital altogether and emphasized the negatives for themselves as business owners in the league. When I spoke with Julianne about her and her husband’s plumbing business, she went out of her way to emphasize both their negative experiences as business owners in youth sport (sponsorships and fundraising) as well as their refusal to “play the game,” by which she meant using social connections to generate business for themselves in any capacity:

No, the only thing running a business and being in youth sports has done for us is given us the responsibility of sponsorships (laughs). I mean, really truly, and we don’t do the [home] service anymore, so we have no need to want to hang a banner. We don’t want that advertising. I mean we do residential now, but we do, we work for contractors. It’s new construction, contractor’s homes. We have no need to have our name posted anywhere. But with the youth sports, when they find out you have a business, they definitely are like, “Oh! Sponsor!”

Later in our conversation, Julianne again downplayed the role of sport in their business as well as distanced herself from the very idea contained in social capital:

**Interviewer:** But you’ve never gone to somebody to sort of patronize them based on your relationship through sports?

**Julianne:** No. No, no. I don’t think so. And Derrick and I were just talking about this. We, do a very good job of leaving business and personal very separate… we don’t do the PR, back scratch, we don’t do any of that. And Derrick does not do lunches, you know. And we’re being invited to lunch all the time by, you know, so and so, and we probably should be inviting people to lunch, and stuff, but we don’t do that, that kind of PR stuff at all. And it may hurt us a little bit in business. I mean, we’re saying that yeah, you probably are supposed to do that a little bit. We’re just here to work and go home and be with our family, so we separate it out, almost to the point where we think it may sort of hurt some of our working relationships a little bit, but you know, what do you do?
Scott also articulated another concern that producers had with the establishment of professional relationships among sporting parents: how a negative professional experience could spill over into the personal experience, as well as the player experience:

Sometimes I’m kind of hesitant, just because if the deal doesn’t go right for some reason or another, you don’t want that, that strain on your relationship because you’re coaching his kid the rest of the year or anything like that. And that’s, I think that’s why I don’t… push my business on anybody when I meet people through Little League or friends or things like that, ‘cause… if for some reason things don’t work out on this end, I don’t want it to reflect- or affect our relationship, you know, on that side.

Thus, while producers of services or business owners stood to benefit from their association with youth sports (because it exposed them to a potential client base that was pre-disposed to trust them more than they would a stranger), there was a certain reluctance to engage in purposive social capital building because of the risks involved for their relationships and potentially for their reputation.

As a rhetorical device, “the kids” are the most powerful force in the league. The league exists to ensure that the kids are the sole beneficiaries of the work put into it. There is a certain stigma attached to anyone who is seen as promoting their own self-interest in place of (or even in addition to) “the kids.” There is incentive to present oneself as purely interested in the welfare of the kids. This incentive is what complicates the motives of producers in being too forward in offering their services to potential clients. It would likely be considered gauche for Scott, for example, to hand out business cards as a manager or as a parent, even though this would potentially benefit his business. Instead, if the subject of his business came up “organically” he was able to benefit from it without committing any sort of etiquette breach. He was then better able to make the claim that, while he occasionally created business for himself, it was merely a by-product of his involvement in the league, rather than its focus. Indeed, I believe that Scott’s focus was entirely player-driven and that his business benefits were purely by-products of his
involvement. I never saw evidence to the contrary. However, it remains that enterprising business owners could seem to have it both ways. They could commit themselves to the pure motives of the league, but by engaging with other parents they could also stand to benefit from their involvement without their motives being impugned. It is critical however, that everyone present themselves as avatars of the league’s central mission and not appear opportunistic.

CHILD CARE
Up to this point, I have detailed the motivations of donors and recipients (or producers and consumers) in three of the four major types of benefits exchanged in the Valley City Little League. In all of the preceding sections, I have attempted to introduce elements of recipient motives that complicate the largely taken-for-granted view of the motives of recipients in social capital exchange. The literature on help-seeking has been especially helpful in problematizing the motives of help-seekers, which it turns out are hardly self-evident. However, in these cases where is a clear distinction between donor and recipient (Emotional Support and Information-Sharing) the “burden of motivation” still rested firmly on the donor. That is, it seems easier to explain the motives of the recipient over those of the donor, and the flow of exchange between beneficiary and benefactor is more likely to be stalled because of a lack of motivation on the part of the donor rather than a lack of motivation on the part of the recipient. I showed how emotional support often carried emotional costs for the donor in terms of discomfort and awkwardness, and how this often caused withdrawal from the relationship. In terms of information sharing, this is more evident in employment information, which may be shared freely, but the more helpful sharing of influence in the employment process was only offered in certain circumstances by the donor, who had to be properly motivated to do so, usually by personal experience with the job-seeker. For reasons unique to its nature, the question of
motivation in the formation of business relationships is no more complex than the other benefits, but more difficult to divide into clear benefactors and beneficiaries. Because of this, the burden of motivation is roughly equally divided between producer and consumer. I will argue in this section, however, that child care represents a distinct and unique scenario of a reversal of the burden of motivation. In this case, I show that for child care, the motives of donors are the ones that are unproblematic and therefore supply of this benefit is quite plentiful. Because the motives of the recipients were more complex and the stakes higher, the burden of motivation rested almost entirely on them. That is, the exchange was more likely stalled because of reluctance on the part of the recipient than that of the donor. This presented a situation with an overabundance of providers for social capital benefits of which nearly no parent wanted to take advantage. I argue that this occurs for two reasons: (1) the rhetoric of the league which places “the kids” above all else in the prioritization of and motivation for action, and (2) the differential framing that this rhetoric causes among parents over who exactly was the beneficiary in this type of social capital exchange.

A discussion of this type of benefit would not be complete without further reference to Small’s (2009b) *Unanticipated Gains*, which dealt specifically with the exchange of child care benefits between mothers participating in daycare centers. Small’s work is instructive, because it specifically addresses the seeming-paradox between exchange and the strength of the relationship, as the mothers in Small’s study often expressed a willingness to entrust their children with mothers whom they hardly knew. Small claimed that the *institution* of the daycare center provided a foundation through which mothers could entrust near-strangers with their children, “…for enrolled mothers, the center itself either guaranteed or encouraged repeated encounters, not merely through many tasks that required their participation but also through
mundane rules such as required times for drop-off… organizations can institutionally perform much of the maintenance work [of relationships],” (p. 105). Further, Small found a disparity between mothers who would leave their children with another and those who would take someone else’s children for a period, “It is worth noting that while more than a few mothers were willing to trust others they did not know well with their children, almost all mothers we interviewed were willing to take care of the child of another they scarcely knew,” (p. 112). In the VCLL, I found a similar, but less strongly repeated pattern: I found the willingness to take another person’s child in as prevalent as Small, but I found the trust to leave their own child with another less so. Through the discussion of motive, I offer an alternative explanation based on the exigencies of this particular context.

While it’s certainly true that a child who received a ride to practice or had a parent stay late with them benefitted from that action, it would be foolish to view them as the only beneficiary (whether or not they were the primary one is another matter). However, by presenting the children as the beneficiary of their actions, parents were able to present themselves as fully committed to the child-centered nature of the league. This interpretation was very prevalent among parents who expressed their willingness to engage in this type of social capital benefit. As Melody explained to me:

**Melody:** You mean like load up their kids, take’em to practice? Oh yeah, I’ve always done that. That’s just something that- and I don’t do it for the parents. I do it for the kids, ‘cause I don’t want the kids to miss practice. I don’t want them to miss a game. If somebody needs help buying a uniform, we would pick it up; stuff like that, oh yeah, in a heartbeat.

**Interviewer:** What is it about- why is it that you would do that?

**Melody:** Because… it’s not fair to the kid if the parents couldn’t do it. You don’t want the kids to feel left out or uncomfortable, because their parents, you know, ‘cause they can’t come to practice, and then they can’t start the next game. Or they don’t have the matching pants, and the whole team has it. We don’t want them to suffer like that.
Some instances of help went even further. Sierra, and Brent had a longstanding arrangement with a set of parents who worked on the weekends to make sure their son William was able to participate:

…we feel like the kid should still be able to participate in sports even though his parents have to make a living. You know what I mean? Like he should still- *He should not be punished if there’s a way for us to accommodate to get him to and from, we should try to do that.* Um, just as people we should try to do that (emphasis mine).

Presenting the children as beneficiaries also freed them from the expectation of reciprocity since, as benefactors to children, they did not expect anything specific in return. Thus, they were also able to present themselves as acting altruistically.

It was generally Core parents who provided these types of benefits to children, since they were the ones most likely to be there for practices and games regularly. However, even for the Fringe parents I spoke with who had never provided such benefits, there was an open and enthusiastic willingness to engage in such behavior if necessary. Most of the Fringe parents such as Harriet had simply never been afforded the opportunity to engage in such helping behavior:

Right. I mean, I wouldn’t even know them if I saw them. But you know, the parents that I do see consistently- I mean, and even, and that doesn’t even say anything about the child, you know. I would… if that child was in the parking lot waiting for their parent and there was nobody else around, I would wait there for them. Just because I don’t know them personally, I would not leave them there. I think any parent would do that, hopefully, you know. But yeah, I mean even the ones that I don’t really know their parents, I would still offer assistance.

Again, the recipient in this scenario was seen as the child rather than the parent. This made sense, because they were directly involved with the child in this scenario, and as a parent, they were empathetic to other parents and would not want their own children left alone in those circumstances. Because of these two factors, parents were usually more than willing to provide whatever type of child care is necessary.
This pattern of behavior usually held even in the face of potential liability issues were something to go wrong with the child in the care of another parent. Most parents that I spoke with did not factor those issues into their decision whether or not to provide child care in a league setting:

Adam: I tell my parents that up front. I have a less fortunate family on my team. Lady doesn’t have- we email everybody, texts, you know, the game’s this time, you have to come here, da, da. She doesn’t have text, so we call’em every time. And the mom can’t, you know, she works late. I’ll go to the house, pick up the kid, take him to practice, take’em home. Absolutely.

Interviewer: You don’t ever think about that in terms of like liability issues or things like that?

Adam: No. That’s not even crossed my mind.

Interviewer: Is it because, I mean is there a certain level of trust between your parents and you that, that sort of allows you to…

Adam: I, I believe so. I believe so. And again, I don’t want my kids to be left out, you know what I mean? I, I just don’t. There was one time where she forgot, you know. I don’t know if she forgot (laughs). But we stayed out for 45 minutes after practice. And I stayed at the ballpark with’em. You know? And I threw the ball with’em, you know, helped him out batting and stuff like that until she got there.

Some parents acknowledged the concern of such issues, but it does not generally stop them from performing those duties in the event that they arose, most likely partly for some of the reasons Adam articulated above, and partly for some of the reasons Scott mentioned here:

I think about things like that, because, for one, that’s the kind of business I’m in. I guess if you get to know the parent or if you know who they are at least, or you know a family or something like that, you really don’t concern yourself too much with it, I think. I don’t think Nolan (the manager with whom Scott coaches) really thinks about that at all. I mean, that is a concern but, I don’t know. Like I said, that small town community, a lot of times… you don’t think about those things (laughs).

This may seem more prevalent simply because the majority of interviews I conducted were with Core or Fringe parents who were closer to Core parents than Isolated parents. When I spoke with Andy, a Fringe parent who was much closer to being an Isolated parent than a Core parent, he
was far less willing to provide certain types of child care, in large part because of the potential liability. In saying so, he also indicated that, where he knows parents better, he was much more willing to engage in such care. However, due to his relative isolation on this particular team, he was very reluctant:

Andy: I mean, I never gave rides to kids, cause I don’t know. I just stay away from that, ‘cause I don’t want anybody to ever think anything. You know, I don’t know. Maybe I’m just um… overcautious, but you hear all these stories in the news, kid says this about a parent or something. I just stay away from that. If I’m gonna be some place, it’s gonna be with a kid out in the open, everyone can see and the parent comes and picks’em up and that’s it. So I mean, I just might be overcautious on that, but you just, you just hear these things. So I’m there to protect myself and my family. And I don’t want anything to ever come out that, that’s gonna possibly even happen. So, I do stay out. I don’t give rides to kids.

Interviewer: Has anyone ever asked you to give their kid a ride?

Andy: Nope.

Interviewer: Would you turn them down if they did?

Andy: It depends. It depends on how well I knew that family, but as of right now, I would say I probably wouldn’t. I mean, especially on the baseball team. But like, like with my kids now, they have some friends that they’ve had- They’ve been friends ever since we moved here. So those friends, we know the parents really well and stuff. We give them rides. But as far as the baseball team, I mean… no.

It is possible that other weak Fringe and Isolated parents would feel similarly were they asked the same questions. Unfortunately, I was not able to conduct many interviews or even have conversations with many of these parents. However, it was my experience in conversations with parents of all stripes that they are usually very willing to provide this type of service, especially if they could present it as something they are doing for the kids, rather than strictly for the parents.

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2 This is a substantial limitation of this study, which I cover more thoroughly in Chapter 7.
From the perspective of potential recipients, however, the standard for allowing or being comfortable with their child being in the company of another parent was markedly different, and significantly stricter. This created a substantial imbalance between social capital offered (or accessed, in Lin’s terms) and social capital mobilized. Ricardo offered a prime example of how this conversation typically took place in my interviews:

**Interviewer:** So the parents on this team, you know, who would you consider parents that you would be willing to count on in that, like that situation? Like if he needed a ride, who would you feel comfortable calling?

**Ricardo:** Probably coach Brent… Brent, Sierra, uh, even Sam’s parents [Julianne and Derrick], Sam’s mom and dad. Like, for Tuesday’s game, when I was there at the field trying to get a hold of kids and I was talking to parents, and Sam’s dad was like, “Hey, if you need me to go pick this kid up, I can go. If it’s a ride issue, you know, I can go provide the ride.” So I know, you know, I can always count on Sam’s parents, you know…

**Interviewer:** Uh, on the flip side of that, what kids would you feel comfortable doing that for? Like, who would you pick up and give a ride to?

**Ricardo:** I would do it for any one of the kids. I mean, it’s more important for me to have the kid there at the game than to have them at home without a ride, you know what I mean? So I know if I had to miss a game when I was playing, I would have been devastated, you know what I mean? I would have much rather have gotten on my bike and rode to the game than to have had to have sat at home knowing my team was playing, you know what I mean? Yeah, yeah.

Like, I do it for Jessie that plays on our team. They only have one vehicle. Uh, the dad, he has construction jobs, so he’s not always out at the same hour… I’ll go pick him up if, if she [Jessie’s Mother] knows that he needs a ride or is gonna need a ride, she’ll call me a couple hours ahead of time. And you know, if I can, if I’m close by, and the majority of time we’re right there, you know, we’ll go pick him up and take him to the game. And, you know, I’d do it for any one of the kids.

In order for Ricardo to trust his child with another parent, he had to either have a previous relationship with the parent or have shared an experience which provided him with evidence that the parent was committed and trustworthy. Christina made note of this imbalance very explicitly:
Christina: Oh, I would take anybody’s kid home. If they forgot snack, “Hey could you run to the store and grab it for me?” Um, you know if they couldn’t get their kid to practice, “Hey could you swing by and pick up my kid?” I would do all of those things.

Interviewer: So, do you think that you would probably do it more for these people as a group than you would necessarily feel comfortable asking from them?

Christina: Yes. Absolutely. 100%. Yes. There are only certain things that I would ask people to do. But they could ask me to do anything, and I would probably do it. I mean, obviously… They could ask you for a lot more that you would feel comfortable asking from them. Yes. That’s kind of the thing I was trying to get at. And I think- but that has nothing to do with those people.

And also, I don’t want to ask somebody, and inconvenience them. Do you know what I mean? I don’t want to be the mom that people are like, “Oh God, she’s gonna ask me to take her kid home again. Oh, she forgot snack again.” I don’t wanna inconvenience anybody either.

Time after time, in conversation after conversation, I found parents far more willing to be the donor than the recipient where their children were concerned. Much of this imbalance may have been due to the way these recipient parents viewed the transaction. Whereas donors saw the children as the beneficiaries, recipient parents saw their children as the resources being exchanged, and they were extremely reluctant to allow their child to be in the company of another parent without having a more established relationship. At the same time, they were very willing to be the donor in the relationship because self-trust was not an issue for them, as Nicholas explained, “I’d be glad to help out anybody’s kid. (sighs). Conversely, however, I wouldn’t necessarily feel that comfortable leaving my kids with people I don’t know. You know, I’ve become that, that ungodly paranoid parent. Don’t trust anybody. But I want everybody to trust me, so… uh, you know, again, if I could help out, I’d be glad to.”

When it comes to child care, the balance between supply and demand was highly skewed; there was plenty of supply but very little demand. Because of the magnitude of this imbalance and the reasons behind it, a reversal in the burden of motivation occurred. No longer were the
motives of the donors at question while the motives of recipients were unproblematic. Instead, the motives of the recipients were crucial to understanding the nature of the exchange. This represented a great unexplored area in social capital studies, which have focused too often and too exclusively on donor motivation. Critically, the decision to allow a child to be placed voluntarily in the care of another parent more likely relied on the closeness of the relationship, much as I mentioned in the distinction between information sharing about job opportunities and actually vouching for a potential job applicant. The closeness of the relationship mattered because the level of trust required for the recipient in this type of social capital exchange was far greater than that required for the donor. Because their motives were largely if not exclusively altruistic, donors in these cases did not rely on a sense of specified reciprocity because they viewed the children as the recipients of their goodwill. They may have relied on a sense of generalized reciprocity, but they largely did not see a situation where they would have to rely on the store of goodwill that inhered in the team as a whole, as Core and Fringe parents are routinely present at practices and games. On the other hand, because they viewed themselves as the recipients and their children as the resource being entrusted to another parent, parent recipients were not in a hurry to leave their children with just any parent. Closeness mattered. Soon after telling me that she would feel comfortable giving any child a ride home from her son’s team, I reversed the scenario on Harriet, asking which parents she would feel comfortable providing Anton a ride home. Her response: “Well, I would say… Probably just the ones that I have gotten to know on a one-on-one, sitting and talking to them.” In this case, closeness mattered for the recipients, but not the donors. All of this led to a reversal in the burden of motivation, where the motives of the recipients were more difficult to discern and more important to parse out than the motives of the donors, which were much closer to self-evident.
From the above, it is evident that motivations for recipients, far from being unproblematic, are a complex web of trust, insecurities, and calculations that lead to either asking for or not asking for (or accepting or not accepting) help from another parent. Some parents are more willing to allow their children into the care of another parent than others, and the parent involved may be an important component. Of the parents I spoke with who had allowed their children into the care of another parent, it was the manager or a coach or a parent they knew well. Harriet, for example, had allowed Brent to pick up her son at the orthodontist’s office while his older brother was at an appointment that went long:

[My older son] had an orthodontist appointment, just right here in Valley City. But Anton had a game, and I didn’t know how long his appointment was gonna run. So I called I called Brent and I said, “Anton’s gonna be late to the game. You know, I’m at the orthodontist appointment. I don’t know how long it’s gonna be.” So he offered to come and pick Anton up at the orthodontist, so he came and picked him up and took him to the game. And so that has, that was a tremendous help. And I would hope that every parent would ask if they needed that help.

Even in Mario Small’s study, while mother’s were often willing to trust mothers they hardly knew with their children, the examples he cites (the Parents Association Vice President, a son’s friend’s mother), either the institution (the daycare center) or another established relationship (a son’s friend) provided the basis for the trust. In the cases cited above, such as Harriet, the institution (the league) provided the basis of trust for the exchange, as coaches and managers were seen as representatives of the league, much as Parents’ Association officers were viewed in the daycare centers of Small’s study.

For other parents, especially Isolated parents, the decision to allow other parents to drive their children to and from games and practices was based on pragmatic need and the previous relationships they had built with the coaches. William, the Cubs player whose parents ran a business that operated primarily on weekends was one such player. While I was never able to get
either of his parents to interview with me, I did speak to his mother on the phone one day, where she explained to me that they wanted William to be able to play baseball but that it would be impossible without the aid of Brent and Sierra, for whom they had previously played. Without them, she explained to me, William would not have been able to play, which would have been very difficult for him. While she would have preferred to be at his games with her husband rather than working, the situation required sacrifices. Instead, she relied upon, and was grateful for, the help she and her husband received from Brent and Sierra.

Much like the mothers operating in Small’s daycare centers in New York City, most parents in the VCLL would not turn to their Little League contacts first in an emergency that existed outside of the domain of the league itself. What help they would consider from within the league was for league matters, such as rides to and from practices and games, staying late after practice with a child in the event that they ran late, etc. But they still considered them a potential resource. Small found that parents in these situations were able to cope with having less information about the other parents they entrusted with their children because of the institutional backing of the center itself. Similarly, the League itself provided, for many parents, a setting where strangers were not always treated as such, and that trust was more easily established than in other situations, as I have noted above. However, I believe that I found a greater reluctance to enter into such arrangements than Small found in his daycare centers. I can only speculate about the differences, but one of the possibilities is the nature of the baseball season, which is only two months long. In Small’s reckoning, one of the mechanisms by which trust in the centers is built is through repeated encounters. Day after day, mothers run into specific others because of their routines and the strict drop-off and pickup times imposed by many of the centers. While Little League runs in a similar fashion from a time perspective, the two-month long season means that
there are a very limited number of encounters possible before the season is over. It is, perhaps, more difficult to build trusting relationships in the shortened amount of time that Little League can facilitate relationship formation. Repeated seasons playing with the same kids may alleviate this issue, but the time involved is much greater. This may account for the increased reluctance and insistence on closer relationships that I found in my interviews with VCLL parents where child care is concerned.

Not all benefits shared routinely in the VCLL required such an arduous process. Information sharing, particularly regarding services about town, was freely shared around the league. Because of this, however, it may not have been useful in supporting a growing relationship between parents. This did not diminish its utility to recipients, however. Likewise, business contacts that passed between parents, either as producers or consumers, were generally straightforward. Though some producers were wary that their professional relationship could impinge on their personal ones, and some consumers were aware that their knowing someone through sport does not guarantee that they were conscientious in their business dealings, both parties generally set aside those concerns. At the very least, I am reminded of the phrase, “The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.” Looking back on Katheryn’s assessment of the coach she used to install lights in the back of her house, “… even though he’s probably like the biggest shyster ever,” it reminds us that familiarity (presumably as long as it is not characterized as negative familiarity) in itself was an advantage with potential material consequences. And while producers of such services were not outwardly pushing their business interests through the league, there was an advantage to be gained through their participation in the league.
CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explored various aspects of the benefits I noted in Chapter 4. In particular, I noted the extant theory for the particular benefit and whether or not my observations conformed to that theory. Where distinctions could be made, I explored how motivations – particularly those of the recipient – may have played a role in the discrepancy. Because motivations are an understudied aspect of the social capital literature, their discussion may shed light on why social capital exchange in the VCLL may have manifested in a manner that would not be predicted by extant theory. Finally, I explored the impact that the league itself, with its child-centered ideology, may have impacted the exchange of resources between parents. In the end, I have presented a picture that complicates the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary as well as reiterates the crucial role that social contexts play in social capital exchange.

Information sharing most closely conforms to the existing theory, as it generally flowed freely between donor and recipient, and without much regard for the strength of the relationship. Information sharing took on two forms: information about jobs and information regarding services about town. Job-sharing information was rather difficult to sort out. As shown in Smith (2010) but in contrast to other sources (Granovetter 1974), donors were unlikely to move from information to “vouching” for another unless the relationship was closer than that of an acquaintance. When this was the case, job-sharing information was not especially helpful. For others, there operated an ethos of individualism that precluded the exchange of such information, especially regarding jobs. Information sharing regarding services that could be procured around town was also freely passed, with little regard to the potential that the information shared could lead to negative experiences for recipients. The child-centered nature of Little League did not seem to have much of an impact on this type of social capital exchange. Further, reciprocity
seemed to be generalized in this context, which lessened the probability that information exchange could be reasonably utilized to build closer relationships.

Emotional support exchanged in the league did more to challenge existing social capital theory, but the results presented here were the most speculative and in most need of expanding. Existing social capital theory suggests that emotional support is more likely to be exchanged between closer relations. However, the help-seeking literature suggests that there are occasions when emotional support may be sought from more distant relations, such as acquaintances. In my interviews, people expressed a willingness only to ask for such support from close relations, but described providing such support – in the form of a willing ear, in most cases – from distant relations. In such cases, the problems shared between confidants were in some way related to the family, conforming to the idea of domain-specific close ties between parents. In such cases where emotional support was exchanged, the relationship ended with the season, which may suggest that sharing emotional support with an acquaintance may be too much of a burden on the relationship or may make the recipient seem unattractive as a future closer relation, but more research is needed into the mechanism of relationship ending.

Parents who own their own businesses can find themselves embedded in a large pool of potential customers or other forms of support for their ventures. The literature on entrepreneurs and social networks is conflicted vis-à-vis voluntary organization such as Little League, but it seems that if Little League is a diverse organization, as I have suggested, then participation should increase the diversity of a parent’s network while reducing its density, both of which are critical factors in utilizing networks in benefit of business ventures. At the same time, participation should also accomplish the same things for potential customers looking to procure services from service-providers, for services as varied as plumbers and electricians to insurance
agents or attorneys. Thus, it can be difficult to disentangle who is the beneficiary and who is the benefactor when such exchanges take place. What is clear, however, is that participation in the league, especially on the same team, produced a situation where consumers looking for services would almost uniformly rather utilize an acquaintance they met through the league than a random search, though there is also an acknowledgement that the relationship can be put at risk by introducing a professional element. If something goes wrong in one realm, parents worry that it could affect the other as well. Thus, there is some (though not much) reluctance to mix instrumental and affective relationships. Finally, there was a sense among some providers that they would prefer not to appear to be profiting personally from their child’s participation in the league. In this sense, some providers distanced themselves from the potential benefits they could accrue in favor of aligning themselves with the prevailing child-centered ideology of the league. When they did benefit from their child’s participation, they insisted that such benefit was merely a byproduct of their participation rather than the purpose of their participation. While this was almost certainly true, it reinforced the sense that personal gain was incompatible with the child-centered aims of the league.

In making the decision to accept another parent’s child in your care, or vice versa, parents considered numerous factors. For donors, they tended to regard the child as the beneficiary of their actions rather than the child’s parents, and thus acted – in their own minds – altruistically, though they also acknowledged that they hoped that such care would be available for their own children were there ever a need. For recipients, who tended to regard themselves as the beneficiaries and their children as the resource being exchanged, there was far less motivation for entrusting the child with another parent unless a) absolutely necessary, b) the parents were closer than mere acquaintances, or c) they could entrust their children to someone with formal
standing in the league, such as a manager or a board member. Thus, child care represented a situation which exposed the flaws in extant social capital theory which problematizes the motives of the donors but not the recipients. In this case, scholars would be far more hard-pressed to explain and provide for the motives of recipients than donors, whose motives are far less problematic. This creates a reversal in what I have termed the burden of motivation. Such a reversal results in a great deal of supply of the resource and a far smaller demand for such a resource. It is this resource perhaps more than the others which demands a reevaluation of recipient motives in the social capital literature.

Motivations for acting as the beneficiary when exchanging emotional support and child care were very complex. There are ego-relevance concerns in both matters, as both emotional issues and a lack of ability to constantly be there for one’s child had the potential to affect the self-concept of a parent. Also at issue was that by engaging in emotional support exchanges with acquaintances rather than close relations – a rational course depending on the nature of the support and the individuals involved – recipients actually pushed away potential closer relationships by asking too much of them too soon and by appearing as an unattractive companion for future interaction. There were also trust issues that inhibit exchanges, particularly that of child care. When making the decision to leave a child in the care of another parent, the closeness of the relationship mattered in a way that it tended not to in other exchanges. Thus, in certain exchanges – and really in all forms of exchange – social capital scholars do the concept a disservice when ignoring the motives of recipients in favor of a sole focus on donors. In some cases, as I have shown, it is the motives of donors that are actually self-evident and those of recipients that deserve the lion’s share of scrutiny.
Motives are tricky forces; they are notoriously slippery. Methodologically, they present huge problems for the qualitative researcher. Interviews are not especially well-suited for their accurate assessment, as they can either be hidden or distorted, even from the interview subject themselves. Observation likewise presents problems to the researcher, as they can only be indirectly inferred in all but the rarest of cases. The most likely scenario is that the motives for both donors and recipients in all of these cases are more complex than they have been presented here. Almost certainly, I have only scratched the surface of the thought processes and drives of the VCLL parents. Context, exigency, and individual psychological processes surely play a large role in the decision to ask for and/or accept and offer and/or provide assistance in a time of need for a parent. I have relied on past research on social capital motivations as well as the help-seeking literature to inform my interview questions and interpretations of motives. If nothing else, this chapter should indicate the need for a better understanding of recipient motivations in these contexts. It also illustrates the mechanism by which Little League serves as a vehicle for social capital creation and transmission. Informing and influencing all of these transactions and the motives that drive them are the kids themselves. While in some exchanges, the kids move from a front-and-center position to the background (Information Sharing and Business Contacts in particular) they still cast a shadow on them, often functioning as a rhetorical device which parents often invoke when explaining their motives. Many if not most of the time, there is no indication that these motives are not closely aligned with the explicit reasoning of the parents, either as donors or recipients in cooperation with one another. However, in the next chapter, I will explore how “the kids” as a rhetorical device can be used by parents, particularly board members, in service of less noble and more nefarious (or at least questionable) ends.
Chapter 6: Negative Social Capital

Valley City Little League’s monthly Board of Directors meetings typically began with a minutes reading from the previous month. Joshua, the friendly President of the league with a teddy bear build and a desperate need to be liked, if there was any particular reason this had to be done (for reasons that were about to become obvious). He was rebuffed by Melody, the black-haired, bespectacled, and blunt secretary of the league, who had taken the minutes from the December meeting – as the league bylaws stated that the previous meeting’s minutes must be read at the beginning of the following meeting. Joshua grimaced and shuffled his papers, a tactic that seemed to indicate his uncertainty regarding what to do next. I had seen it many times at board meetings, and it usually meant that Melody needed to step in and take charge, which she did. As I watched the conversation unfold, I imagined for a moment that a smile flickered across Melody’s face. She had been unable to remove Joshua from the presidency, but she would have her chance to embarrass him one more time before moving on. Joshua, for his part, continued to look down at his papers. Despite his jovial and outgoing personality when amongst the parents in the league, Joshua was most definitively not a leader. His near-obsessive desire to remain liked caused him to routinely fail to adequately run meetings or act decisively in the face of adversity, the responsibility for which usually fell on Melody herself or, when she refused to do so, to Ryan, the league vice president. The attending members began to shift uncomfortably in their seats, heightening the tension in the room.

Continuing with the full weight of the by-laws on her side, Melody, with the slightest hint of faux sympathy cum mockery in her voice, offered to skip over parts of the minutes reading. When Joshua mumbled something to the effect that he did not care what she did, Melody began
to read the minutes. I had not read them in advance that month, and was not fully prepared for what was coming. The relevant section of the notes read thusly (all emphasis mine):

A letter was written/emailed to D9 (the district office in charge of the local Little Leagues) concerning Joshua's embezzlement conviction. Lawrence (chief umpire) read the email response from Ismael (District 9 administrator) to himself to those in attendance at the meeting. The actual letter was not read. Joshua read a statement in which he stated it was true that he was convicted of embezzlement in the recent past. Ismael stated that D9 supported him [Joshua] and that he himself has allowed a manager convicted of a DUI to coach in his league when he was president. Ismael wanted a vote on Joshua as president. Since there was not a quorum or a 48 hours’ notice given a vote could not happen. Ismael stated since there was no vote Joshua would remain president.

It was brought to the room’s attention that Joshua had texted another board member over 170 times in one day accusing her of writing the letter. D9 refused to address that issue (VCLL Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, December 2010).

Clearly, Melody had written the minutes to accentuate Joshua’s misdeeds as well as attempt to discredit the District office’s defense of him as president of the league. The season had not yet begun, and already it seemed as though it was heading toward disaster. The board had been divided into two opposing factions who seemed comprehensively incapable of working together. Reputations had been tarnished throughout the league and larger community, and it was openly speculated that the league could collapse without resolution. It was already showing signs of sagging under the weight of its conflicts, as registration numbers were down approximately 20% from 2010, coaches had to be recruited heavily for the first time in anyone’s memory, attendance at the umpire clinic was at an all-time low, and parents were openly and loudly complaining about the way the league was being run. Even still, there were no new volunteers to serve as board members. A body of leaders who had been brought together almost exclusively by their connections to one another was being ripped apart by the deterioration of those same relationships. That deterioration, as well as the personal and organizational effects of the toxic relationships, are the major topics in this chapter.
When I attended board meetings at the beginning of my fieldwork, I noted that I felt the board was a smoothly functioning body where consensus was far more likely than conflict as it concerned league matters. In an early conversation with Leanne, a few weeks before the board conflict began to heat up, she explained to me her view on why the board functioned as it did:

I think that’s why we don’t have too many conflicts, because a lot of the people trust what’s going on, ‘cause everybody’s basically pretty happy with the way the financials are being run, the way the concession’s being run, the way that everybody’s kind of little role in it. Everybody’s pretty happy with who’s got what. I think everybody else feels pretty comfortable with where everybody’s at, and everybody’s doing their jobs. I don’t think there’s a lot of dissension in that, you know what I mean? Everybody basically has the same goal.

This was further corroborated by both Joshua and Melody, who acknowledged that they were friends for some time before Joshua was president. In speaking with them later on, Melody lamented this phase of their relationship, framing herself as the victim of Joshua’s con of the league, “He took money from the league. It took us 6 months to get it back. And at the time Joshua and I were friends. I believed- I was sucker ed in by Joshua, I believed his- Well, I believed him until about halfway through the six months… Javier was gonna go press embezzlement charges against him. And I wish I had let him do it sooner, but I thought Joshua was my friend.” Joshua, for his part, also acknowledged that he, Melody, and Marilyn were friends before they were adversaries.

The VCLL Board of Directors was one of the few spaces in the league where players were not directly involved or even visible as it operated. Players were not allowed to be voting members of the Board, and were not present at Board meetings. When they did accompany their parents, they were sent outside to play around on or near the fields while the Board conducted its business. In this environment “the kids,” because of their absence from the proceedings, played a complex role in the business of the Board. Because they were the ostensible beneficiaries of
every aspect of the league, they were ever-present in the statements, arguments, and rhetoric employed by Board members when debating any particular piece of league policy. However, because they were not immediately present at the meetings, they became an abstraction in the proceedings. Thus, the arguments, debates, and conflicts were prone to become about the Board members and their wants and needs within the league. This led to policies and practices that did not benefit the kids themselves (which was far less likely to occur in contexts such as practices and games where coaches interacted with the kids on a regular basis). The other major import of such a situation was that the members of the Board got caught up in their own relationships – both positive and negative – which had near-disastrous consequences for both the parties involved as well as the organization. Because the Board of Directors was built largely on the basis of social relationships – that is, board members almost exclusively joined the board at the urging of a friend already on the board, which is consistent with the literature on volunteering (Wilson 2000) – these relationships tended to be less “professional” and more personal. When things were going well in the personal relationships, this guided the Board more easily through sensitive areas and debates over league policy, though this potentially came at the price of efficiency. When the relationships began to deteriorate, however, as they did during the 2010 and 2011 seasons, the parties and the organization suffered significant damage. Throughout the process of running the league during a season, the rhetoric of “the kids” played a crucial role in the justification of one’s actions – constructive and destructive – within the board of directors.

THE “DARK SIDE” OF SOCIAL CAPITAL VS. NEGATIVE SOCIAL CAPITAL

Of the many ways in which the concept of social capital has been critiqued, one of the most prevalent – and perhaps the most trenchant – has been the neglect of negative aspects of the

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1 I use the term “professional” loosely here to refer to any official league business. It should be understood as having the same meaning as “formal.”
phenomenon, particularly by its pioneering scholars (i.e., Bourdieu 1985b; Coleman 1988; 1990; Putnam 1993; 2000). Since then, a number of scholarly writings have sought to do just that. In general, scholars have largely focused on four areas in which social capital can be considered to have negative consequences: exclusion, the excessive costs of conformity to norms, restrictions on individual freedom, and downward leveling norms (Portes 1998; see Lit Review for full explanations and examples of these processes). In considering these “negatives” of social capital, one is struck both by what they have in common as well as by what they ignore. For while all four of these elements consider the negative consequences for others of otherwise positive social interactions (negative externalities), they altogether fail to consider the very real costs of negative (or toxic) relationships.

That is not to say that the dark side of social capital was not evident in the VCLL, because it was. There was exclusion in the league, such as when certain coaches used their connections to the Board (or their positions on the Board) to rig their teams in defiance of the rules, leaving the pool of talented players depleted for the other coaches in the division. There was also what Portes (1998) called the production of “public bads,” in which relationships were used for illicit purposes. In this case, board members were accused of placing their children on certain teams (particularly All-Star teams) or colluding to embezzle league funds (detailed below). What distinguished these instances from what I term “negative social capital” was that, in these relationships, there were positive consequences for the parties involved, and the negative effects were external to the relationship between, for example, parties A and B. A and B may derive benefits from their actions together, and the negative consequences are spread through

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2 Though one could argue fairly persuasively that, given Bourdieu’s theoretical predilections and notions of class, “The Forms of Capital” (1985) focused entirely on the negative effects of social capital.
persons C, D, E, etc. This would be an example of the dark side of social capital. In negative social capital, the relationship between A and B itself is negative and thus the consequences of their interaction and continued relationship is negative for A and B themselves, irrespective of the consequences on the larger context (See Table 1). However, in this case, the organizational consequences were also uniformly negative.

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Table 1: Distinguishing between the “Dark Side” of Social Capital and “Negative” Social Capital

To the extent that social capital can be understood in some form or fashion as resources made available through social connections, it seems that both positive and negative externalities can be thought of as coming part and parcel with accruing resources through social networks (leaving alone the positive sum conception of social capital that scholars such as Putnam take). As such, these negative elements can be thought of more appropriately as the ‘dark side’ of social capital, and these effects have been described in just such a way. However, there has been little effort to disentangle the ‘dark side’ of social capital from the term ‘negative social capital,’ and the terms are often used interchangeably. I argue that the theoretical rigor so often called for by social capital critics and scholars (see, e.g. the various works of Nan Lin or Ben Fine on the matter) requires that the ideas of ‘negative social capital’ and ‘dark side’ of social capital be distinguished, as they refer to two distinct ideas and processes. While the ‘dark side’ of social capital may indeed refer to exclusion, excessive costs, and downward leveling norms, negative social capital should be conceived in a way that takes into account the destructive potential of certain social relationships to the parties directly involved. If, as has been argued convincingly by social capital scholars, social relationships can confer emotional and material benefits on the parties involved, then it follows naturally that negative social relationships can exact emotional
and even material costs on the parties involved. And while some scholars have begun to take on this task of articulating the nature and consequences of negative relationships, their work represents the tip of the iceberg. A neglect of the ways in which toxic relationships can have a significant impact on emotional and material well-being has served social capital theory poorly by pushing the focus to only one side of the equation. A full and mature theory of social capital will necessarily have a well-developed idea of not only what the negative consequences of positive social relationships are, but also what the consequences (both negative and, potentially, positive) of negative relationships can be, not only for the individuals themselves, but also for the institutions within which the relationships are embedded.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE VCLL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The VCLL Board of Directors was made up of a President, a Vice President, a Secretary, a Treasurer, a Chief Umpire, a Safety Officer, a Player Agent (in charge of ensuring eligibility for All Stars as well as running the tryout and draft), and up to 18 additional members with no specific title. In addition, the Board may also have “General Members,” consisting of rank-and-file parents who paid dues for the right to vote on certain league issues as well as the Board elections in the off season. The Board was responsible for following Little League International rules, as well as using available leeway in said rules to craft its own by-laws and procedures. The Board ensured that all players were eligible in both age and geography, that all teams were created according to established rules, that all games were scheduled and officiated. The Board was also responsible for the financial health of the league, including all fundraising efforts. Any

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3 See, for example, the work of Moerbeek and Need (2003), Van der Gaag and Snijders (2004), or Morrison and Nolan (2007) for examples of negative (they refer to it as “sour”) social capital. Consequences of negative relationships in the workplace include lower job satisfaction and frustrated career aspirations. In some extreme cases, those with more negative workplace relationships are prone to higher levels of unemployment in the coming year. The use of the term “sour” social capital, however, relies on the idea of capital as metaphor. I hope to highlight the real and tangible consequences of such negative relationships.
member of the community was eligible to join the board, whose officer elections were held in July. Further, new Board members could be elected at any regularly-held Board meeting (up until the board is full, which never was while I was involved), and board members could only be discharged in the event that ¾ of the board voted them off (this also never happened while I was there). According to the league by-laws, Board Officers must be elected in September of each year.

What was noteworthy about the board is that, while anyone was eligible to join, almost no board members joined “spontaneously.” That is, all but one board member I spoke with during the course of my research were recruited by a current board member with whom they had an established relationship, usually because their children were playing on the same team. Marilyn, for example, was recruited by a former president of the board, and in turn recruited Melody. Leanne was recruited by her husband (now ex-husband) Javier, who was President when I began my fieldwork. Adam and Scott were both recruited by Ron, who they both said persuaded them to join on the basis of seeking a “different way of thinking” on the Board, which meant that Ron was seeking a more business-oriented Board membership. The only member of the Board I spoke with who claimed to have not been recruited for the position is Joshua, whose wife (now ex-wife) was a Board member at the time he joined which was, coincidentally or not, the same time they were going through their breakup. Thus, the board itself has a history of being built through the social connections of its members. For a body of individuals supposedly working together for a common goal to become so fractured and so dysfunctional when many if not most of the members have (or had at one time) friendly relationships – and, in many cases, family relationships – was one of the more interesting mysteries that was presented to me over the course of my two seasons. The consequences of the falling out – both at the league and the
individual level – were doubly evident considering the role social capital played in the regular functioning of the league.

Voluntary organizations – especially those where the individuals who are responsible for its functioning receive no compensation for their work – rely on social capital for their smooth operation. Its members were not compensated for their services. Thus, from an organizational standpoint, the league would dissolve without the time, effort, expertise, and resources possessed by or available to its members. That is, the VCLL was almost completely dependent on social capital, particularly that possessed by the Board of Directors. Examples of these resources included (but were hardly limited to) recruitment of coaches and parent volunteers, accounting expertise, fundraising creativity, administrative duties, officiating of games (umpiring), and concession experience, not to mention the use of Ron’s construction company to complete critical repairs to the league’s concession stand and clubhouse detailed in Chapter 4.

During my time with the VCLL, I became a full voting member of the Board of Directors, attended meetings, offered my own services, and spoke with members – both formally and informally – about their recruitment to the board, their service to the board, and their relationships with other board members. They all agreed that, at one time, the board functioned very smoothly. Many of the board members enjoyed multiplex relationships with other board members (they were either family or friends outside of Little League), and the league ran with a surplus of both cash and parent goodwill. Though the accounts vary, sometime during or after the 2010 season, some of the critical relationships deteriorated, unification morphed into fragmentation, and various factions of the board began fighting for control of the league and its operations. They attempted this through both personal and “professional” attacks, through the withholding of institutional knowledge and expertise, and through a general refusal to cooperate
with other members of the board. Through all of this, the league’s financial surplus dwindled, and the goodwill extended from the parents and indicated by an abundance of coaches and other volunteers, vanished. Coaches – and all volunteers – increasingly had to be recruited from a pool of parents with no coaching experience, which led to an increase in the number of complaints by parents against coaches for failure to do their job properly. Virtually all teams opted out of their concession stand duty (where a set of parents from each team ran the concession stand for a night), leaving one volunteer to run the stand as a de facto full-time job. Finally, the board itself had a great deal of trouble maintaining its meeting attendance and membership, and could no longer easily recruit replacements from the rank and file parents. The major consequences of consistently failing to have a quorum at monthly meetings was that crucial league legislation could not be voted on, and even the normal functioning of the league was hampered, as no votes could be taken.

The full range of consequences of the deteriorating relationships, however, did not stop at the organizational level. The rampant rumors of a personal nature (including numerous rumors of marital infidelity by multiple board members), accusations of incompetence and impropriety (including embezzlement charges aimed at several different board members), infighting, and the public actions of various board members led to not only the downfall of several board members’ reputations within the community, but also to severe damage to personal relationships amongst board members (including one final divorce and one rumored pending divorce). In the end, the deterioration of personal relationships on the board produced substantial personal consequences as well, the full range of which might be felt for years to come.
NOTE ON METHOD FOR THIS CHAPTER

For this part of the project, I altered my approach when gathering and analyzing the data. In viewing the conflict between Joshua and Melody, I took a case study approach. This allowed me to view my study of the board as distinct from the rest of the league, even as it – by its nature – was intimately tied up in the policies and administration of the league. In other words, though the decisions made by the board affected the rules of the league and its overall vision, it was also its own distinct social space and entity, separate from the fields and the day-to-day functioning of the league. Further, I treated Joshua and Melody’s conflict separately because it represented what Yin (2003) referred to as an “extreme” case. Though I had encountered both parents on teams and board members who perhaps did not like one another, the conflict on the board (and between Joshua and Melody in particular) was a far more intense and for more impactful conflict in the league.

A case study is, “…an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (ibid. p. 18). Case-study approaches are considered most appropriate in situations where researchers want to answer “how” or “why” questions, in situations where the researcher does not have control over behavior, and when the events are contemporary. While this did not alter the data-gathering methods (I still utilized participant-observation and in-depth interviewing techniques), it did alter the way I viewed the data. I began to ask more pointed questions of both my interview subjects and of the data itself. Specifically, I wondered how board members – in this case Joshua and Melody – justified their actions against one another and how they each viewed the conflict between them. The conflict between Joshua and Melody represented an “embedded unit of analysis” (p. 46) within the larger case of the
board of directors, while the league represented the context within which the league operated. Because of the tangled nature of the Board and the day-to-day operations of the league it was indeed difficult to see where the case ended and the larger context began.

While the single-case study faces potential shortcomings in that cases thought to be of one character (the extreme case, in this study) may not be of the type initially thought by the researcher. It is necessary then to couch my conclusions with the appropriate caveats. These caveats should be seen as similar to those discussed in Chapter 3 regarding the potential pitfalls of ethnography: the conclusions from this case cannot be disentangled from the context that produced it, and therefore different contexts (leagues) may produce conflict of a different order. That is to say that I cannot generalize my conclusions in any literal sense. At the same time, I do offer what Yin calls “analytic generalizations” (p. 15), which are generalizations to theoretical propositions. These are detailed below.

EVOLUTION OF A PROJECT

I was observing the advanced choreography that is known as Picture Day (part of the Opening Day 2010 ceremonies) when Joshua approached me and we began talking. Joshua was already the league Vice President at the time, and had been one of the more affable and cooperative board members in my short stint with the league. I had no idea when I asked him how things were going that I would get anything but pleasantries in return, nor did I immediately recognize the opportunity for what it was, but the Board of Directors became one of the primary focal areas of my study, and proved to be the cornerstone of both empirical and theoretical findings on the subject of negative social capital. I constructed what follows from conversations, in-depth interviews, and official league documents.
The board’s previous president, Javier, had been running the league for approximately three years when he decided to step down. He had promised the rest of the board that he would get the season started, and then would walk away from the position on Opening Day. Since the board was in the middle of a term (officer elections taking place in August at that time), Joshua assumed he would simply ascend to the post until new elections six months hence. The rest of the board did not agree, insisting on a new presidential election then and there. Joshua lost that election to Lawrence by a margin of 6-5. The crux of the political disagreement between various parties centered on when Javier, the previous president, stepped down. According to Joshua and his supporters, Javier stepped down when he stopped fulfilling the duties of league president, which was April 10 (Opening Day). According to my conversations with Javier, he considered himself stepped down officially the previous July at the end of his term, and only stayed on to help the board get to the new season. If the former was true, then according to league bylaws, Joshua should have taken over as President until the new election cycle. If the latter is true, then the league Presidency should have been decided 7 months previous. The Presidential election, depending on who told the story, was either the beginning of the conflict, or another in a series of red flags regarding the dependability and trustworthiness of Joshua as a board member and (eventual) president.4

After the election, someone (no one will admit to doing it, but presumably Joshua) called the District office to complain that the election could not be considered valid, since proper

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4 Meeting Minutes show that Javier resigned in October, 2009. From then until April 2010, he was listed as the “Interim” president. The minutes indicated that a special election was to be held for his replacement, but the matter was tabled (not formally) and did not appear in the minutes until Lawrence was elected in the April 2010 meeting. I could not find direct reference to a re-election, as I could find nothing in the minutes referring to an election after that time. While it was only hearsay, the principals largely agreed on the sequence of events that led to a second election.
notification had not been given. According to league bylaws, special elections must take place only after all voting members have been given 48 hours’ notice in writing. This was not done, according to the nameless caller, and they demanded that the District take over the election process, which they did. When the special election was held there was again controversy, this time over “new” board members, their motivations, and their eligibility to vote in the election. The views on this controversy, like so many others, depended on who recounted the story and which side of the conflict they were on:

There was a woman in there who said that she was a board member, and I’d never seen her ever, ever, ever. And so, she starts getting drilled by our secretary (Melody). “Well, when did you sign up? Have you paid your dues?” This and that, and she couldn’t answer any of the questions, so… they said, “Oh, sorry, but you can’t vote.” And I think Joshua brought her in as an extra vote for him (Lawrence).

Joshua, naturally, took a different view of the same incident:

And so, some of the people that would sign up for the board, they people that I know. They friends. But they didn’t sign up on the board so I could have numbers to win an election. They signed up for the board ‘cause they wanted to be a part of the board. And they came to that election that night, and people were looking at them like, “Who’s that? Who is that?” And [they] told them, “Well, you didn’t pay your dues,” and started being aggressive with’em, and those girls left. And those same two ladies didn’t put their kids in baseball this year, simply for that reason. We lost a lot of kids because of that election last year, and the shit that goes on from the Board.

In the end, however, Lawrence again won the election, and became president of the VCLL.

Joshua stayed on in his capacity as Vice President.

Despite taking over the presidency with most of the heavy lifting having already been completed (the few months before the season starts is far busier than the season itself), and despite having received a complete checklist and flash drive containing forms, procedures, and important dates, Lawrence was overwhelmed as president, his wife going so far as to ask Javier after a tee-ball game in which their children played together, “What have you gotten my husband into?” to which Javier replied, “You mean, what has your husband gotten me out of.”
Complicating the transition: rumors were swirling throughout the board that Lawrence was involved in an illicit relationship with another member of the board. It was difficult to know the veracity of such rumors, since the parties involved – for obvious reasons – did not openly flaunt their alleged relationships either to me as a researcher or to the general public, but their effects were evident. After his wife received an anonymous email message informing her of Lawrence’s alleged extramarital relationships, Lawrence left the board altogether, leaving Joshua to take over as president where he remained until the conclusion of my fieldwork. Lawrence lasted approximately 4 months as president.

By the time Joshua took office, an air of apprehension already surrounded him as a volunteer and vehement opposition arose in the form of a powerful faction of the board, led by Melody, her sister Leanne, and their mother Sonya. Marilyn, the league’s Treasurer, served as a partial ally, but generally took a more measured approach to Board dealings. Because of her close relationship with Melody however, she was consistently lumped in with the rest of the opposing faction. The roots of the conflict were partly personal and partly professional, though it was noteworthy that while the professional conflicts could mostly be suppressed – in that they were only deployed once the conflict blew up – the personal battles were ultimately what catalyzed the larger war over the welfare of the league.

ANATOMY OF A CONFLICT

The President’s View

In Joshua’s view, the conflict with Melody’s family stemmed from three possible sources, all occurring either in the summer or the fall of 2010: the vaguely inappropriate behavior he exhibited toward Melody’s daughter (which he maintains that, while the incident happened much as Melody described it, was completely innocent), false allegations concerning missing
concession stand money, or the revelation and subsequent ending of his illicit romantic relationship with Marilyn.

First, no one disputed the form and content of the interaction between Joshua and Melody’s adolescent daughter that occurred sometime in the fall of 2010. The two were talking about an upcoming Rhianna concert, and both were discussing the possibility of getting tickets for the show. Joshua gave her the money to purchase the tickets, but did so without Melody’s permission or knowledge. Later, when her daughter revealed where she had gotten the money, Melody was furious. At that time, she explained, she effectively ended her relationship with Joshua on any sort of personal level, and forbade him to have any contact with her children. Joshua did not view himself as having done anything wrong, and denied any ill intentions toward Melody or her daughter:

Last year, think it was a Rhianna concert coming here. And me, being the kind-hearted guy I am, and loving kids, her daughter said, “Joshua, I want to go to the concert.” I said, “You know what, I’ll get you the tickets. Let’s see if I can help you out.” I reached in my pocket, and pulled out my last $25 I had, gave it to her. At the time, I didn’t think—me and Melody being friends and shit, as I thought we were, I didn’t see no harm in it. I didn’t see no harm in it. So I gave her the money. And all of a sudden, something happened. Well, I don’t remember. I don’t know what happened, but… she started acting different.

The incident, recounted in a similar fashion by Melody, nevertheless carried a much different connotation and interpretation for her and her family. In their eyes, it was highly inappropriate to give a child money without their parents’ knowledge or permission. To do so represented a grave violation of trust. Whether or not their interpretations of this event were colored by their growing distrust of Joshua based on previous events is unclear.

Second, it was a common rumor that money was “disappearing” from the concession stand, despite the high profits that the concession stand turned in 2010 (about $7000, far more
than any other league in the district, according to Joshua). The original source of this rumor was another board member with a well-earned reputation as a malcontent and one-man rumor mill named Leonard, though it gained traction independently through other parents and board members. These rumors had legs for two reasons: first, one volunteer (Sonya, who was also Leanne and Melody’s mother) ran the entire concession operation, and was there nearly every night that the stand was open. Further, her attitude toward parent volunteers was perceived quite negatively. This was noticed by board members as well, and was summed up well by Ryan, the former chief umpire and league vice president who resigned in 2011. I had made the comment that it seemed like many parents did not want to volunteer in the concession stand. He replied:

Well, yeah but, you know what? People say that, but if you treat’em nice in there, and you know what? Give these people that come in and volunteer there 3 or 4 hours a night… let’em have a meal. They appreciate that. Don’t treat’em all like a bunch of crooks. Watch’em, but don’t watch’em, you know what I’m saying? Don’t have an eagle eye, don’t start off with the attitude. There’s a way to do it.

This view of Sonya’s demeanor toward parent volunteers was pervasive, so much so that when, in 2010, the league began offering a team buyout of their concession duty, most teams raised the money to buy themselves out of their duty rather than work with her. In 2011, nearly every team took the buyout option. Finding volunteers for the stand became next to impossible. Anecdotal evidence from parents indicated that people in the league linked Sonya’s attitude toward help and the possibility that money was disappearing from the league through the concession stand.

Adam, the gregarious and very popular manager, explained his own experience when his team volunteered to run the stand during the 2011 season:

What happened was, it was our time to go and do the concession, ok? So we came- So I had my parents there, k? And before the doors open, I asked Sonya, right, “What do we do with the money? Do we have a checks and balance system?” And she’s like, “What

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5 Leonard was later removed from the board for absenteeism, but controversially rejoined the Board in 2011.
are you talking about?” I was like, “Well… you know, I don’t want my kids, or my parents to be liable if there’s money missing. So… how much money do we have in the drawer, and then afterwards, who do we sit down with to count the excess money, the profit, and who does the drop?” “Well, I do all that.” I was like, “Well… I feel uncomfortable- You know, I feel uncomfortable.” “Why?” “Because, I don’t want shit to happen, and then they turn back, and say ‘Oh, the Padres, you guys stole money, or there’s money missing.’ You know, I don’t want that to happen.” And again, that’s why you need to have that. You have to have accountability.

So, I brought that up, and all of a sudden, she just clicked, and she started becoming offensive. “Well, you don’t know anything.” Na-na-na. So when you start becoming offensive, now I start questioning you even more. Ok, well, are you really pocketing money? And then she starts going in, and she starts opening more cans of worms. She’s like, “Well… you don’t understand what I do, and, this, this and that. And, look at my book.” She’s like, “This is how much I spent at Sam’s.” And, and they were even numbers, right? It wasn’t like a receipt of $12.83… you know? It was even numbers. $1300, $600. “What I do is I round these numbers up.” You shouldn’t have fucking told me that. You shouldn’t have told me you round those numbers up. That make sense? I was like, “Are you kidding? Well, do you turn in receipts? Who do you turn them in to?” I start asking the questions, and she got all flustered, and she got all pissed off and didn’t talk to me the rest of the day. And it was really uncomfortable, right? Simple question.

When the all-star tournaments came around in 2011, the board convinced Sonya to split management duties with another volunteer. They would rotate and run the stand every other day with volunteers. The second volunteer’s work slots filled almost immediately. Sonya’s slots were filled only by family members, presumably because of her reputation for having a poor attitude with volunteers.

Further, because of the monopoly that the family cartel had over the concession stand, including the counting of the money, the money drops into the safe, and the deposit slips, many people concluded that the concession stand was a source of substantial embezzlement. In Joshua’s words, the deterioration of his and Melody’s relationship could have stemmed from Leonard’s gossip about the concession stand which was then conveniently placed on him as the source. In fact, Joshua repeatedly questioned procedures in the concession stand. While he always stopped short of explicitly accusing the family members of stealing money, he was one of
the most vocal critics of their procedures, and was one of the heartiest advocates of stricter procedures in the stand and inventory measures to track the ins and outs of commodities:

One night I sent Antonio (another board member), one night I sent his wife. One night I sent Lydia (another board member), and they all went up there and told Sonya, “I’m on board duty.” She did not call those people. And they said, “Just call me. We’re here when you’re ready to count.” She did not call them. She called her granddaughter or Leanne to count the money. So that’s what I got told that night. I sent somebody, but they’re not approved to you, so you didn’t call’em.

The implication that Joshua made in these statements and in many casual conversations with me about the matter was that he was indeed suspicious of the way the concession stand was run by Sonya, partly because of her attitude toward anyone who questioned her about it, but also because she became insistent that someone from family count the money and make deposits to the bank from the stand. This suspicion filtered down to many of the rank-and-file parents:

The thought is that some of the money- I know concession-wise, I’ve heard people say, “Well, that jacket looks awfully thick,” or, “That backpack has a lot of stuff in it,” when the family walks out of the concession. Um… and other than that… <long pause> we don’t know what to think without a financial statement. (Rita, Mariners team mother)

All the sales over the season, and knowing how much I contribute to the snack bar, you know, it’s like, shouldn’t there be more than that? Where did everything else go, you know? So… It just seems like there should be more (Therese, mother of Mariners player)

The conversations that took place between parents, where money was concerned, focused on the number of children who registered, the fees that were paid, the money made through the league’s annual raffle, and concession stand sales. While they were primarily overly simplistic – that is, they did not take into account the imperfections in any of those processes, such as kids who played without paying (scholarships), raffle tickets that were never sold, or the expenses involved in running a concession stand, they also raised some fundamental questions about the

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6 According to the league’s by-laws, standard procedure requires the concession stand volunteer to contact the board member on duty – a board member is required to be at the fields when games are occurring – to count money and confirm that all of the counted money is dropped into the safe for future deposit.
transparency with which the board conducted its operations. Financial documents were not publicly available unless by request, and consisted of a spreadsheet listing income and expenses, none of which the rank-and-file parents believed they could fully trust. Because of this disconnect between the expectations of the parents and the measures taken by the board to ensure transparency, this distrust showed no signs of abating at the conclusion of my fieldwork.

Third, Joshua connected his troubles with the board members to his revelation of an extramarital affair between him and Marilyn, the league Treasurer. He claimed that, at a party of his, he revealed to Leanne the nature of their relationship. In his eyes, Marilyn was angry at the betrayal of trust in Joshua revealing the relationship. That it was to Leanne – a “known gossip” in the community – made things substantially worse. Joshua believed that, in an effort to keep her family intact, Marilyn distanced herself from the relationship, and enlisted her friends Leanne and Melody in an effort to discredit Joshua and his claims about their relationship. Joshua claimed that, later on, he and Marilyn largely patched up their differences, and he counted her among his greatest supporters on the board. Marilyn corroborated the professional reconciliation between her and Joshua, but claimed she did not actively support his Presidency and wanted nothing to do with him personally. This did not stop Melody, Leanne, and Sonya from carrying on their vendetta against Joshua, and they continued to undermine him at every possible moment. Their efforts were often but not always effective.

The Opposing View

For the faction of board members who opposed Joshua as President, the timeline of the conflict began much earlier, specifically in the fall of 2009, well before I began my fieldwork. There was an incident involving Joshua’s handling of fall baseball registration money that I heard repeatedly in my conversations with members of the opposition group. In that story,
Joshua took money from a league registration event to his home. The board members who were running the registration were fairly new at the time, and Joshua was the league Vice President. Thus, he was able to convince them to let him take the money directly to Melody, rather than put the money in the league safe, as Melody had instructed. Instead of taking the money to other officers to count and deposit, Joshua allegedly took the money back to his home. The league attempted to retrieve the money for approximately 5 months. Only the threat of legal action against him for embezzlement was sufficient to make the money reappear at a registration event the following February. The actual currency returned to the league was 2 $100 bills, leading members of the board to believe that Joshua spent the money, and only returned a portion of what was collected at the fall registration, because with a registration fee of $45, neither the amount expected nor the form was consistent with what was collected at the registration. This incident alone was enough for certain members of the board to be apprehensive about Joshua’s access to money, yet the story was not known to a large number of board members.

Another incident pertaining to an alleged misappropriation of funds revolved around Joshua and raffle ticket money. According to league rules, every player in the league was to sell a book of 10 raffle tickets at $5 each. This provided the largest influx of funds for the league’s operating budget outside of registration fees. On a team with 11 players, each team would ideally return $550 for the league’s coffers. The team parent was generally responsible for getting the funds raised from the players and their parents to league officials. This entailed no small amount of stress on team parents, who were generally not in a position financially to pay back the money in the event that it was lost, misplaced, or stolen. According to the story as told by both Leanne and Marilyn, Joshua attempted to abscond with a team’s raffle ticket proceeds before being caught in the act and forced to return with the money. This was Marilyn’s version:
There was another incident. Nolan’s (one of VCLL’s managers) wife turned in her raffle ticket money to him [Joshua]. They turned in their raffle ticket money to him. And on Opening Day, I went to go bug’em and say, “Hey, where’s your raffle ticket money?” And he told me, “What are you talking about?” He calls his wife. His wife goes into the concession stand to tell me off about the raffle ticket money. “I turned that money into Joshua. I turned in $550. How could you not have it?” [Marilyn replied] “I- I am so sorry. I don’t know why he hasn’t turned it in to me, and I apologize. I am completely sorry, I am so sorry.” And so then, Leanne got really mad, cause Nolan’s wife was telling me off. So she - during that - went to go talk to Joshua, “Did you collect raffle ticket money?” And he said, “Oh yeah, I collected $300. Ummmm, I don’t have it with me. I don’t have my wallet. I’ll give it to you later.” Well, Leanne didn’t know how much it really was.

So then Leanne comes back and says - you know, by this time, his wife is fine, and she’s ok, and we’re all cool. And she comes back and says “Joshua doesn’t have his wallet, he’ll bring the $300.” And I said, “No, she just said there’s eleven books at $550.” So Leanne gets mad. Joshua walks in 5 minutes later and she says, “Nolan’s wife says it was $550.” He’s all, “Oh, maybe it was.”

All right. So, he supposedly goes home, he does bring us back $450. And then his associate’s gonna bring us the other $100. So, his associate showed up the next board meeting, or whatever, and gave us $100. But I mean that was a second incident with cash, and it did concern me. And yes, my name’s on everything and it’s scary. (Marilyn)

Joshua, for his part, denied any wrongdoing, saying that he was only trying to take the money off of the team mother’s hands and then forgot to turn it into the league until later. To others with first-hand knowledge of the incidents, however, they represented a pattern of ‘shady’ behavior by Joshua that, coupled with his previous run-ins with legal issues, provided justification for their attempts to have him removed from the board for the good of the league and the kids.

At a personal level, members of the opposition told various stories of misconduct and general inappropriateness, which ranged from the allegedly disconcerting behavior concerning Melody’s daughter described above to inappropriate comments about female members of the league:

I’ve been out there, and I’ve called him a dirty pig. He will sit there and undress women with his eyes. And that is, to me, disgusting. There are kids around there. I go, “Control your hormones. You’re an adult.” You don’t go around undressing the mamas with her kids and all that. I go, “You’re disgusting.” I told him, “You’re a pig.” I told him that. I go, “You’re a complete pig.” I go, “You don’t do that.” That… angered me, cause that to
me is so wrong in every way. You know, you just don’t do that. Pissed me off. I go “You pig.” Cause he goes, “Ohh, mama.” I’m like, “Oh, you pig.” (Sonya)

This pattern of behavior extended to the alleged stalking and harassment of the board member with whom Joshua claims to have had a long-term romantic relationship. In the alternative version, Joshua fabricated the entire relationship and began using Facebook and more traditional methods to spy on Marilyn and her doings. A particularly chilling episode nearly led Marilyn to file a restraining order against Joshua, but another incident involving her daughter distracted her attention from that issue to focus on her family. The restraining order was never filed, but the opposition group used the event as a catalyst to more actively seek Joshua’s removal from the presidency. Leanne told me the story:

Joshua started having this really weird obsession with Marilyn. She’s nice to everybody. He kept telling me for mmm… probably like 3 or 4 months, starting last, I say last summer, he was saying how he had this girlfriend, this girlfriend, this girlfriend, and kept talking about this girlfriend. And I’m like, “What’s your girlfriend’s name?” And he would never say her name. Then he finally said, yeah. He finally admitted, “Yeah, she’s my girlfriend.” I’m like Marilyn? I’m like, “You’re with her?” I’m like, are you freaking kidding me?

Um… it just became a weird obsession. Like a really scary obsession. And, so… it got to the point where we would show up somewhere, and he’d happen to be there. You know what I mean? Like, it, it got to be creepy. Like, he wouldn’t leave her alone, just little weird things, and just more and more and more kept happening. So it got to a point where I’m like, all right, this is getting to be too much. This guy is crazy. He’s literally crazy.

Thus, Joshua’s behavior, both professional and personal, became too much to bear in the eyes of Leanne, Melody, Sonya, and Marilyn, and they began actively attempting to remove Joshua from his post as President of the league.

NEGATIVE SOCIAL CAPITAL – A MANIFESTATION

How does a relationship progress from one of simple antipathy to one characterized by negative social capital, in which one or both parties engage in attempts to undermine the well-being of the other. Further, what actions are taken by the parties in order to undermine the other? In other
words, how did negative social capital manifest itself in this particular situation? Many people participating in the VCLL board of directors had disagreements, and several sets of parents did not like each other on a personal level. However, very few relationships were so dysfunctional that the parties involved would knowingly and willingly risk sacrificing the league’s wellbeing in order to get over on their rivals. Why, then, were parties so willing to utilize these extreme measures?

In the eyes of both parties, the transition from antipathy to negative social capital came in the form of the alleged relationship between Joshua and Marilyn. For Joshua, as mentioned previously, he believed his mistake was revealing the nature of their relationship to others involved on the board, particularly Leanne. In his words, when she began spreading the news of their relationship around, he attempted to silence her out of respect for Marilyn’s private life. Failing that, his betrayal of Marilyn was what sent their relationship spiraling downward.

Coinciding with the dissolution of their relationship was the anonymous letter sent to the District outlining Joshua’s criminal past:

**Joshua:** When I told Leanne about us, that’s when things went, went south between me and Marilyn. And she didn’t talk to me for a long time, cause she was mad, cause she felt like I betrayed her, and by telling, as Marilyn said, the motor mouth of fucking Valley City. ‘Cause right away Leanne went back and told Melody, and then Melody started questioning, asking Marilyn about it…

**Interviewer:** But that’s about the same time that all those anonymous letters and all this started coming out.

**Joshua:** Yeah, all that shit started coming out.

**Interviewer:** That was about the same time. Do you think that had anything to do with it?

**Joshua:** I’m sure, I’m sure it had a lot to do with it. Um, and all those letters started coming up.
In the eyes of Leanne, Marilyn, and Melody, the problem arose because Joshua invented a relationship between himself and Marilyn which became quite scary to them over the course of the previous year. In doing so, according to Leanne, he went from a shady character that could not be trusted with money to a genuine threat to the well-being of one of her friends. It was then that she sent the anonymous letter to the District office in an attempt to remove Joshua from the league. In doing so, she revealed embarrassing and potentially very damaging information about Joshua, including a felony conviction for embezzlement as well as civil economic trouble in the form of evictions and lawsuits against him. When these revelations failed to get Joshua removed from the board, Melody also began working against Joshua, using her large reservoir of institutional knowledge to undermine him as President.

As one of the longest-serving members of the board, with a very close working relationship with Javier – as her ex-brother-in-law – Melody possessed, by nearly every measure imaginable, the greatest amount of knowledge about the bureaucratic necessities of running a local Little League Organization. Others on the board often looked to her when there were questions about league procedure rather than Joshua. When Lawrence took over as President, he received a flash drive containing all of the forms and procedures for keeping the league in the good graces of the District and National office. When he left the board, the drive seemed to disappear. Joshua claimed never to have gotten anything when he took over as President, and that he was forced to learn everything about being president on his own. If he had had a better professional and personal relationship with Melody, he would have been able to draw upon her knowledge regarding critical dates and forms and procedures. By the fall, however, when the season had ended and preparations for the following season were underway, their relationship had deteriorated to the point where not only did she purposely withhold information about said
dates and procedures, but she also justified her actions based on her previous experience. In
talking about her own journey from parent to league secretary, Melody claimed to have had little
to no help learning the job:

I just kinda got pushed to do it. And I’ve done it since. When I was first there, I was put
in blind. So, these excuses these board members use, “Oh I don’t know what I’m doing,
no one told me.” Well, you know what? No one told me either. But that’s the difference
between you and me. I figured it out, and I don’t sit there and complain about it. I don’t
whine when no one helps me. What do I do? I researched it. I found out how I do it, and I
kind of built my own system.

Melody’s rhetoric in this case did not always hold up to her actual behavior toward Board
members. When another new officer, Roger, was thrust into a new position on the executive
board, she spoke openly about spending a great deal of time with him making sure that he knew
what needed to be done in his new job:

I go, “Well you’re player agent.” And he goes, “What do I do?” I had to sit there and
explain to him what his role was. Tell him where to look up the information. And this
week, I’ve been sending him everything he needs, ‘cause… he said he’d do it. Which is
nice, because I usually do it, and he asked me to send him all the information he needs,
and I got him everything he needed, and I sat down with him, and I told him exactly what
his role is. Because the president of our league has never explained to him what his role is
as player agent. And that’s his job. To kind of make sure people know what they’re
supposed to be doing.

The difference between Roger and Joshua: Roger married into Melody and Leanne’s extended
family, and had a very good relationship with the both of them. The decision to withhold crucial
information from one officer and not another was a direct result of the nature of the relationships
involved between the parties, and a striking example of negative social capital.

Additionally, Melody, Marilyn, and Leanne began to let go of some of what they
considered “extra” responsibilities that they had taken on during the terms of previous presidents.
The reasons they let them go (again) largely depended on who told the story. To Joshua, they let
things go in an effort to make him look bad when league operations began to sputter. To Melody,
it was a response to Joshua’s insistence that board members learn their roles and stop stepping outside of their job descriptions. The Little League Operations Manual described the role of the Secretary largely in terms of note taking during meetings, as well as a communications apparatus to the league. Melody described her role thusly:

I do everything. I schedule everything. I run Opening Day. I run tryouts. I run registration. Well, this is what I did in the past. This year, it’s not happening. I run picture day. I run barbeque for the kids. I run the tournaments. Well, I set up the tournaments. I set up concession. I set up the scorekeeping. I make sure everybody’s here on time. I schedule people. I make sure the game schedules get out. I make sure the rosters get out. I make sure the managers’ packets… I make sure practice schedules get out. I contact coaches if I have to. I get all the information out to everybody. And that’s just what I can think of off the top of my head. I am doing Little League 12 months a year. I check the phone messages. I check the mail. I check the email.

She, Leanne, and Marilyn claimed their plan of action was necessary to illustrate to the league their value by forcing others on the board to take over many of these duties. In board meetings, they became quite adamant about the duties they would and would not be taking over before and during the season:

**Leanne:** Like these men think that they can run the show. Fine. Then do it your damn selves. You think you know everything, fine. They sit there like, “You do your job, and you do your job and you do your job.” Fine. I will do exactly what my job is. You guys ask me to get raffle tickets printed, that’s what I’ll get printed. I’m still waiting to print’em. Mister President hasn’t told me what exactly are the awards. I don’t think he understands how much each of us took on to make sure it got done, and now he’s with his, “Oh you do your job.” Fine. You ask me to do raffle tickets; that’s what I did. I’m not gonna do anything extra.

I was out there every freaking day last year, along with my sister, Marilyn, all of us. I have my kids there till 9, 10 o’clock at night every single night. For what? Am I gonna do it again this year? No. They can do it. I think it’s a bunch of crap, you know what I mean? To have such little respect for people who have put themselves out there. You see him out there every day? No.

**Interviewer:** So what… what happens to the league then?

**Leanne:** It falls on the president. So why didn’t it get done? I don’t know. Why don’t you ask Joshua?
Interviewer: But what happens when it doesn’t? And the league really starts to collapse?

Leanne: Then maybe people will believe us. I don’t know. Do I want to see it collapse? Absolutely not. My kids play there. All my friends’ kids play there. My family’s kids play there. I don’t know what’s gonna happen. However he thinks he can run it. He thinks he’s got it all handled. He’s got his “people” as he says to come in and do it. Where they at? Lawrence thinks he’s got it all figured out too. Let him figure it out. Let him help Joshua. Ryan’s got it all figured out. Let Ryan figure it out. Let him help Joshua. They don’t understand how much we do.

In fact, during the next Board meeting, I got to see first-hand what this stepping back of responsibility within the league looked like. During the meeting, Melody and Leanne began enacting their plan:

Melody, Leanne, and Marilyn had been telling me that they were planning to step back from going above and beyond for the league, and this manifested in the preparations for opening day, specifically in terms of Picture Day. While Melody has already done some of the work for the pictures, the teams have not been scheduled yet, and Melody has no plans to do it. Arlene takes it over. When Leanne is asked about raffle tickets, she claims that since the deadline was missed to give her the proper information (Joshua) that she didn’t order them in time, and that “hopefully” they would still be printed on time. The reaction in the room was pretty incredulous. Leanne’s body language was pretty petulant, and she gave her report (while texting), and in a harsh tone. (Fieldnotes)

In their eyes, not only had Joshua given them an opportunity to justifiably withhold their institutional knowledge and skills from him, he had practically demanded it with his admonition that board members stick to their written job descriptions. Her actions, however, did not have the effect that she intended. Instead, other board members viewed her as having a bad attitude about Joshua being president, and they viewed her actions in the very way Joshua interpreted them: as a way to make him look bad, as Lawrence explained:

So she’s tried to back down a little bit, step down a little bit. And you notice that in the last meeting the, like the poor attitude, where, ‘Well, I’m not doing that. I’m not doing

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7 In a Board meeting following the explosive one detailed in the beginning of this chapter, Joshua had one of his chief supporters read aloud the job descriptions of each member of the Executive Board (officers) and demanded that each member follow their job description and nothing more.
nothing. Well, we need to find somebody to do that.’ When in years past, she would do it. And she would do a lot of things that she’s not doing this year.

For Joshua’s part, his efforts to negatively affect the well-being of his opponents were never as blatant, yet his intentions were identical to those of the other group. He maintained that he never had a personal problem with any of the members of the board. He did, however, resent the way in which he has been treated by the opposition group, and he claimed that he would always stand up for himself, even if it meant fighting back when he was attacked by them. One of the critical battlegrounds between the two groups involved embezzlement, either in someone’s past (Joshua), or insinuations of current wrongdoing (both sides hurled accusations against the other).

It was interesting that the embezzlement rumors that ran rampant throughout the league among the rank and file parents did not center on Joshua, but instead on Melody and her family. This was the case largely because of the family’s prominent presence on the board, especially in the concession stand, where the majority of the visible cash flowed into the league. At the conclusion of my fieldwork, there were five family members on the board (Melody, her mother Sonya, her sister Leanne, her first-cousin Ron, and a cousin by marriage named Roger). While Joshua was often accused of spreading those rumors, in my conversations with him, he often deflected them without dismissing them. When I gave him the opportunity to do so, he did not. Instead, he continued to raise questions about the way that money was handled by Sonya, Melody, and Marilyn, largely because of their defensive reactions to questions about their procedures:

People say they don’t look right. I mean, when people start questioning things. It’s hard for me to say yes or no. There are parts of me, maybe some percent of me that wants to say no. But then there’s that little point in the way people get defensive about things. Because, if you ask me a question and I get defensive, first thing I know in my heart that
I’m guilty of something. ‘Cause I’m not gon’ get, I’m not gon’ get bugged about someone talking shit about me (Joshua).

Thus, by failing to actively defend board members from the accusations of wrongdoing that permeate the league gossip channels – and by subtly encouraging and even taking part in the spread of such rumors – Joshua played a subtle yet significant role in undermining and potentially damaging the reputational status of the board members who openly opposed him in his term as president.

*Personal Consequences*

For the principal antagonists, the major fallout from their conflict was a loss of reputational status. Many members of the league no longer trusted either party with the welfare of the league, and it looked, at the conclusion of my fieldwork, like there may be significant turnover in the next round of officer elections. Joshua was exposed throughout the league as a convicted felon, as well as having his financial woes made a part of the public record within the league. Because of the nature of his conviction, the league was forced to institute a number of safeguards with the express intent of restricting the access of the league president to its assets, physical and monetary. Locks were placed on the freezers in the concession stand in large part because of the rampant accusations that Joshua himself abused the concession stand by handing out free drinks and food when Sonya was not around. His name was not allowed appear on the bank account, and he was not authorized to handle money in the concession stand or at registrations. It was an embarrassing situation to say the least for him.

For Melody, many board members and the rank and file parents saw her as part of a family cartel that ran the league for their own advantage for years. Many believed that she was complicit if not an active participant in the embezzlement of league funds, through either registration or through the concession stand that was run by her mother. By withholding her vast
repertoire of institutional knowledge from Joshua, she allowed many elements of the league to suffer, particularly in organizational elements such as umpire scheduling, All-Star eligibility, and bureaucratic paperwork that allowed the league to run smoothly. Instead of discrediting Joshua, however, because she was the face of the league for many of the rank and file parents, she was instead often viewed as a selfish manipulator who was involved strictly for her own gratification and the benefit of her family. As Scott, a new board member explained, “She, she absolutely is the strongest one of them. And then I think Marilyn is part of that group too. So, I feel that little group right there really kind of bulldogs its way through what or how things are run.” As the rumors of embezzlement gained steam (even being mentioned in the local newspaper), all the members of the board, but especially Joshua, Marilyn, and Melody, stood to see their reputations fall further into decline within both the league and the larger community. Even in the uncertainty of the rumors – I was never able to find evidence one way or the other – the reputations of those involved suffered.

Marilyn had her marital relationship damaged by the rumors of the illicit relationship between her and Joshua. In an attempt to keep her family intact, she first stepped back her involvement with the league, even routinely missing meetings to avoid the stress that they caused her. Finally, she left her post at the end of the 2011 season and eventually left Valley City altogether. As someone who worked as an accountant in the “real world,” she also stood to suffer professionally as allegations of missing money mounted. She openly fretted over the possibility of losing her CPA license in the event that money came up missing:

I didn’t want to ever be Treasurer. Melody’s the one who asked me to be Treasurer. Didn’t want to do it. I wanted to just be free. Like, the one who sits and talks and they have to tell them to shut up. I wanted to be that person. I already do this at work. It’s not fun. I don’t want to do it. I- I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to do it, ‘cause the moment you sign your name on something, it’s like, “Oh God.”
In this particular case study of personal conflict, the organizational consequences for the league were substantial, with both tangible and intangible elements. Specifically, the league suffered in 2011 from a nearly 20% drop in registrations, a season-long scramble for volunteers (particularly umpires), and several bureaucratic lapses, such as delays in submitting charters, safety plans, and eligibility paperwork that led to additional scrambling every time a deadline approached. In 2010, the league registered nearly 600 kids, making the VCLL – along with the local AYSO\textsuperscript{8} league (soccer) – the largest youth sports league in the city. The deterioration of social relationships and the development of rampant infighting on the board began almost immediately after opening day, with the roots of the conflict possibly dating back months before that. Many board members suggested that the issues that plagued the board in 2010 (particularly the embezzlement allegations and extramarital affairs that were allegedly taking place on the board) would result in a drop in the number of registrations in 2011. Arlene, a lifetime resident of Valley City who herself left the Board in 2010 because of rumors of a personal nature but eventually returned after the season, predicted a precipitous decline in registrations for the 2011 season:

That’s why a lot are leaving. I wouldn’t be surprised if our numbers were down this year because of this. I mean a lot of people- And that’s why we do competitive with my middle one, is ‘cause there’s no drama. You show up to the fields, you play baseball, then you’re out of there. You play a doubleheader, and you still don’t even know. You know? You could spend all day at the fields, and then you go home, and you’re fine.

The final 2011 registration figures noted that only 472 kids registered with the VCLL, marking a nearly 20% drop in registration numbers from 2010.

\textsuperscript{8} AYSO stands for American Youth Soccer Organization, one of the largest youth soccer organizations in the United States.
It was, of course, difficult to pinpoint the causes of the drop in registrations without data on the now-excluded population of the league, information that the league neither kept nor sought. In fact, with the continued economic difficulties that have affected the American economy since at least 2008, one could pose an alternative theory around the decline in registrations having something to do with economic conditions. This was, in fact, my first thought. However, in talking with officials from other local leagues, particularly the leagues with the most in common with Valley City, they did not experience the same numbers drop as the VCLL did. A neighboring league, Rio Vista, reported similar numbers between 2010 and 2011. Another league, County, reported slight increases in registrations from 2010 to 2011. It is thus difficult to assign any sense of causation to the numbers decline to economic factors – or exogenous factors of any type to the drop in registration numbers between 2010 and 2011. Such factors, were they relevant, would most likely have affected the three leagues similarly. Stories also emerged from those two leagues that a small exodus from the VCLL took place, and players that formerly played in Valley City began switching leagues, though I had no firsthand knowledge of families that did make the switch. It stands to reason that the drop, because it was not accompanied by concurrent drops in adjacent leagues, led me to believe that the personal relationships on the board really did have something to do with the drop in registration numbers from 2010 to 2011. This resulted in much lower revenue for the VCLL. Because the league also had many fixed as well as variable costs (field maintenance, rent to the city, etc.), 2011 was the first year in recent memory that the league operated at a loss. Some board members predicted another precipitous drop coming in 2012.

The VCLL was a volunteer-run, nonprofit organization. The league only ran successfully (or even marginally) because of the largely-thankless work of many volunteers (up to 100,
depending on the size of the league). Volunteers ran the administrative side of the league, did the books, wrote the by-laws, attended meetings, coached teams, acted as team parents, umpired games, maintained the fields, chalked the lines, ran the concession stand, and ordered the uniforms. The amount of work needed to successfully orchestrate a season did not vary directly with the number of kids involved in the league, so when the available volunteer pool began to dry up, smaller numbers of people were saddled with larger amounts of work at the same time that a faction of them purposely stepped back to prove a point to Joshua and the rest of the board. This resulted in a lower level of satisfaction among the volunteers, and things began to slip through the cracks as the responsibilities fell to fewer and fewer volunteers.

Finding officials is a struggle for many youth sports associations. Because the league was volunteer-run non-profit, it was difficult to pay umpires, because of the tax implications (though league officials told me that this had been done in the past). During the 2010 and 2011 seasons, the league required its coaches to attend umpire training seminars before the season, and umpire between 4 and 6 games per season in addition to their coaching duties, which normally ran 2 to 4 evenings per week. Failure to attend the required seminar or umpire assigned games was supposed to have been met with a one-game suspension (as per the by-laws of the league). Many if not most coaches were quite unhappy with the policy. Furthermore, since the suspension policy was unevenly enforced, coaches largely shirked this duty, because they saw it as unfair, and because they did not face reprisal for refusing to participate. While this had been a longstanding problem (I was told), it was particularly noticeable in the 2011 season. Many teams, including the Cubs, were routinely forced to pull parents, many with no formal training, out of the bleachers to officiate games. Occasionally I was also asked to officiate games as an
“unbiased” party to the events taking place (that is, I did not have a child playing in the games for either team). I recorded these instances in my fieldnotes, such as this one:

As was becoming the norm, there was no umpire for the game. There was the usual search, but no takers. At first, I thought I was safe, because I was wearing flip-flops which would have to be considered a safety issue if I was forced to get behind the plate to call balls and strikes, which I have always refused to do. Funny thing was, Joshua was around. Someone asked him to umpire the game, and his response was that he had already umped 22 games this season, and he wasn’t going to do this one. I was rather incensed at his comments for two reasons: 1. He’s the President, so it’s his responsibility no matter how many games he’s already done, and 2. The umpire mess is partly to mostly his fault in the first place, since league disorganization falls pretty squarely on his shoulders. They kept asking Nicholas to do it, and Katheryn said that he needed to so that she could heckle him. She promised that she had been wanting to “drop an F on him,” and would definitely do it if he was behind the plate [Nicholas was known for his short temper and proclivity for obscenities]. He promised that it wouldn’t bother him. I said that, knowing Nicholas, it would have been a bonding moment between the two of them. That got a hearty laugh, and Nicholas pretended to be offended. I explained: wasn’t that a quintessential indicator of friendship, the ability to give and take grief from each other? We decided that was true.

In the end, Ron9 came up (with his team in tow) after the game was delayed for 20 minutes and asked if I would do it from behind the mound… how could I say no? Any doubts I had disappeared when his son started a chant with my name… Se-an, Se-an, Se-an… I was done. Nicholas volunteered to do the bases, and we took the field to get the game started.

The lack of umpires was largely a result of the board of directors being unable to negotiate a fair and equitable policy regarding on-field officials, as well as a lack of legitimacy in enforcing the suspension policy. The board divisions manifested in this area in particular. Joshua was a part of a contingent of board members who wanted to do away with the policy of having coaches share umpire duties in favor of setting up a paid system of umpires from the larger community.

Melody, in support of Marilyn and her seemingly legitimate objections (as Treasurer), led the

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9 It is worth noting here that I had a relationship outside of the league with Ron, as might be expected in a community the size of Valley City. He coached my daughter’s 4-year old soccer team in 2010, and his son had often helped him out with the girls, who all adored him. I had also officiated several of his son’s Under 10 soccer games in my role as a referee in the local AYSO. I had gotten to know his family rather well by this time, and I liked them very much.
opposition to the plan. As the leaders from both sides did not have a working relationship beyond the bare minimum to run the league, they were not been able to effect any sort of compromise. Alternative plans, including one to emulate the local AYSO by requiring teams to provide two trained parent umpires, gained no traction with either side, as they could not come to an agreement with the other. Instead, the policy was articulated only in a verbal and completely ad hoc way by Lawrence, the chief umpire. However, lacking full institutional backing, and because Lawrence was himself overwhelmed with multiple duties, it went almost entirely unenforced, and parent complaints about both the lack of umpires and the poor quality and behavior of the replacement umpires reached an all-time high, as my fieldnotes from a mid-season 2011 board meeting illustrate:

We spent the majority of our time talking about an incident that occurred in a Majors game. Two parents brought complaints in against the umpires for their game. The incident stemmed directly from the lack of umpires showing up to their assigned games, as the two umps were pulled out of the stands to do the game. The parents presented their case (at length). It involved much swearing at parents, challenges to fights, and comments toward and at players.

Joshua called up the umpires and had them come to the meeting and explain their side of the story. In the end, predictably, it was a word-against-word kind of situation, and I don’t believe Joshua plans to take any action, despite his promises earlier in the meeting to the meeting to the two women present who had brought the complaints. Marilyn kept bringing up that this was a direct result of a lack of umpires, which became a point of discussion again. I argued that while this was true, it wasn’t exactly the heart of this particular matter. The umpire question was already an issue. It didn’t need another stark example of why it was a problem. I argued that the actions of a board member and another volunteer were at issue here. Regardless, I do not believe the issue had an actual resolution, except that the two accused were going to go down and apologize to some kids.

The league also had trouble attracting coaches, a unique problem for a league that, in the first season I was involved, was able to interview prospective coaches to pick and choose the ones they thought best for the job. Because the league lacked candidates in 2011, they were not able to choose the best coaches from a large crop, and were forced instead to allow whomever
they could recruit into the job. This resulted in an increase in complaints about coaches from parents compared to seasons past. Complaints about coaches swearing on the field, berating kids on and off the field, acting negligently during practices and games, failing to show up for practices, and abusing umpires and officials plagued nearly all of the age divisions of the league in 2011. While I was not able to interview coaches who have disassociated themselves from the league, I did speak with several coaches who hung on for the 2011 season, but were seriously considering leaving the league before the 2012 season. In particular, they cited the umpiring requirements, the board “drama,” and an overall lack of organization for their dissatisfaction with VCLL:

To me, to me it’s horseshit. You know, so it gets really political. And, and the parents feel it. ‘Cause you remember, I’m, I’m a parent barely getting introduced to the sport, so I’m bringing in the complaints from what I hear from the outside. And the problem with the board is that, they’ve been- they get blinded, you know. They have these blinders on, because they’ve been doing it so long… They think their way is the only way. To me they don’t hear the complaints from the outside. And if they do, they think everybody’s wrong.

So, going back to my thing is, I see you get a big drop off because what happens, when you get teams like ours, right, that you know, the core group that we keep, guess what we may possibly do? Let’s keep the group and we’ll leave, and we’ll go play club ball. (Adam)

A coaching shortage was an especially serious problem in the upper age divisions.

Coaching baseball and softball is a skill that takes time to develop. It was generally relatively easy to find coaches for the youngest divisions of the league (the 4 and 5 year old divisions); as the kids get more skilled and grow, the pool of qualified and available coaches began to dwindle.\(^\text{10}\) When coaches in the Minor (9-10 year olds) and Major (11-12 year olds) divisions

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\(^\text{10}\) I noticed a similar process in my role as the Under 5 and Under 6 administrator for the Valley City AYSO. I generally had little problem recruiting coaches for the teams under my purview, even among parents with little or no knowledge of the game. However, administrators of the
began to leave the league, they were not at all easily replaced. Formal training – outside of umpires – was not something that was emphasized by the VCLL, and it is thus difficult to train a coach who has no prior experience. They were in essence forced to learn and grow as coaches at the same time as their kids learned and grew as players. While some coaches were themselves players at the high school or college levels, and thus had a better sense of how to teach the game to new and advancing players, most did not. Many of the experienced coaches, when they became dissatisfied with VCLL, left to go to more competitive leagues, where they said there were no headaches, no boards, and thus no drama to deal with. The talent drain within the coaching ranks was one of the major challenges of the league going forward from the 2011 season into 2012.

Finally, either because no one was there to let Joshua know when certain league requirements had to be met, or because he failed to look those deadlines up, the league struggled with certain bureaucratic elements which caused major headaches, especially when All-Star season started. In many of these cases, the paperwork had been previously handled by Melody. In light of their conflict, however, she let those duties fall to Joshua (presumably without telling him), who had been lax in handling them:

There’s certain things, that have to be set up and put into place, that Melody usually already has done by now. But Joshua says it’s his league, he’s supposed to do it. Melody says, “Fine.” She told the village, “This is your contact,” and all this. So Melody’s been hitting him with all this stuff that she does that’s actually a president’s job. She’s been hitting um, he’s having issues with it. But she did it to help. But when you help people sometimes you get stabbed in the back, so she says, “Nope. No more. No more.” (Sonya)

Further, the out-of-district waivers and accompanying forms that were required for players to leave their own Little League District to come and play in Valley City were not handled properly older divisions faced much more difficult challenges in their divisions when they experienced coach shortages.
at registration, and thus were out of order when All-Star season began in June. Without the proper documentation, any player playing outside of their demarcated Little League district was ineligible to play on a Valley City All-Star team. Melody noted during registration that Joshua was allowing out-of-district players to register without the accompanying documentation and that it would come back as a huge mess when the All-Star season started. However, even knowing this, she refused to bring this up to him during registration. While in the end the league did not lose the eligibility of any of its All-Stars due to this lapse, it resulted in a mad scramble for parents of out-of-district kids to prove that they had the proper permission to play at Valley City, and several parents were upset at Joshua when they were forced to go out of their way to take care of a matter that they believed was already handled. Further, the incident embarrassed Joshua and league officials in front of District officials who were overseeing the eligibility process for the All-Star season.

THE RHETORIC OF “THE KIDS”

In his landmark analysis of conflict within groups, Simmel (1955) wrote, “The (sociologically very significant) ‘respect for the enemy’ is usually absent where the hostility has arisen on the basis of previous solidarity,” (e-book Location 571-72). Certainly, this was the case on the Board of the VCLL. The parties involved in the central conflict of the season were all once unified in purpose, and friendly in their social relations. When the relationships began to deteriorate, all sense of decorum or respect for the antagonists disappeared. The genesis of the conflict, because of its partially intimate nature, bound the parties in a mutually destructive pattern of interaction. The line between professional disagreements and personal vendettas blurred and eventually vanished in a puff of anonymous letters and ceaseless rumors. The consequences, both personal and organizational, were significant.
What then can be said about the nature of these so-called voluntary organizations? What was in this case the driving motivation behind the refusal of each party to back down by simply ending the relationship? The costs of doing so, especially for Joshua, whose son was not even involved in the league in 2010 (he returned to play in 2011), were relatively low. Melody, for her part, had the option to leave, but also had the option of continuing to operate behind the scenes, using her knowledge and considerable influence to run the league in a way that she saw fit. The familial voting block on the board would have seen to that. Settling the motivational question in the social capital literature would certainly be a substantial theoretical advancement (e.g., Lin 2001a; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000; Smith 2010; see Chapter 5 in this work). However, it is noteworthy that all the parties involved in the conflict – as well as every single member of the board that I interviewed in my time with the league – all appealed to a cause greater than themselves: the kids. The players within the VCLL were the rhetorical device upon which all actions could be justified. “The Kids” were the unassailable beneficiaries of all of the actions of the board members according to the board members themselves, which also justified the headache that serving on the board of directors could cause, as Joshua explained,

And the thing is, I want to make this clear, just like I told Marilyn, I have no problem with neither one of ’em [Leanne and Melody]. Even after the bad shit they said. I have no animosity, no problem with ’em because… Little League don’t pay my bills. Little League don’t bust me my nuts I need at night. It don’t matter to me what no one else thinks about me. I’m there for the kids. And that just what it is. I’m there for my son, and those other kids that, that, that adore me, and I see going out there and trying to make something of their life and not get themselves in trouble.

However, instead of using the kids as a rallying point for the board members to put aside their differences and work for the betterment of the league, they instead employ this rhetoric to justify their attempts to damage their enemies within the board.
In order to understand why, it is productive to see the motives that the rivals attributed to each other rather than themselves. Their answers were revealing:

What’s happened is… we have taken baseball from the kids, and it’s all about parents. That’s, my opinion. I’m serious. It’s not about the kids anymore. It’s mostly about the parents, what the fucking parents want. And it’s not the parents out there playing. I mean, it’s the parents paying the money, but it’s the players that we should be all concerned about (Joshua, talking about parents at large who have opposed him).

Why would- why is this title so important to you? Why is saying that I am the President of Little League so important to you? Visions of grandeur, schizophrenia? I don’t know. You know, I have no idea (Marilyn, talking about Joshua).

I don’t think Joshua has the passion for this league. I don’t know what it is with him. I don’t think he’s ever been in charge of something, and it’s hard for him to give it up. The power. He doesn’t want to do the stuff that comes with it. He likes- He wants to be the face of the league. But he doesn’t want… the responsibility of it, the dues that come with it (Melody, talking about Joshua).

In this case, the rhetoric of the kids played such a strong role when discussing the motivations of oneself, and played no role at all in the motivations assigned to one’s adversaries. “The kids” thus became the criteria by which relationships and actions were judged. Where relationships deteriorated to the point where parties could not derive the motivations of their adversaries in these terms, then the relationship became characterized by negative social capital. Because the other party could not be seen as having redeeming motivations for being involved in the league – and really, there was only one redeeming motivation for being involved with the board according to the parents in the league – then all actions taken against that person were justified, because actions taken in the best interest of the league – and thus the kids – trumped all actions deigned to be motivated by anything else. When one was convinced that they were acting on this more noble plane, then the relationships may in fact have been no easier to exit than those that characterize negative social capital in the workplace (Moerbeek and Need 2003; Morrison 2007). Melody highlighted this sentiment when I asked her why she persevered in the VCLL during the
strife which saw her and her family the targets of rumors and ill will from parents and board members alike, “My kids are here, my son’s here, and I love this league. And I’ve worked really hard to get it where it’s at. It’s a pride thing. I love this- Look at- on a Sunday, look where I’m at. I mean… I love this place.”

CONFLICT IN VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

There is a large body of literature dealing with conflict in formal organizations but comparatively little work that examines conflict in voluntary organizations (Temkin and Cummings 1986). To the extent that conflict in for-profit or governmental organizations is distinct from that in voluntary organizations – and there is reason to believe that it is (see, e.g., Gatewood and Lahiff 1977) – one must turn to the comparatively smaller voluntary organization literature to understand how conflict between parties tends to play out in these environments. This (brief) examination may shed some light on when such conflicts may cross the line from typical antipathy to negative social capital.

Before the antagonistic groups came into focus, the lines of differentiation were already being drawn by members of the groups. Eventually, these sites of differentiation coalesced into the two distinct groups. That is, the boundaries began to form before the groups themselves became visible to the rest of the board or even to themselves (Abbott 1995). These sites of differentiation were initially professional. Melody and Leanne were concerned about their perception of Joshua’s trustworthiness where league cash was concerned. However, since they still considered him a friend, this concern did not manifest as the creation of a distinct group created to oppose him. However, when a personal element was introduced as another site of differentiation – whether it be in the Rhianna incident or the real-or-imagined relationship with
Marilyn\textsuperscript{11} – the differences became pronounced enough and concern grew enough for a distinct “rebel” group to coalesce and identify themselves as a rival to Joshua’s presidency. It was also the introduction of the personal element into the formal bureaucracy of the board of directors that led to the creation of negative social capital. Leanne explained:

…when he tried giving the money to my niece, that just… basically threw me over the edge. I’m like what the hell is he doing giving money to her, and not talking to her parents? And she [Melody’s daughter] kind of came up to me at the fields when he did that, and I’m like, “Why is he giving you money?” I’s like, “Does your mom know he gave you money?” And then she told her mom, and my sister flew off the handle, and my- and I don’t blame ’em, cause if somebody had given my kid money, I probably would have flown off the handle too.

Without more evidence from research into negative social capital – especially in voluntary organizations – it is difficult to ascertain whether both personal and professional elements are necessary conditions for the creation of negative social capital. However, one can create a good deal of logically solid hypothesizing – bolstered by the empirical evidence presented above – based on conflict research concentrating specifically on voluntary organizations. Temkin and Cummuings (1986), in their review of conflict studies in voluntary organizations, listed three potential sites for conflict: (1) “dissimilar interpretations of messages” involved both miscommunication and misinterpretation of organizational communications, (2) “differential views of organizational concerns” involve issues of power and authority as well as disagreement over organizational needs and resource allocation, and (3) “discordant interpersonal needs,” which involve personality conflicts and antipathetic relations between organizational members (p. 6). Once there exists a conflict in an organization between parties or

\textsuperscript{11} It truly does not seem to matter whether or not the relationship with Marilyn was real or not. In fact, the disagreement over whether or not it happened likely facilitated it as a site of differentiation between what eventually became the two different groups. Weber’s writing on ethnic groups is instructive, “The belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, could have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community,” (or group, in this case) (Weber 1978 [1922]:389).
groups, there tend to be three distinct strategies available that groups might employ in the resolution of such a conflict: competing, collaborating, and a mix of accommodation and avoidance. In this particular instance, I am concerned with establishing why a competition solution was generally chosen by both parties over specifically a collaboration strategy. In other words, why – when both parties claimed the moral high ground of working for “the kids” – were they not able to collaborate to work through their differences and instead pursued a strategy of competition, whereby they both sought to weaken the other in order to produce a “win” for themselves.

Temkin and Cummings’ review, in combination with their own empirical study, uncovered a few critical insights as to why this may have happened. I will combine this with insights from my own empirical observations. First, in general, participants in voluntary organizations tend to place the needs of the organization above and beyond their own needs. That is, in a conflict with other members of the organization, volunteers are likely to invoke a collaborative strategy (or at least an avoidance strategy) in order to keep their own conflicts from compromising the aims of the organization. Second, competition strategies for conflict resolution were chosen far more often when the conflict was interpersonal. Conversely, when the conflict was organizational in nature (conflict over messages or over the aims of the organization in general), other strategies were heavily preferred. The latter conclusion fits very comfortably with the evidence presented above in this chapter. Clearly, the parties involved pursued competition strategies in order to strengthen their own position at the expense of their rivals. Since the conflict did not truly boil over until the personal element was introduced, it makes sense that such strategies were avoided until the personal element was introduced into the conflict. In fact, before the personal element was introduced, it would have been premature to think of the
situation as a conflict, according to Melody and Leanne. However, the first of Temkins and Cummings’ conclusions does not hold in this particular situation. The parties involved in the conflict did not hold the organization’s needs above their own. Even as the organizational consequences were taking shape, neither group as a whole pursued any strategy for resolution that did not involve competition, though individual members did, particularly Marilyn, Lawrence, and Ron, who managed to work professionally with both groups without alienating the other. I believe the answer lies not in Joshua or Melody’s self-perception but in their attribution of the motives of the other party, as I detailed above. Because neither party believed the other was acting in good faith for the betterment of the league, instead ascribing to them less noble and more nefarious motives for their continued participation on the board, they did not see collaboration or accommodation-avoidance as viable strategies, since they believed those strategies would compromise their own (pure) visions for the league. This is why, I believe that the rhetoric of “the kids” served as a further mechanism of division rather than a rallying cry for more collaborative strategies.

The personal conflict between Joshua and Melody and her cohort also was not simply a clash of incompatible personalities. They both described themselves as former friends-turned-enemies. The crux of their personal conflict was also not the product of their participation in the formal workings of the organization. That is, the personal conflict did not come about through the formal means of the organization, but instead the intrusion of the informal (i.e., the personal) into the formal organization of the league. Arthur Stinchcombe (2001) has written extensively on the subject. He writes that in some cases, informality (such as personal relations) works to increase the efficacy of the formal organization, such as when decision makers can hash out ideas and debates in informal or casual settings rather than in the formal debate setting of the
boardroom, or when the system is well-adapted to cope with the exigencies of circumstances that perhaps the organization’s current abstractions (laws, rules, procedures, etc.) do not adequately address (casuistry). In other cases, personal relations can distort and harm organizational objectives, whether the relations are positive or negative. Thus, it is not the existence of informality (i.e., the intrusion of the personal into the professional) per se that harms organizational objectives, but a specific type of informality, based on negative interactions, that overwhelms the professional obligations of the board members.

At the same time, it is extremely difficult in this type of setting to distinguish between the professional and the personal. Note that both the Rhianna incident between Joshua and Melody’s daughter as well as the alleged relationship between Joshua and Marilyn contained elements of both the professional and the personal. In the former, the incident occurred at the fields when Joshua was in his official capacity as league president. In the latter, Joshua and Marilyn met through their participation in the league and had a previous formal, bureaucratic working relationship. Even when segments of that relationship came to the fore, as they did in the league meeting described in the opening segment of this chapter, there was intense disagreement between parties on what constituted formal league business and what constituted personal business over which the league and district had no formal jurisdiction. This was highlighted by the text message exchange that took place between Joshua and Marilyn the day before the meeting, in which Joshua accused Marilyn of writing the letter to the District informing them of his criminal past (which Leanne later admitted to writing). From my fieldnotes taken during the meeting:

Marilyn accuses Joshua of texting her all day the day before [the meeting] accusing her of writing the letter [the anonymous letter that led to the district intervening in the meeting], saying that he knew it was her, only to relent at the end of the day, saying that he knew she didn’t write it, but that he wanted to know how she’d react if he accused her.
They continue going back and forth over one another, until Ron, Ismael, and Leonard intervene. Ismael claims that what was going on between them was a personal matter, and did not involve the league. Marilyn insists that since it was about league business, that Ismael, as the District Administrator, had the authority and the duty to intervene in the matter. He demurs.

Marilyn is now PISSED. She claims her innocence and loyalty to the league. She is essentially claiming harassment at the hands of Joshua, which she claims is unwarranted... She also claims that Joshua send her 170 text messages in their exchange.

Here is what Leanne had to say about the text messages, which she also read:

The day before that meeting, he sent her text messages all day, that became very threatening. I read them. He was not being nice. She has all of them. And it really bothered her, cause they [Ismael] were like “Oh, those text messages were personal.” It wasn’t personal. It had to do with Little League. And saying how, at that meeting, he was gonna out her and air all her dirty laundry, and he had a personal vendetta against her. And he was gonna make sure everybody knew the truth about her.

Even as Marilyn and Leanne made the claim that the messages had to do with league business and were therefore under the jurisdiction of the league, both also emphasize personal elements in the messages, such as their tone, and whether or not they constituted harassment and the clearly personal elements that the messages contained. It would be difficult to impossible in this situation to disentangle the professional from the personal, and the District declined to make an attempt, instead classifying the messages as purely personal.

Another way in which the informal and the formal intersected in this context was in the way that the vagaries of league policy affected the way it was interpreted and implemented – what has been called the “loose couplings” of various elements of formalities (Marwell 2007) – based on the personal relationships of the parties involved. Because Javier and Lawrence were in law enforcement, they had been running the background checks to which all volunteers must submit before being allowed a formal role in the league. While any crime against children automatically disqualified a potential volunteer from approval, other offenses were not so clearly defined, and the wiggle room that league administrators had in dealing with the knowledge of those infractions could create controversy. When the news of Joshua’s former embezzlement
conviction first came to light, I asked Leanne why the league had not acted from the beginning to avoid this type of controversy. She replied,

We came across that one, and I was just like, “Hello? He’s been arrested for embezzlement.” And he [the league President before Javier] goes, “Yeah, but he’s just a volunteer, and it’s not a reason to disqualify him. He’s not gonna be around money. He’s not gonna be something like that.” He goes, “I know who this guy is.” He said, “You guys need to be very careful with him, he’s shady.”

Thus, at the time of Joshua’s initial background check, Leanne was instructed to overlook it. However, the vagaries of league policy in the matter left the door open for differing interpretations. A clearer rule regarding background checks and what was and was not disqualifying might have alleviated the problem, as Stinchcombe explains, “…when formalism is of the sort that ought to work properly, the variance in understanding what is meant by the formalities will be relatively small – otherwise people would always have to go behind the formalities to figure out what was really meant,” (2001:55). Leanne and Melody attempted to exploit this uncertainty in league policy in an effort to remove Joshua from the presidency by doing exactly that. Formally, once Joshua had been cleared as a volunteer, the matter should not have been revisited except in the even that new information had come to light regarding his criminal record. Instead, Leanne and Melody “went behind the formality” – that is, they went back to his old background check – to exploit the information that had been there the entire time. However, a higher authority (Ismael, the District President) utilized that same vagary as a justification for keeping Joshua entrenched in the position, by explaining his own dealings with the criminal history of some of the volunteers of his league, which included a manager with a DUI conviction on his record.

Much of the content of the conflict between Joshua and Melody can be understood in literature on volunteer organizations that emphasizes both the general categories through which
conflict arises and the various strategies that volunteers utilize to resolve such conflicts. The conflict had both professional and personal elements and, conforming to expectations from the literature, the development of combative strategies for resolving the conflict (negative social capital) were employed once the conflict became personal. It is unlikely that the conflict would have played out in the same way had it remained simply a concern over the handling of money within the league, as the league set up several ad hoc policies to address concerns over Joshua’s access to league assets. Thus, without a personal element in the conflict, it was unlikely to develop into a relationship characterized by negative social capital. However, unlike what would be predicted by the literature, the parties involved were unable to place the larger organizational aims over and above their own personal squabbles. I believe this is because neither party felt the other was acting in good faith (i.e., for the kids), and thus felt that their combative strategy was necessary for the protection of the integrity of the organization itself. Had they both acknowledged the good faith of the other party, it seems likely that they could have put aside their differences in order to act in the best interests of the league.

CONCLUSION

Conflict is an inevitable part of participation in voluntary organizations such as the VCLL. Perceptions of both the organizational vision as well as implementation will differ between individuals who may or may not have compatible personalities from the beginning. However, the development of negative social capital is not an inevitable accompaniment to such conflict. There are other forms of resolution to interpersonal and intergroup conflict within such organizations. Further, because the organization is child-centered and because all parties involved claimed that their involvement is for the betterment of the kids, it would seem that an equally likely alternative would be that parties would have pulled together, put aside their
personal differences, and act in the best interest of the league. Literature on voluntary organization conflict suggests that this is, in fact, a more likely trajectory for the resolution of conflict in such settings. However, in the case of the VCLL, the opposite occurred. Instead of pulling together, the groups continued to pull apart with both significant personal and organizational consequences.

This chapter sought to advance the understanding of negative social capital through first highlighting the distinction between the dark side of social capital and negative social capital. Second, through a detailed account of the origins of the central conflict, I drew some preliminary conclusions about the nature of conflict in voluntary organizations and the development of negative social capital. In short, the introduction of a personal element in the conflict facilitated the shift in relations from that of simple concern to one characterized by antipathy and negative social capital. When Leanne and Melody first found out about Joshua’s criminal past, and even when they (allegedly) experienced it firsthand with the fall baseball registration money, they were not motivated to either seek his removal or damage his reputation by exposing his past. However, when a personal element was introduced, through the Rhianna incident with Melody’s daughter and with the alleged relationship between Joshua and Marilyn, Melody and Leanne began their efforts, utilizing their professional concerns to further what was ultimately a personal agenda. In response, Joshua began his own campaign directed against Leanne and Melody’s family, specifically concerning embezzlement of league funds through the concession stand. This evidence, coupled with the literature on conflict in voluntary organizations leads me to a specific conclusion, that negative social capital in such organizations is unlikely to be created when disagreements are purely professional. If they are, the path to resolution is more likely to remain purely professional.
What, then, is the mechanism by which this occurs? How does the intrusion of the personal into the professional alter the trajectory of the conflict? In this particular context, it revolves around the distinction between how one attributes one’s own motives for acting against another member and the attribution of the motives of “the enemy.” In the case of both Joshua and Melody, both were quick to attribute their own motives as consistent with the larger aims of the league: the kids. At the same time, neither party was willing to allow that the other may have been acting with the same motivations. Instead, both believed that the other was acting on their own selfish agenda. Joshua believed that other board members (but specifically Melody) were “taking” Little League from the kids. He also believed and supported the rumors that members of Melody’s family (Melody, here sister Leanne, and their mother Sonya) were embezzling money from the concession stand. Melody and Leanne likewise believed Joshua to be embezzling funds from the league, but at the same time insisted that they could not possibly understand why he stayed on as president since his own children did not participate in the league, unless he had either delusions of grandeur or simply stayed on because he had little meaning in his life. A refusal to acknowledge the good faith efforts of the antagonistic party allowed each of them to justify their actions in the name of the kids.

Still, however, there are questions left unanswered that I leave here for future researchers working in this vein. First, future research should investigate whether it is actually necessary for both personal and professional elements are necessary for the development of negative social capital in such an environment. It is possible that personal conflict, even in the absence of professional concerns, may create negative social capital. It seems unlikely that the reverse situation (professional conflict without personal conflict) would create such a situation. Under the assumption that processes in voluntary organizations are distinct from other types of formal
organizations – specifically for-profit or more strictly hierarchical organizations – these should be investigated separately. Second, how do antagonists in these types of situations make the connection between their personal and professional concerns? Does the order in which they arise make a difference in how they are handled? Do antagonists construct a narrative in which the personal and professional differences are linked together? Despite the evidence I have presented here, the steps leading from conflict to negative social capital is still somewhat of a black box. It may be that there are additional factors involved in the process that I was unable to capture. Additionally, the specific and general organizational impacts should be studied in greater depth. I have equivocated on the matter of whether organizational consequences of antagonistic relationships (specifically those characterized by negative social capital) are necessarily negative for the organization itself. Certainly in this case, they were. However, I do not see anything inherent in such relationships that would preclude their having positive organizational impacts. Specifically, if the antagonists pursue damage to their opponents specifically through their greater commitment and greater work given over to the organization itself in an effort to make rivals look bad, such negative relationships could produce positive organizational results. I find myself unable to sufficiently theorize about such effects, and leave my own description of the organizational effects of this particular conflict as a spur to future researchers looking into this area.

Still another important consideration is the role of certain ascribed characteristics of the antagonists that may play a role in the creation of negative social capital, specifically race and gender. These may have played a role in this particular conflict, but I was unable to ascertain whether or not this was true. It was interesting that the entire group that engaged in the attempt to remove Joshua from the Presidency were women, while Joshua’s most vocal supporters were all
men. Further, it was worth asking whether Joshua’s race (he was nearly the only African-American participant in the entire league) may have played a role in the way he was both perceived and treated by his rivals. I was not able to explore these dimensions in any depth. However, the tendencies were noted by some of the participants, specifically where race was concerned. Joshua believed that his race did, in fact, play a part in the way he was treated by his rivals, though he did not bring up the subject when I would ask him about the nature of the board conflict in general. Only when I questioned him directly about race would he acknowledge that he believed it may play a part in the conflict. For their part, the women involved both denied the role of race in their assertions of the conflict, but also were insistent that Joshua was attempting to “make it about race” at every possible turn. Sonya, specifically, was wary about the possibility that Joshua would make their conflict about his race. When I asked her about her feelings about the anonymous letter and efforts to remove Joshua from the presidency, she replied:

I really hate it, but it has to be brought on the table, cause it’s gonna get worse if it’s not brought up. It has to. It has to. And people have to be told the truth. And I don’t think Mr. Joshua’s gonna like it. Oh, he’ll probably say we’re the biggest bigots. And it’s all because of his race. No, it has nothing to do with the race. It has to do with what you did. Total different thing. Look how many different nationalities are, are represented on that board. Look how many different ones. Has nothing to do with… what color you are. It’s what you did. What you did was wrong.

Later, she brought up the race issue again, indicating that Joshua wanted to use the racial component of their conflict in order to bring a lawsuit against the league, “Word’s been going around that Joshua’s looking for anything- that’s he’s already obtaining a lawyer, looking for anything to make it a race issue. And it's not a race issue.” I cannot draw even speculative conclusions about the role of either race or gender even in this conflict. However, it is a potentially productive line if inquiry for future researchers investigating negative social capital.
The case study presented here was an attempt to draw out the concept of negative social capital through an in-depth analysis of a particular conflict occurring during my time in the VCLL. Because negative relationships carry with them the potential for tangible and intangible consequences, the development of a theory of negative social capital is a necessary component of a complete and mature theory of social capital. Studying these types of relationships in formal organizations such as Little League is a fruitful approach because there are grounds to believe that likelihood that the parties involved in negative relationships within organizations will simply exit the relationship. To the extent that the parties involved are committed to the aims of the organization – and here child-centered organizations are especially fruitful sites for such a commitment – they may well be more likely to persevere in the organization despite the presence of negative relationships. In fact, it is possible that such a presence will increase their organizational commitment, simply because they do want to leave the health and integrity of the organization in the hands of their enemies, especially if they cannot even acknowledge that their enemies may also have the best interests of the organization at heart. Relationships that are negative, have both professional and personal components, and that are difficult to exit for the antagonists are at particular risk for the creation of negative social capital.
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

The past three chapters have explored some of the aspects of social capital operation in a youth baseball environment. In constructing the arguments, I have attempted to outline the significant and specific manners in which the presence of children affect how social capital operated between and among parents in the setting. To sum up: where children were present in the immediate environment, exchanges were characterized by their positive character. Parents built and utilized relationships in order to provide benefit either to their own or to other children (and, by extension, parents) on a team. Where children were no longer physically present (such as at board meetings), they were instead utilized as rhetorical devices to justify actions that were often taken against another person rather than in their service or benefit. I have termed this “negative social capital,” to characterize the potential harm that can accrue through negative relationships, especially when one party employed resources with an eye to harm another. At all points in these processes, parents and board members justified themselves by claiming that they always acted in the best interests of the kids. “The Kids” is employed in a number of ways to fit the situation. In some cases, parents may act in the best interests of their own child, especially when attempting to ensure their place on a particular team, either with a specific coach or an All-Star team. In other cases, “the kids” may have referred to a team, as when a coach worked to ensure that the needs of their team were served. When employed as an act of justification, however, “the kids” took on its most diffuse and least definable character. In the rest of this chapter, I want to summarize the arguments of the previous three chapters in order to draw some broad conclusions about the work that has taken place. Since these conclusions are by necessity tentative, I then draw attention to some of the limitations of the work, paying particular attention to issues of hard-to-reach populations and the lack of a comparative element in the work. Next, I discuss the
implications of my conclusions for both sport practitioners – that is, those who administer leagues at the local, regional, and national levels – and sociologists, both of sport and social capital. Finally, I explore how future research might proceed in light of the conclusions and limitations of this work.

RECAPPING

In chapter 4, I presented the case that children’s activities such as Little League participation facilitated the creation and utilization of social relationships that, under the proper conditions, lead to substantive exchanges. It was important to make this case rather than assume it, not least because the idea has a certain logical appeal without much previous empirical support (see Small 2009b for the most notable exception). However, this was not the only reason to present the case as extensively as I did. One of the major points of the chapter was to establish that not only did parents establish these relationships in this environment, but also that their children played a significant role in that development, a major scholarly contribution of the chapter. The tying together of these various strands of academic social capital work – sport, child-centered activity, and children as active and influential social agents – represents the other.

The chapter contained three major sections: a typology of parents based on their levels of social participation, the main sites within the league of social capital creation and consumption, and a catalog of benefits that routinely passed between parents by their own description or through my observations. In creating the typology, I attempted to delineate between those parents whose social participation gave them ready access to social capital benefits within a particular team as well as to describe those parents who were also far more likely to be the benefactor in any particular social capital exchange. In describing how the league facilitates the creation and consumption of social capital between parents, I sought to underscore some of the
structural elements that facilitate the formation of such relationships, but also to highlight the active role of children in the process as well. In describing the particular benefits exchanged within my time with the VCLL, I sought not to comprehensively catalog specific benefits that one could expect to find in their youth sport relationships, but to explore instead how different types of relationships – from the less-than-acquaintance to the close friend – can impact the nature of exchanges within any particular team in the league (or among board members as well).

I classified parents on each team I observed into one of three categories: Core, Fringe, and Isolate. Each category implied something about the nature of the participation of the parent, either instrumentally (in terms of helping the team fulfill its obligations to the league) or expressively (i.e., their social participation with the rest of the parents). Core parents represented the highest level of participation for VCLL parents. They could typically be counted on to volunteer for a number of projects for the team, such as taking on extra snack duty if necessary, giving kids rides to and from practices and games, or taking on the substantial role of team parent, to name a few. They were invariably well-connected socially on the team, and were typically able to identify nearly all other parents on the team, even the Isolates. They tended to locate themselves in the “center of the action” at games and practices, and did not hesitate to participate in conversations while they were there. They were also the most likely to get involved in administrative aspects of the league, such as umpiring, coaching, or joining the board of directors.

Fringe parents could typically be counted on to do at least their minimal share for the team, which included paying all additional fees and adhering to their designated snack contributions. They also participated at higher-than-minimum levels, but were less likely to volunteer for them if not directly solicited. Socially, they tended to be connected to several other
parents, but tended not to associate with them as a larger grouping. They were, however, reasonably likely to form close friendships with other parents over the course of multiple seasons as long as their children continued their participation, and they were typically friendly to most if not all the other parents on a team. During practices and games, they often seated themselves away from the bleachers or watched games from their cars. Some also wandered around the grounds, either disinterested in the game or too nervous because of it. Fringe parents, because they typically built relationships with a select few others, could typically enjoy the social capital benefits of team participation. They tended to have enough connections and participate enough in team activities to be both benefactors and beneficiaries in such exchanges.

Isolated parents were those parents whose presence was far more notable than their absence from team events. They typically dropped their child off at practices and games and picked them up at the end. They sometimes also arranged for their child to be taken to and fro by another parent in the league, virtually never appearing at the fields or practices. Their participation in team obligations did not tend to extend beyond their snack duties, and even those were sometimes fulfilled through a proxy (such as an older sibling or through another parent). They typically had relationships with few other parents, and were not known by face or name to other parents on a team. Parents often noted that they would not be able to pick Isolated parents “out of a lineup” when discussing them. Their isolation could be self-imposed or a product of circumstance, such as the family whose business depended on weekends for its livelihood. Such parents may simply not have been able to participate as fully as they would otherwise by the circumstances of their lives. Where they participated in social capital relationships (such as ensuring their child’s participation), they were far more likely to be recipients than donors. Overall, however, they were mostly isolated from the social capital benefits afforded to other
parents with one notable exception: other parents looked after and took care of their children. It was doubtless a trust in this system and of Little League as an organization that allowed these parents to continue their child’s participation at all.

Throughout the season (and beyond), certain recurrent processes in the VCLL facilitate both the creation and consumption of social capital benefits. In the chapter, I highlighted five of these processes: team formation, practices and games, all-star participation, participation on the Board of Directors, and children’s networks. Team creation and formation was a process primarily characterized by social capital consumption, as parents and coaches often leveraged connections to ensure the best possible outcome for their children or teams, respectively. In the younger age divisions, it was much simpler to activate social ties for instrumental purposes. Where parent requests were honored, parents could simply request a coach and they would usually get him or her. Likewise, coaches could ask parents to request them if there was a particular child they were interested in having. Obviously, in either case, it helped to have a previous relationship with the coach or parent. Teams could be and were built entirely of children and parents with previous relationships. One pre-tee-ball team consisted entirely of a single extended family whose members wanted their children to play together. In the higher age divisions, the process was complicated by the tryout and draft process. Coaches could not guarantee the selection of any particular child. They could only promise to try to choose their friends’ children if asked. On the one hand, this allowed them an easy “out” in the event that they were unable to select the friend’s child, as they could blame the draft process. On the other hand, to avoid tension or if they sincerely wanted to help their friend out by choosing their child, they may have been forced to select the child earlier in the draft than they wanted to in order to ensure they were available. This sometimes caused them to miss out on more talented players and
weakened the team’s ability to compete in the league. Coaches attempted to navigate this treacherous terrain, with some erring on the side of friendship and others on the side of competitiveness.

Once the season began, teams practiced regularly in preparation for games, which occurred throughout the week and on weekends. The dynamics at play in terms of parent opportunity and execution of sociability depended largely on (again) the age division of the teams. For younger teams, practices were the primary times for sociability among parents and games less so. For the older kids, the reverse situation existed. In the younger age divisions, practices were better for socializing because parents were present the entire time. The league required parents to stay for their young children’s practices unless extraordinary circumstances prevailed. Most parents were content to abide by this rule, since practices were short and many did not want to be away from their young children during this time. Older players’ practices, however, were longer (up to 2 hours) and parents often used that time to run other errands or attend to other family matters. Since the children were generally not anxious about being away from their parents while practicing at this age, parent attendance at entire practices was rare. At games, younger divisions saw increased numbers of extended family members attending games, which limited inter-family socializing, as family members mostly confined their conversations to themselves. As children aged through the league, however, fewer extended family members could be counted on to show up, and games became the primary site for the building of relationships between parents, as the structure of a baseball game provided significant opportunities for conversation.

For parents whose children were selected to play for an All-Star team, there was another chance to forge relationships with other parents. All-Star season was interesting because even
though, for most teams, it was generally very short (only about 3 weeks or so), the heightened competition between communities created situations that could facilitate increased cooperation and exposure to potential friends and exchange partners. All-Star teams practiced nearly every day between the time the teams were selected (in mid-June) and the District tournament (often on July 4th weekend). Practices were long, and while parents would, as on other teams, use the time to take care of other business, there were also many heavily involved parents whose children were selected for All-Star participation, and so the number was usually not as low as might be expected from observations of regular-season teams. The combination of heavy involvement and nightly practices led to situations such as parents taking turns providing the other families dinner after practices. This also increased camaraderie among both players and parents. The increased focus and competition leads to a greater sense of an “us/them” dynamic. Further, because competition was between Valley City and other towns in the area, the distinction between in-group and out-group was heightened. For teams who won the District tournament and headed to State, there was the prospect for significant travel. The Mariners did just that, and the travel offered an additional opportunity for parents to get to know one another, as they raised money together, stayed in the same hotel, and endured the same two-day rain delay together.

Parents who took their involvement in their children’s sports to another level found that one avenue was in the actual administration of the league, handled by the VCLL Board of Directors. Involvement on the board brought parents from teams of all age divisions and from both baseball and softball. These were also parents who were looking for ways to help the league out, and they brought their own unique set of skills and solutions to the challenges of running a league. Thus, the league benefitted from the human and social capital of its board members.
Naturally, relationships formed during the course of the long season, and these parents could often relate to each other because they were heavily involved, and had a greater understanding of their own commitment to the league and to their children. At the same time, where visions diverged, there was a heightened sense of estrangement from those with whom one disagreed. This, by itself, was unlikely to lead to negative social capital. However, when personal elements of conflict impinged on the formal conflicts which arose, the potential for negative social capital became substantial. When the personal conflicts emerged, it became easier for board members, because they saw themselves as wholly and altruistically committed to the betterment of the league, to see their rivals as acting out of ulterior motives. This led to the development of negative social capital on the VCLL Board.

Finally, the friendship decisions made by the players amongst themselves impacted the friendship choices of the parents. Because of parents’ explicit desire to create network closure within their child’s friendship networks – that is, they wanted to have some level of familiarity with their children’s friends’ parents – they occasionally developed closer relationships with their children’s friends’ parents. This did not happen in the majority of cases, but it was more likely to happen than parents developing closer relationship with parents whose children their own did not know or like. Parents often saw it as a waste of time to develop relationships with parents when the children did not get along, fearing that it would be too difficult to maintain. Instead, they were steered toward certain parents based on who their children chose as friends on a team. To the extent that children’s friendship criteria differ from homophily principles offered by McPherson et al. (2001) – and there is at least some evidence that they do (Fine 1987) – parents may see themselves familiar with or even developing closer relations with parents whom they might not have otherwise taken the time or made the effort to get to know. This process was
evidenced by the times during my interviews when parents more easily noted differences
between themselves and their youth sport friends and credited their friendship to the friendliness
of the other person, rather than some identifying characteristics that made them compatible, such
as having similar values or liking similar things.

However, one of the main takeaways from the chapter was that relationships did not need
to be close in order for social capital exchanges to occur. The Little League organization as an
institution was such that parents often saw mere participation in the league as evidence of the
moral character, likeability, and sense of commonality between themselves and other parents on
a team. The mere inclusion of a child on a team meant that they as well as their parents enjoyed
certain privileges that may have been denied or inaccessible to others with no affiliation with
their team or the league. This became more evident when talking about the specific benefits
exchanges that I observed as well as those parents shared with me during interviews. In the
chapter, I explored four specific categories of benefits: child care, emotional support,
information sharing, and business contacts.

One of the benefits conferred upon – or at least potentially available to – parents in the
VCLL was that of child care, specifically the notion that their children would be cared for while
they are under the purview of the team and the league. That is, while they are at practice and
games, or when they were with team parents on the way to or from practices and games, they
would be looked after. As stated many times above, many parents were not able to or otherwise
did not attend practices and/or games. Most of the time, however, they could be counted on to
return on time when those events were complete. However, circumstances arose that impeded
their punctuality. Though the occasions were somewhat infrequent, most coaches and some
parents told stories of waiting with children after practices or games for their parents. Whether a
parent or a coach, those who provided this benefit saw it as both a moral imperative and an investment in the generalized reciprocity that would see their own children as safe with another league parents in the event that roles were reversed. Parents were also generous with offers to give kids rides to and from practices and games. Whatever liability issues may have been salient in such situations rarely enter the thoughts of either the donor or the recipient in these situations.

Emotional support was a benefit passed back and forth between parents, but it was complicated by the difficulty people had sharing emotional issues with others, and an even greater difficulty that some people had when hearing of such issues from others, especially with others with whom they did not consider themselves “close.” Stories of emotional support in my time with the league were always told to me from the perspective of the donor, and never the recipient. That is, when people told me stories about the exchange of emotional support, they were always the ones doing the supporting rather than the one seeking the support. Additionally, the stories nearly always included an element of their own discomfort at being asked for support, and a distancing from the recipient. There were very good reasons that people might seek emotional support from acquaintances rather than close friends. However, seeking it from more distant rather than close ties resulted in the dissolution of the relationship rather than its strengthening.

Information sharing, on the other hand, was a resource that freely shared between virtual strangers, acquaintances, and intimates. Information about jobs or information about goods and services about town both passed between parents in the league because they were very low-cost for the donor, and potentially extremely high-benefit to the recipient. It took very little effort to tell an unemployed parent about a job one ran across, or a job at one’s own company, just as it took very little effort to recommend a good dentist or mechanic. At the same time, the potential
benefits could be immense. Information also passed freely because the sense of reciprocity was both generalized and negligible. It was generalized because there was no expectation of specific repayment for information traded. It was negligible because many parents who recalled trading in information chalked it up to common decency. It was a resource traded with no obligation of repayment and little sense of risk in the event that the tip did not pay off in the spirit in which it was intended. In terms of job information, however, there was a distinction – an extremely important one – between passing along information about a job and endorsing a particular candidate for a job (putting a good word in with a hiring manager, e.g.). Sandra Smith (2010), among others, has noted that information without endorsement is not especially helpful, and this also may have contributed to its free passing. Endorsement, it seems, depended on the closeness of the relationship and the knowledge one may have had with the skillset and ability of the recipient. This was the case with many of the parents in the VCLL.

On the other hand, where that knowledge was not available and parents needed to procure business services around town, they were more likely to trust those who participated in the VCLL, for reasons they were not always able to articulate. This meant that those in business for themselves or those who depended on clients for their livelihood may have exposed themselves to a large and untapped customer base by their participation. The mortgage broker, the lawyer, or the insurance agent, for example could, if they chose, generate business for themselves through their participation. This stemmed from the idea that rested somewhere in the minds of many parents in the league that other participants were, in lack of other evidence, decent, honest, and hardworking people with whom they were more likely to invest their trust than someone outside of the league. This is a reversal of the way many people think of strangers, and it is a distinct advantage where trust in business relations might be necessary, or at least advantageous. On the
other hand, many business owners and service providers were uncomfortable with the idea that they could profit from their children’s participation in the league. They were quick to distance themselves from such profit, and insisted that it was only a byproduct of their participation, and not a guiding principle. While I have no doubt that this is true, the fact remains that parents can and have profited in their business ventures from their child’s participation. Since occupations were a regular feature of parent conversations, especially when first getting to know one another, those who might profit from such knowledge would do well for themselves to make sure what they do was known to the rest of the parents in the league. In general, the more parents know about each other, the more likely the potential benefits of participation will be conferred upon them.

In Chapter 5, I explored the various motivations by which people saw their actions, both as benefactors and beneficiaries. Starting from Portes’ view of the sources of (or motivations behind) social capital, I had three central contributions in the chapter I wanted to make: (1) to bolster to the paltry discussion on the motives for social capital exchange, (2) to introduce the motives of help-seekers (also known as recipients or beneficiaries) to the discussion of social capital exchange, as it has thus far been absent, and (3) to explore situations in which children could affect the motives of both benefactors and beneficiaries in those exchanges specifically referenced in Chapter 4. Thus, I took each type of benefit (child care, emotional support, information exchange, and business contacts), and explored the professed and implied motives behind the exchange of those goods to make the above arguments.

For emotional support, the motives of both help-seeker and help-provider were complex because of the tenuous nature of the relationship. For the stories that were told to me, this exchange took place rarely, and between those who were not close friends. There is every reason
to believe that emotional support exchange occurred regularly between intimates, but I was not able to get at that with my interviewees, possibly because of its taken-for-granted nature and the way I phrased my questions. What seemed to stick out in their memories were the occasions when someone placed them in the awkward position of hearing their personal “dirty laundry” at a point where their relationship, in the benefactor’s mind, made it inappropriate for that level of sharing. In the donor’s view, such support was meant for closer relations. However, a look at the help-seeking literature reveals that, for some types of support, people will seek out acquaintances over intimates. This depends on the ego-relevance of the problem. If the recipient sees the existence of the problem as reflecting badly on themselves for some reason, they may seek out for help those with whom they do not interact regularly, to avoid the stigma of the problem to begin with. Such constant contact with the help provider may be a perpetual reminder of the problem for which they at least partially blame themselves.

The reaction of the benefactor was also crucial. In the cases I documented, the appropriate reaction was to provide an ear and to offer as little advice as possible. What advice they did offer was extremely vague. Additionally, they tended to distance themselves from the help-seeker after the interaction or after the season. While benefactors may have felt sympathy for the beneficiaries, they also felt like they were being placed in an unfair and highly uncomfortable position of hearing an acquaintance’s personal problems. This was, they felt, an unfairly weighty burden to place on such a weak relationship. Research on social capital exchange has shown that exchanges optimally start out small and grow progressively larger, as each successful exchange builds trust that enables larger exchanges. If one party places too much burden on the other, the result is often withdrawal from the relationship.
Information sharing, about both jobs and services around town, is an exchange that in the eyes of donors was motivated by common decency or altruism. In Portes’ terms, they were motivated by what he called Value Introjection, the notion that providing help to other human beings was simply the “right” thing to do. There is little in my interviews to contradict this view. At the same time, notions of generalized reciprocity may lead to the conclusion that providing help when necessary may result in such help being available when needed. In terms of the potential motives of recipients, there was little in the way of direct help seeking. Such sharing was often, perhaps usually, the byproduct of casual conversation between acquaintances or friends. However, this does not mean that the help-seeker did not employ a less-direct method of asking for help. Blau’s notion of “storytelling in disguise” (1955) is especially salient. In the guise of mentioning a problem as a precursor for some other point, or just telling a story to present an opportunity for advice or help without formally requesting it, parents in the league could ask for and receive help without actually asking for it. In the chapter, Ricardo mentioned his unemployment as a way of offering rides to kids to both practices and games. The byproduct of that story was that parents then knew he was unemployed, and often passed along information about potential jobs for which he might apply. Similarly, Dean telling Nicholas the story of a broken crown and a two-week wait for the dentist presented the opportunity for Nicholas to tell Dean about his own dentist without Dean actually asking for the information. It may be that this strategy loosened the obligation for direct reciprocity since it did not take the form of a favor. This kept the cost for both donors and recipients very low, even as the potential benefits were great.

The notion of business contacts developed in the VCLL was very complex and potentially confusing for at least two reasons: (1) in a business relationship such as those fostered
by participation in the league, it was difficult to differentiate between benefactor and beneficiary. Both parties took on the characteristics of both in the same transaction, and (2) the accounts of the service providers did not allow for any sort of conscious motivation, as any benefit accruing to them through conscious effort would violate the prevailing ideology of the league that the kids were the exclusive beneficiaries of Little League. Thus, while it might have been prudent for any type of business owner to make known his or her occupation and availability, they would consider it quite gauche to do so in order to drum up business. To keep the first problem in check, I referred to the parties as providers and customers rather than benefactors and beneficiaries (or donors and recipients). The second problem was unsolvable from my perspective, as I was not witness to any business owner or service provider trying to generate business for themselves. I could at that point only take their word for their own motivations. Thus, I instead focused on the motives for potential customers and why they seemed to prefer providers from the league – even those with whom they were virtual strangers – to others whom they might employ for similar services. Those motives, as stated by the potential customers, centered on a combination of familiarity and a certain amount of trust in the organization that reflected on the other parents who were participating in it (Bounded Solidarity). At the same time, there was some trepidation in utilizing relationships for these purposes – in both service provider and customer roles – in the event that an unsatisfying business transaction may damage the personal relationship.

Unless evidence to the contrary was presented – whatever form that evidence might take – parents in the VCLL were predisposed to trust other parents in the league. There was a sense that parents regarded other parents as having similar values, at least where child rearing was concerned. There did seem to be some spill over into other areas, and business relationships were
formed in the space where this trust exists. There was less risk in getting involved in a business relationship than a personal relationship, as there were formal, contractual safeguards in place to protect the integrity of the relationship. But these relations formed mainly because of the trust that one youth sport parent felt they could place in another, even with the explicit understanding that these business people were likely no better or worse than any others that one may have found through an internet search or through the phone book. Or, as Katheryn succinctly put it, “…so I called him to put lights in our back yard, because I trust him more, even though he’s probably the biggest shyster ever, right? But I didn’t know.” Because of the scant mobilization of this type of social capital, however, it remained a mostly-untapped resource for both providers and consumers.

The final benefits analyzed in the chapter were the first to be analyzed in Chapter 4: child care benefits. They were presented first in Chapter 4 because they were the most basic and immediate forms of social capital that existed among parents. They were considered last in the following chapter because they represented a reversal in what I labeled the “burden of motivation,” and represent a major reason why social capital scholars should pay attention to the reasons why people are more or less willing to engage in social capital exchanges (because different parties might define the terms of the exchange distinctively, complicating their actions and the analysis of such). For the other three sets of benefits, and in social capital scholarship in general, motives from the perspective of the recipients have been presented as unproblematic. Scholars, where they have dealt in motives, have only seen fit to do so in terms of the potential donors. Child care in a Little League setting, however, reverses the roles form a motivational perspective. This results from a distinctive view of the exchange, where donor and recipient view the exchange in such a way to problematize recipient motives in unique ways.
Donors (those who stayed with another parents child after practice or games, for example, or those who provided rides to and from practices and games) viewed themselves as the benefactor, the child as the beneficiary, and the resource as their time and energy. This was highlighted with several parents specifically referring to the person they help in those situations of the kids, and they framed their motives in terms of being there “for the kids.” Melody, for example, went so far as to say explicitly that she did not provide rides or buy uniforms to benefit the child’s parents. Recipients, on the other hand, viewed the donors as the benefactor, themselves as the beneficiary, and their child as the resource being exchanged. That is, they were entrusting another parent with their child, caring less about the game or the practice, and more about the safe return of their child from the care of another, whom they may only know as an acquaintance from baseball or softball. This distinct view allowed the donors view their actions in terms of altruism (since they did not expect repayment from the children themselves). The view of the recipients’ children, however, means that recipients have to have far more trust in the donor to take care of their children than required for the donor to take on the responsibility, because as Nicholas put it to me, “I know I can trust myself.” Nicholas went one step further, paraphrasing the entire line of argument, saying, “I’d be glad to help out anybody’s kid. (sighs). Conversely, however, I wouldn’t necessarily feel that comfortable leaving my kids with people I don’t know. You know, I’ve become that, that ungodly paranoid parent. Don’t trust anybody. But I want everybody to trust me.” This discrepancy thus produced a glut of supply of parents willing to give players rides to and from practice, or to stay with them after games in the event that their own parents ran late. At the same time, and for the same reasons, these unique views of the exchange stifled the demand for such services that might have eased the burden on parents with multiple children in the league, or with parents with long or non-standard working hours.
The closer parents were on a team however, either as a group or as smaller cliques, the easier it was for them to overcome these obstacles to ensure a good experience for their children.

In the end, I wanted to show that children affected the way their parents viewed social capital and its exchange among other parents. On the one hand, participation in the league provided a number of acquaintance-like associations that provided prime locations for the sharing of ego-relevant issues of emotional import. Even in diminishing the potential for future relations with the donor in such an exchange, help-seekers still found themselves with a sympathetic, if uncomfortable ear. Participation also placed parents in a large grouping of diverse adults with many different information channels. Because this information was freely passed among groups of parents, these participants found themselves with a wealth of information – whether about jobs or services about the area – they might not have been able to access otherwise. Customers and service providers both found their potential stock of providers and customers (respectively) increase by exposure to a group of people who were predisposed to trust one another more than they would ordinary strangers in an unfamiliar context. The legitimacy of the league, coupled with its ideology of creating a children-first environment, put parents at ease around others, who they believed that, for all of their potential or actual faults, had at least done something positive for their children. Finally, and more directly, children altered the way people view the exchange of social capital, particularly where the children are directly involved. Parents tended to act in ways that were, on the surface at least, more altruistic where children were concerned. However, parents also did not want to be the parent who needed to have their children looked after by strangers, and tended to trust their children in the care of only those whom they may have known well. It is one thing to pass information to a virtual stranger or acquaintance; it is quite another to leave a child in their care if not absolutely
necessary. Thus, where children were concerned, they reversed the motivational problem in the exchange.

In the final “substantive” chapter, I examined the strife that had plagued the Board of Directors since slightly after my arrival. The source of the tension and conflict depended on whom one asked about it. Its effects were still being felt in the league when I left the field. In its wake, however, were destroyed reputations, friendships, and a marriage, which may or may not have been directly impacted by board relationships. Accusations flew between the principals during my time as a board member. These ranged from team-stacking to embezzlement and theft to marital infidelity. The veracity of any of these rumors (thankfully) was not my major concern, for printing them here as either fact or fiction would have been irresponsible and unethical. Instead, I concerned myself with their perception and their effects. The league, its players, and their parents all suffered as a result of the board strife, and the league faced an uncertain future at the time I left the field. Throughout the entire process, however, Board member after Board member insisted that they and (often) they alone were acting in the best interests of the kids. In my eyes, the kids that I had come to know in my fieldwork had become “The Kids,” a rhetorical device to be wielded as a weapon rather than as flesh and blood players to be looked after and nurtured. Actions taken in their name were as likely to destroy as to create. Thus, I explored the creation of “negative social capital” through the board of directors.

First, I wanted to distinguish between what I called negative social capital and what others have referred to as the “dark side” of social capital. In essence, the dark side of social capital comes when people engage in a relationship with an eye to help out themselves or others through the relationship. When these exchanges result in negative externalities, scholars invoke the dark side of social capital as a way of describing those effects. Negative social capital is the
opposite; it occurs when people engage in a relationship with the desire to damage the other party or parties in the relationship. That definitional distinction completed, I then sought to locate the principals involved in the major conflict, its source, the manifestation of negative social capital, and some of its effects on the league itself. Throughout, I was keen to uphold two principles, one data-related, and one ethics-related: (1) I wanted to understand how the principals involved viewed their role in terms of making the league better for the players and how their conflict with one another advanced this goal, and (2) I wanted to make sure to treat all accusations, no matter the evidence, as unverified and unverifiable. The first of my goals connects the chapter to the larger theme of the research on how children impact their parents’ social capital. The second one I hope avoided the ethical dilemmas presented by rumors, particularly those of a criminal or salacious nature.

Among the principals and their allies, the origins of the conflict between Joshua and Melody (and her family) were distinctly different. Each version, of course, painted their protagonist in the best possible light. But these origins were important because they helped to frame the narrative that sustained the conflict itself. In either event, I spent some time in the chapter exploring the manifestation of negative social capital in light of the idea that, for many negative relationships, the principals could have simply chosen not to interact. There must then have been mitigating circumstances present for the relationship to continue. Only if the relationship continues can there be negative social capital. I thus made the argument that the antagonists made to me: they stayed in the league because they felt they are the only parties able to save the league – and, by extension, the kids – from the other. In this mutual commitment to their ideals, they could not withdraw from the relationship. Thus, in order to protect the league, they attempted to force the other from their position. For both, the manifestation of negative
social capital took the form of accusations intended to damage the reputation of the other and make their position untenable. Melody repeatedly accused Joshua of taking money from the league. Her allies, particularly Leanne and Sonya (her sister and mother, respectively) also accused Joshua of various misdeeds, from snack bar theft to stalking the league Treasurer, Marilyn. For his part, Joshua also accused his opponents of thievery, as well as misdeeds relating to the league itself, such as team stacking. There were many other rumors during that time, most of them of a rather salacious nature. Though I did not pursue them, they cast a pall over board meetings, and the league lost a fair number of volunteers, either those who were the subject of the rumors or those who simply grew tired of them.

The consequences for the antagonists as well as the league as a whole were significant. Joshua, Melody, Leanne, Sonya, and to a lesser extent Lawrence all suffered reputational damage as a result of the conflict. There was already a great deal of grumbling about the presence of so many family members together on the board (Ron and Roger, cousins of Melody and Leanne were also Board members, but they generally steered clear of the major conflict), and Joshua’s accusations struck a chord with many parents who were suspicious of the family in the first place. Lawrence, the subject of several rumors, left the Presidency and the Board altogether for a time in 2010, though whether this was because of the Board conflict or not is difficult to say. Joshua, having been exposed as a convicted felon, was substantially humiliated but stayed on as president, even winning a second term when he ran unopposed in the summer of 2011. The Board did, however, enact special safeguards to ensure that he never had contact with money coming into the league, and he was not allowed access to the league’s bank accounts.

The effects of the conflict, however, were felt possibly more broadly, if less acutely, by the league as a whole. The league was often paralyzed by the warring factions, and movement on
any particular issue was difficult. Several board members stopped showing up altogether. However, because they did not formally resign, they were still members, and assembling a quorum at any particular board meeting was nearly impossible for six months. As the Board stagnated, thing began slipping through the cracks, such as paperwork and volunteers. The volunteer crisis that ensued made league operation extremely difficult. Many games during the 2011 season did not have umpires, drawing untrained parents out of the stands to call the game, leading to an increase in in-game conflict. Perhaps most telling, the league registration numbers dropped nearly 20% between the 2010 and 2011 seasons. Surrounding leagues in the area showed no accompanying drop in registration numbers, leading me to conclude that the strife created by the board and its conflict played at least some role in the declining numbers. The declining number of board members also led to a decline in the number of people undertaking the task of getting the 2011 season off the ground, and many parents were unhappy with specific league events, such as Picture Day, Opening Day Ceremonies, fundraising, and uniform distribution. The league as a whole suffered a significant hit to its image that may take several seasons to iron out. As of this writing, most of the principals in the original conflict have left the board. While this might allow the league to operate with less interpersonal conflict, the substantial loss of institutional knowledge that left with the board members might be difficult to immediately replace.

Throughout the chapters, I attempted to weave what I viewed as the unifying theme into the narrative: the kids. They were the center of the ideology of the league, and they were the center of many if not most of the league activities throughout the season. They impacted the networks within which their parents were located and steered them in specific directions in creating closer relationships based on their own friendship choices on a team. Further, the kids
altered the dynamic between donors and recipients in the league, often creating a major imbalance in the amount of social capital available to their parents and that which was mobilized in any given season. In some cases, the ideology of the league prevented their parents from “cashing in,” as it were, on the potential benefits their participation bestowed on them. In others, they altered the perceptions between donor, recipient, and resource. In the end, however, the kids, where they were physically present, did not facilitate the creation of negative ties and negative social capital. Where parents had conflict with others, they could generally avoid them for the season, and they were unlikely to be together the following season. The situation changed, however, where the kids were no longer present except as an idea, or an ideal. In the boardroom, parents as board members were able to invoke the idea of “The Kids” to suit their own agendas, and this was done regularly. As such, there was a greater chance of negative relationships developing and festering. Since the ideology of the kids made exit difficult, the creation of negative social capital was a likely if not inevitable result of such interpersonal conflict. In their presence as well as in their absence – perhaps even especially in their absence – the kids influenced social capital in the lives of their parents.

THE IMPORT OF THIS RESEARCH

What has been presented thus far, though potentially interesting, is of very little value if it cannot be placed into context and made useful, both to academics studying sport, youth and families, or social capital, as well as practitioners administering leagues at both local and national levels. In this section, I want to pick up and elaborate on themes presented first in chapter 2 – how this research addresses particular lacunae in the academic literature – pointing out where this research accomplishes those goals, particularly for sport as well as social capital scholars with an interest in family dynamics. After that, I address the implications for local and
national league administrators who no doubt face challenges in the form of very high attrition rates in their specific sports and leagues. What can this research tell them about how to perhaps stem this tide at various levels of administration? Within the context of the benefits of youth sport, how can local and national administrators utilize the lessons from this research to promote and maintain the health of their leagues and their sports to the benefit of parents and children?

Academic Implications of this research

The unifying theme of this research has been the impact that children have on their parents’ social capital. I have presented evidence that they do this on two levels: indirectly, through their participation and as the ideological beneficiary of everything of which Little League purports to stand, and directly through their own friendship choices. Further, children alter the ways in which parents and adults understand their role as both benefactors and beneficiaries in the social capital exchange, confusing any easy understanding of who might be benefitting whom, and how. Given that parents invest a great deal of time, energy, and financial resources into their children’s activities, scholars have been lax in exploring the role of children in their parents’ social lives. Unlike the simple social effects that having children has on parents’ lives (reconnecting with family members, meeting other parents, etc.), participation in child-centered activities alters the conception of the child from a mere object around which ties form and solidify to an active agent with their own social agendas and independent impact. Given the importance of the peer group in the socialization of children, there can also be little doubt that this is an important area of study for scholars. It is difficult to estimate the actual extent to which children influence their parents’ social capital, but there can be little doubt that they do so, and this is not merely a product of their existence, but also a product of their purposive actions.
This work also has implications into the study of the sources, or motivations for social capital exchange. All along, I have tried to illustrate that those who are on the receiving end of social capital exchanges are active social agents with their own agendas and motivations for acting. It is simply not enough to argue that the prospect of receiving some particular benefit from a social relation along with a need for that resource is enough to spur a help-seeker to action. Other elements in the equation matter; the context matters, the nature of the problem matters, and the strength of the relationship matters, and not always in the way social capital scholars have thought. There are problems for which remedies are not sought from the closest of relations, especially those problems which are important to the self-concept of the help-seeker. The introduction of help-seeking motives to the social capital narrative is a major contribution of this research. Further, the presence of children in the setting complicates the relationship between donor and recipient even further. They first reverse the motivation between donor and recipient in certain situations because of the different way each understands the construction of the exchange. Second, they alter notions of reciprocity for the same reasons. Parents are more likely to provide a service that they view as benefitting the child – such as buying uniforms or providing rides to and from practices and games – without concern for the repayment of the act. They do at times mention that they hope someone would do the same for them and their children, implying that they consider a sense of generalized reciprocity in these situations. The theme continues to resonate throughout the narrative: children alter the structure of social capital relations. In this situation, there is a double puzzle to be engaged: not only should scholars engage the motives for actors in social capital relationships in general, but they will also need to parse how children alter the conventional narrative, once it is in fact established.
Negative social capital – also known by some as “sour” social capital (Moerbeek and Need 2003; Morrison and Nolan 2007) – is the material damage caused by the concerted efforts of parties engaged in a negative relationship. When scholars have dealt with the negative effects of social capital, they have usually referred to it in terms of externalities. This is the property, for example, of the exclusion principle, by which trading scarce resources in a zero-sum scenario means necessarily that any parties colluding to secure a resource (say, a spot on an All-star team) from a donor to a recipient exclude any other parties who might also be competing for that resource. My point in the chapter was not to deny this type of scenario; it was quite prevalent. Instead, I attempted to distinguish the negative form of social capital, whereby parties engaged in attacks on one another in an attempt to damage each other. This is more than simply an academic distinction, as it refers to decidedly different processes, both of which are necessary for the development of a mature theory of social capital. As this is one of the only studies to address negative social capital in a voluntary organization setting, the conclusions that can be drawn definitively are scant. That people engage in relationships that are damaging to themselves and others is evident. Further, their accounts of why they engage in these relationships are enlightening (as are their accounts of why their “adversary” continues to engage in the relationship), as it ties into the guiding theme of the research. Even as the relationships approach “deep play” (Geertz 1972), because the parties believe (or maintain) that they are acting in the best interests of “The Kids,” they continue to engage in the relationship, long after it might be considered prudent or even rational to do so. These findings continue to open up avenues of research that have been previously underexplored. The exploratory nature of this line of questioning leaves the contribution of this study as much in what questions it brings up than any that it might answer with any confidence. I will address some of those questions below, as I start
to ponder the implications of this study in terms of future research suggested by my findings and interpretations.

Finally, in terms of the sociology of sport, this study has provided a corrective to the one-dimensional conception of social capital heretofore utilized by scholars. As I mentioned above, Putnam’s view has reigned mostly unchallenged by sport sociologists engaging in social capital research. This research, while fruitful, has left a large hole where network-style social capital relationships should be studied. The major issue I take with existing sport sociology engaging social capital questions is that they seem to mirror a central question that has perplexed sport scholars since the field emerged: does sport build community? As much of that research showed, so shows the bulk of social capital research in the “Putnamian” tradition: there is a great deal of potential for sport to create community-level social capital, but the empirical results are mixed at best. However, at the network level, I argue that the potential for social capital growth is much more likely to be fulfilled. That parents form, to varying degrees, relationships with other parents is clear. Many to most of these relationships are shallow and ephemeral. However, while they exist, they are valuable sources of social support and social capital for the parties involved, as I have shown. That they are short-lived in no way diminishes their value while they are active, which jibes with previous research on the topic (Dyck 2002). Thus, the overall success of any given program in terms of community-building might not be necessary for participants to still create useful ties with other participants. In other words, the VCLL does not necessarily have to be good for the community at large to be useful for many of the individual participants. This could alter the way sport sociologists evaluate the success or failure of any particular sporting program in the community by forcing them to view social capital as a multidimensional concept. It also invites researchers to study sports and activities that are not generally associated with
social capital building, such as individual sports and activities that take place without formal organization or sanction. These activities may not be useful for those looking for community-wide social capital, but as they create networks of useful contacts for their participants, their social value may be currently underestimated by sports scholars.

Practical Implications of this research

I believe, in addition, that this research has practical, real world value to those who administer youth sports leagues such as the VCLL. The broad conclusion is that enhancing the parent experience may help maintain a higher overall level of league health and participation, not only in terms of the number of kids participating on a season-to-season basis, but in terms of volunteer participation, the life’s blood of any community youth sports league. This argument rests on a fundamental assumption that youth sports is primarily beneficial to its participants and is thus worth the effort to lower attrition rates. This is not the sturdiest pillar on which to rest the argument. While sport can be useful in multidimensional development in children, including physical, emotional, and social, it is also stressful, violent, overly competitive and professionalized, and have been associated with risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (for a short but very useful overview of these issues, see Theokas 2009). While each individual program can be evaluated for quality personnel and implementation, some general guidelines appear to go a long way toward preventing negative outcomes. Specifically, low to moderate levels of competition, low levels of professionalization and specialization, and a supportive parental environment produce the best outcomes for youth sport participants. In fact, these factors alone may go a long way toward alleviating attrition rates among adolescent athletes. Even in their absence, however, I argue that enhancing the parent experience will benefit youth sport leagues.
There can be little doubt that one of the greatest challenges youth sport administrators face on a regular basis is attrition. Sports sociologists have noted this problem for decades. Neither the country nor the sport seem to matter (Brown 1985). Recent estimates place the attrition rate at 70% by age 13 (Spies 2006). Children cite many reasons for their falling out of youth sports. Factors within the sport setting include an emphasis on competition, lack of fun, not enough playing time, and poor coaching behavior (Brustad, Babkes, and Smith 2001; Greendorfer 1992). Among the most commonly cited factors external to the sport setting include: the desire to spend more time with friends, the activity was no longer considered important, choosing to spend time in other activities, and a lack of success (Brown 1985). Parents also have been shown repeatedly to play a key role in the decision to join, stick with or withdraw from youth sport activities (Brown 1985; Brustad, Babkes, and Smith 2001; Fredricks and Eccles 2004; Greendorfer 1992; Hultsman 1992; Leff and Hoyle 1995; Turman 2007). Discarding practical concerns such as the ability to afford the activity or the ability to reliably transport their children to practices and games, as well as simply directly restricting youth access from an activity, parental influence is strongest in terms of the supportive environment they provide for their kids in their sporting endeavors, “Support and encouragement by family members, especially by parents, are important in young athletes initial involvement in sport as well as their continued participation and performance” (Leff and Hoyle 1995:189; see also Greendorfer 1992). Thus, parents play a critical role in their child’s participation. It follows logically that where parents see their own participation as rewarding, they are more likely to provide just the encouragement and support that their children need to continue their own participation. Research indicates that the opposite position also has merit:

The long hours spent on cold and rainy afternoons watching soccer games, the tedious waiting that precedes and follows hockey practices and games scheduled either before or
after normal work hours on weekdays and that virtually any time on weekends, and the manner in which parents are effectively forced to interact with other parents with whom they may otherwise have little in common, are all factors that may prompt mothers and fathers to alter, limit or even eliminate their involvement (and likely, thereby, their children’s participation) in community sports (Dyck 2002:109).

Youth sport administrators thus have incentive to enhance the parent experience in youth sport. The relationships that parents form in the youth sport setting provide an ideal incentive for continued participation. National organizations and league officials alike can and should be devising programs and policies to involve parents at higher rates, and to make their experience more enjoyable. The enjoyment of the league is likely very contagious.

Coaches are on the front lines of providing the primary experience for both parents and children. Coaches are the face of the organization for most parents, especially those who limit their involvement to practice and game attendance (or less). Thus, coaches play the critical role in the perception of the youth sport experience. In terms of enhancing the parental experience, the coach – with or without the assistance of a team parent – can enhance experiences by creating opportunities that encourage social bonding between parents. Adam, one of the most successful coaches in the VCLL, found a great deal of success as a result of this very thing. He regularly held gatherings in his home after weekend games for his kids, and threw a large team party that was very well attended. In speaking with some of the parents involved, they universally described their experiences as positive, and nearly all of them were committed to returning to the VCLL the following year. They also told me that they felt very good about the group of parents they had on Adam’s team, and they spoke more freely and comfortably with one another than on any of the four teams I observed throughout the year. League administrators would do themselves and their leagues a world of good by encouraging coaches and teams to
provide as much opportunity for socializing outside of the immediate sporting environment as possible.

This enjoyment and perception of benefit has implications for volunteer participation as well. Sport scholars have shown that volunteers in sporting contexts come disproportionately from a group of people who feel that they have, or their children have, benefitted from their participation (Green and Chalip 1998; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Their time and energy become the mechanism by which they “give back” to the organization from which they or their family have benefitted. Engagement by coaches is a powerful mechanism through which volunteers are recruited by the league. Provided the league is able to maintain their volunteer base – mainly through training, supervision, reasonable expectations, and a sense of appreciation (Green and Chalip 1998) – they may be able to alleviate the another major barrier to running an effective league. Volunteers also benefit from increased opportunities for social capital creation (ibid.), even at the potential cost of negative interactions (see Chapter 6).

Enhancing parent experiences is not a panacea for what ails youth sport in the United States, but it does represent a potentially very fruitful and substantially understudied area of experimentation. Parents, especially in pre- and early adolescence, have a great deal of influence on the sporting and activity choices of their children. Any element of their experience that may potentially lead to a more supportive orientation toward continued participation should be utilized to alleviate the high attrition rates among youth. When parents feel that they and their children have benefitted from the experience, they are more likely to volunteer to the organization, solving another substantial challenge faced by league administrators across the country. While the prevailing ideology that the league should put the kids first is certainly
axiomatic, it would be short-sighted and wasteful for leagues to ignore such an important
element in ensuring their survival.

LIMITATIONS AND FLAWS IN THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

The conclusions that I have drawn in this research come from many hours “in the field,”
as it were, through many hours talking with, interviewing, and querying the parents on the teams
I have studied. The analysis, while guided by overarching questions, was undertaken with an eye
toward alternative explanations and openness. In the end, however, the interpretations were my
interpretations, the data was the result of a combination of what happened and what I think
happened, and they are incomplete just as I am incomplete as a recording device and as a
researcher. Any singular method or methodological approach is not without flaw, else there
would be no reason to utilize any other. To take the idea a step further, validity, even loosely
defined, is not a product of the method employed by the researcher, “The validity of your results
is not guaranteed by following some prescribed procedure” (Maxwell 1996:86). The weaknesses
and holes in this project, like those in any other, emerge from a combination of the design and
the implementation. That is, there are inherent flaws in the research design, and there are flaws in
the way that I carried out the design. The holes in qualitative research methods are well-
documented, and inhere in the qualitative research process. The issues I encountered in the
implementation of the project itself present a less-flattering if more-honest account of the project
as a whole. In presenting these issues and acknowledging them, I hope to – perhaps ironically –
increase reader confidence in the substantive conclusions I have drawn above.

General Critiques of Qualitative Research

One of the most basic critiques of qualitative research is that it is not generalizable to larger
populations. This is, of course, because it does not usually involve procedures that lead to
representative samples of the population, however that may be defined. In general, one does not undertake qualitative research to make definitive claims about large-scale populations. Certainly, I can make no credible claims that what I have found here in the Valley City Little League would hold up in other leagues across the American Southwest, let alone the rest of the country. I would hesitate to speculate to what extent the claims I have made regarding the VCLL would resonate with other parents in leagues across the country. However, when I have discussed the project informally with people who have experience with Little League (or other organized baseball leagues) my findings, such as they are, tend to be at least familiar to those with whom I speak. The distant acquaintances on a team, the sense of obligation that the children’s presence imply to parents on a team, and the strife that league administrators face both within and outside of the board all seem to resonate with people outside of the VCLL. While the extent of the applicability of these conclusions is murky to say the least, I do feel that further research into the phenomenon of social capital and youth sport might yield similar results. I will discuss ideas for such future research below.

A second critique of qualitative research involves the reliability of the data gathered by the researcher, particularly in terms of selectivity and bias. Selectivity involves our human imperfection as recording devices. Observations are a good way to get a feel for a social situation, but even the most fastidious of note-takers end up with less-than-complete accounts of what actually happened in the setting. When not taking notes (and I often did not take notes), this process is magnified. Researchers miss words, we catch only snippets of conversations, and it is often easy to misinterpret what one has heard. We are also prone to miss the full array of reactions from the participants in a conversation. When interviewing with audio-only recording devices, body language and facial expressions are often lost. It is somewhere between an axiom
and a cliché to say that non-verbal language is the dominant form of communication, so this loss is significant. Researchers can choose to take notes of such things during an interview, but this often makes the respondent more self-conscious of the interview setting, which is inherently unnatural anyway. It also makes more difficult to convince the speaker that you are actually listening intently to them.

Selectivity involves not only our imperfections as data recorders, but our own biases in what to remember to record and what to discard as detritus. We lose a great deal of potentially enlightening information this way, as often the full import of what we have witnessed is only apparent later on during analysis. In this project in particular, this was a risk. Entering the setting with an idea of the types of behavior I was looking for doubtless biased the way I took in and interpreted what was going on around me. Another researcher, taking in the same scenes as I did but with a different or perhaps more open view of the situation doubtless could have not only seen many things that I missed, but might also have had differing interpretations of what we saw in common. One of the great dangers of the presentation of our research is the unavoidable lack of inclusion of alternative viewpoints. While it may be possible for me to present alternative interpretations, it is not possible for me to describe what I missed during observations, and it would certainly be impossible for me to provide more than a smattering of alternative views, each as inadequate by itself as the one I have presented here. By entering the field with certain expectations and assumptions about the site, I not only closed myself off to other social phenomena, but I also prejudiced myself to interpret what I did notice in a way that would validate my initial research concerns. This is, to an extent, unavoidable. However, since I
certainly came out of the field with a substantially different project than what I expected going in, perhaps I was able to partially navigate the setting open to the alternatives.\textsuperscript{1}

A third general critique of qualitative research that I want to address is the idea of reactive effects. Early critiques focused on the effects of the researcher on the participants in the natural setting. In other words, people act differently when they are being watched. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, the “Becker Principle” undermines this critique. Researchers, especially those who stay in the setting for long periods of time, are generally able to wait out any self-consciousness of those they are studying, and behavior tends to return to what it would have been regardless of researcher presence. However, in the interview situation, reactive effects are far more substantial, as what a respondent says is always conditioned by what they are asked. In clarifying some of my questions, particularly where they concerned the exchange of resources between parents, I tried to avoid leading the respondent to any particular conclusion. However, knowing what they did about the project, it is certainly possible that respondents in interviews responded to my questions in a manner that they thought was helpful to my thesis. There is an element of desirability bias in interviews as well as surveys. I am hopeful that because I was able to elicit examples of such exchange that it quells some suspicion that I unwittingly led respondents to their responses through my line of questioning and that the phenomenon in question happens in much the way I have presented it here. However, it is worth mentioning that the issue of social exchange between parents rarely came up in either interviews or observations unless initiated by me. I do not believe this is because I created the concept in people’s minds, but because it was removed from the foreground because they were, in general, focused on their children.

\textsuperscript{1} For a more complete discussion of the specific biases within the project, see Chapter 3.
Specific Issues with this Project

This project suffers from some specific issues that are not inherent in qualitative research, but are risks nonetheless. They are sometimes avoidable through a combination of conscientiousness and serendipity. In some cases, they do not become apparent as problems until after one has left the field, and they become nearly impossible to solve. By accounting for them, I again hope not to undermine my own conclusions, but to suggest how future researchers can address these issues to strengthen or refute them based on their merit. Specifically, I encountered issues pertaining to comparison groups, hard-to-reach populations, and member checks. I will discuss the development of each of these issues as well as how each potentially impacts the conclusions I have drawn above.

Perhaps the most glaring omission from this study is the lack of a comparative group. I originally conceived the project as incorporating fieldwork in four sports around Valley City: baseball, basketball, football, and soccer. As I mentioned above, however, the scope of such a project was far too large to accomplish in a reasonable amount of time. Further, the original design was predicated on each sport being confined to its “season” during the year. When I became involved with the machinations of the VCLL board of directors, the VCLL alone became a year-round project. I made the decision to aim for depth rather than breadth. At the same time, at many points in my work with the parents in the VCLL, I was reminded that other sports in the area might offer new insights into the nature of my research questions. Some of those sentiments and anecdotes are included in this account. This is ultimately because I do not conceive this project as strictly concerned with the social capital benefits of Little League baseball, although I readily acknowledge that, because of the lack of systematic inquiry into other sports in the area, I can make no such broader claims. Ultimately, this project is the beginning of a larger research
program into the connection between social connections and social capital and youth and adolescent sport taken as a whole. The implications of such a line of inquiry are substantial, and they impact for my suggestions for future research, which I detail below.

Even still, this work as a standalone project would have been strengthened by comparison to one of the area’s other sport offerings. Parents were never short of suggestions that, given what I was studying, I would be better off studying other sports, particularly football. Football, I was assured, was where the parents became much closer for a variety of reasons: increased emphasis on competition, more competition against other communities, far more practice time to get to know other parents, and the greater levels of danger involved in playing a contact sport where injuries were far more prevalent. These observations from parents, derived completely of their own experiences, fit comfortably in the sport and leisure theories that address such issues, as well as my own observations and hypotheses from this fieldwork. I have written above that I believe that increased emphasis on competition, and especially that against teams from other communities, will better promote parent camaraderie, even though that competitive emphasis may be substantially worse on the children’s experience. I have also opined that practices can be good places for parents to get to know one another, as the action on the field generally does not warrant their attention. Where practice attendance is high – as I am told it is in football – there is a greater opportunity for parents to forge relationships. Further, research into children’s activities has indicated that where danger of injury is higher, parents report knowing more of the other parents involved (Galaskiewicz et al. 2012). These reasons cited by parents and at least provisionally supported by the available evidence, means that different sports may have different dynamics for parent interaction and relationship building. Even that does not take into account the variety offered by different locales as well. How would youth football in Texas compare to
football elsewhere, such as New England? How do the dominant sporting practices in different areas compare to one another? This work does not – and cannot – offer even a preliminary hypothesis for these questions, but a comprehensive theory of youth sport and social capital must address them. In this process, comparison is essential. It would have strengthened this project immeasurably.

Another specific weakness in this process was my inability to include potentially challenging or negating cases. It is my feeling that such cases were to be found especially in the Isolate population of parents on teams. However, in my interviews, there are no true Isolates included. Duneier, among others, argues, “…for every ethnographic project there are phenomena that are extremely inconvenient from the standpoint of the line of thinking or theory that has emerged from the fieldwork. The method of ethnography should accustom itself to explicitly identifying such phenomena” (2011:2). This research, as it stands, is based on evidence collected from parents that are at least marginally involved in the running of a team. Those who have had to forego – or have chosen to absent themselves – are not represented. I did attempt to include some of these parents in my interviews. However, of the 9 times I was “stood up” for an interview, 7 of those were from Isolated parents. Their isolation from the team also isolated them from me as well. Perhaps because they were not as familiar – or even at all familiar – with the work I was attempting to carry out. It may not have been difficult for them to simply avoid or forget about our appointment. They may have not felt any affinity for me or for the project, or they may not have trusted my presentation of self or of the project. Certainly they did not know me from the league and had little to no familiarity with the project, except for what they may have heard secondhand.
The implications for these troubling cases are quite substantial. On the one hand, they were the recipients of much of the benefits of the association with the team, in that their children were most likely to be given rides or cared for in their absence. On the other hand, they may not have been nearly as willing to provide any potential benefits for other parents. They almost certainly would not have been able to call upon other parents for benefits that would be seen as theirs instead of their children’s, or for any benefits that may be at all dependent on the closeness of the relationship. In fact, their lack of involvement may be caused them to be judged harshly in absentia by other parents, which could have further eroded their access to any social capital benefits from the other parents. That they may benefit at all by their child’s participation may result merely from the disconnect between the view of the exchange between donor and recipient, particularly where children as seen as beneficiaries by those parents providing them with a ride or staying with them after practice or a game. I can only speculate on their views simply because, as an absent population, they are necessarily more difficult to reach. Again, this has implications for future research undertaken in this vein.

Finally, given the nature of the project and the amount of development of the argument from what was said to me to what has ended up on the page, this study would have benefitted greatly from member checks which involve, “…systematically soliciting feedback about one’s data and conclusions from the people you are studying” (Maxwell 1996:94). Allowing the subjects of the research to comment on and critique the ethnographer’s observations has elicited some amazing insight to the ethnographic process as well as some of the issues that this methodological approach inherently entails, such as bias and selectivity noted above and in Chapter 3 (see for example Duneier 1999 and Liebow 1993 for some ideas how member checks have been integrated directly into the text). This does not mean, that my ideas and conclusions
would be completely unknown to those parents who lent me access to their lives and experiences, but I have also not sent the material back to them in an attempt to elicit their feedback on my ideas and conclusions, nor to see if they feel as though they have been treated fairly or that I “got it right.” Part of this is, of course, because I did not – nor do I now – have a complete manuscript to send to them to evaluate. Quite simply: the time never really seemed right to pass along specific chapters for evaluation. The manuscript always felt too rough. Perhaps this is only my rationalization for delaying what I still feel is necessary, for ethical as well as honorable reasons. As I have promised them access to my writings, at some point before publication I owe them a reckoning of the material.

Another reason, however, that I have restrained from sending out the material has to do with Chapter 6. It is not simply that the chapter on negative social capital portrays some of the less flattering aspects of Board member behavior. It is also because – as I stated in my discussion on method and methodological challenges – anonymity in this chapter, while nominally achieved for outsiders, was impossible for insiders. There was simply no way to completely shield the identities of the major players involved and still remain faithful to the observations and interviews. The league is just now attempting to extricate itself from the enormity of the conflict which threatened to sink it during the 2010 and 2011 seasons. I have no desire to open up old wounds. At the same time, perhaps enough distance has been gained since that time to take a hard and honest look at the league during this time. If my ideas and conclusions are authentic, perhaps the league could learn from some of the conflicts of the past.

As I plan to take this research to the social scientific community in the form of publications, it will be necessary to the integrity of the research and the conclusions I have drawn within it to allow members of the organization, especially those whom are depicted in the pages
above, to view and comment on the manuscript. Their insight, if prone to the same biases and narrow-sightedness as my own observations of the time and place, are certainly no more so. A complete picture of the VCLL may be impossible, but what is presented here can be burnished by assembling as many of the fractured and incomplete views of the action as one can, so as to remove as much of the cracks and fuzziness from the margins as possible. I have been in contact with some of the principals involved in this research, and I do intend to make this account available to them. I hope that by giving them a voice in its final construction, they will feel that I have done right by them, and even if I have not flattered them entirely, that I have not been unfair or unduly influenced by the various factions fighting to tell their story or discredit someone else’s. Among our many goals as qualitative researchers, fairness to our subjects should always be at or near the top of the list.

The critiques I have presented here should not be regarded as an attempt to be comprehensive. Others reading this work may find other issues with the ways I have carried out the research, with the conclusions I have drawn, or with the way I have chosen to present it all. If this work has any impact, then this continual discussion is both necessary and long-term. Doubtless this project would have been stronger had I incorporated some of these practices into the fieldwork and interviews. At the same time, I hope that they have the effect of increasing the trust in the conclusions that I have drawn in the previous chapters. Even as I incorporate these weaknesses into my own assessment of the project, I am confident that the ideas I have presented in chapters 4, 5, and 6 have merit. Though future research, such that it is, may render these ideas primitive in their simplicity, I believe that these ideas warrant discussion, and that they can contribute however small a piece of a comprehensive theory of youth sport and social capital. The imperfections contained therein are not meant to tear down the fundamental argument, but
rather to be used as a blueprint of how to improve the overall argument as it stands presently. Only additional study and research can construct an edifice from that blueprint. Every implication, academic and practical, as well as every weakness that I have either outlined or omitted implies directions for future research into this topic. It is to a few of those directions that I now turn.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The ideas presented here do their job best and most effectively if they lead to additional research in this vein. The best projects raise far more questions than they answer, and they inspire researchers who consume the work to expand upon, reconceive, or challenge the ideas and the conclusions drawn in the work. My suggestions for future research takes on several areas of analysis, and most likely would benefit from qualitative and quantitative inquires. Doubtless this is only a sampling of the questions implied by my research, but they are the nagging questions and doubts that plague me when I think about what I perhaps wanted to answer but could not, or what questions have arisen since I left the field. Some of them I mention under the assumption that my conclusions have some merit and seek to expand on what is presented here. There are also those which would question that which I have presented here and seek to support or disprove what I have presented in these chapters. I have tried to delineate clearly between the two, but I will present them together.

First and foremost, studies with a comparative component must be undertaken. Whether the studies contain the comparative element themselves or seek to compare findings with this one, the base of the ideas contained herein needs to be understood from multiple angles, both in terms of locale and sports/activities. Doubtless there are nuances in both sport and locale that can be captured. Researchers should take on work that explores parent relationships in New England
football, or Southeastern basketball, or Midwest our Southern soccer leagues. Exploration into the differences between community and school sport may be fruitful, as the difference between pre-adolescent, adolescent, and high school sport may be as well. Studies such as these may go a long way toward understanding questions I have raised here about the nature of competition, intensity, time, and intra- vs. inter-community sport. If my arguments and conclusions have merit, then researchers, despite expected differences between sport and locale, should see comparable processes of relationships and exchange development between parents.

Chapter 4 also invites the study of team construction, composition, and the parent interaction that results from such decisions. I documented the myriad manners in which teams are constructed, constrained as they are by the rules of the league, social relationships, and the relative competitiveness of the coaches involved. I also noted that, as a result, some teams come together at their first practice of the season with many parental relationships already formed, while others come together as relative or absolute strangers. One of the natural, yet unanswered questions arising from these factors is how parental interaction and social capital exchange is affected by how the team is constructed. What are the consequences of league rules that allow parents to request specific coaches? Do parents who want their children to play together conspire to request the same coaches in the younger age groups? Do newcomers to a team where many parent relationships already exist find themselves on the outside looking in? My own cases in the VCLL were not chosen in a manner that would allow me to systematically answer this question, yet it feels like a crucial question to answer, as it relates to the question of what league administrators can do to enhance the parental experience and potentially reduce attrition. Future research in this area would be highly productive where it attempts to answer this question and makes implications surrounding the consequences for various forms of team construction.
Another area of research suggested in chapter 4 involves children’s networks’ impact on their parents’ sport networks by “steering” parents in the direction of their children’s friends on a team. Despite Fine’s (1987) exploration into preadolescent subcultures on a baseball team, we do not know enough of how children on sports teams develop relationships on teams. Fine suggests that children on a baseball team select friends using different criteria than adults who tend to gravitate toward those who they consider “like” them (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson, Miller, Smith-Lovin 2001). If that is the case, then children’s networks have implications for the principle of homophily, and parents may find themselves spending time with those whom they might not have chosen on their own as friends, but whose children draw them together for a time, even if that time is brief. Because these relationships, ephemeral as they are, can still have value in terms of social capital, player relationships may be a source of valuable “bridging” social capital for parents (Putnam 2000). Such research would also need to establish that such variety even exists within a sport in a given locale, and that heterophily is even possible or likely in such a setting. I have offered up an argument that perhaps heterophily is more likely in a youth sport setting because of this element, and such a claim should be treated with extreme caution and vetted quite thoroughly. If it is true, however, then youth sport represents an effective mechanism to create social capital between individuals and groups who might not otherwise come into contact on a regular basis. Because sport brings them together and focuses their attention, and gives them a common cause, it is a ripe setting for the development of relationships (Small 2009b).

One of the unspoken implications of this research is that youth sport enhances parents’ social capital compared to those parents who do not participate. This idea, stated explicitly, should be tested. Seemingly, the best way to measure such a claim is with counterfactual models.
Because there are multiple comparisons available, several models could be tested. Do parents of youth sport participants have higher levels of social capital than those whose children participate in non-sport activities, or in no organized activities at all? Do youth sport parents benefit differently from parents whose children enjoy non-sport activities or those whose children do not participate in organized activities at all in type and/or quality of their social capital enjoyed? For that matter, do parents of youth sport participants enjoy any social capital advantages over their counterparts who do not have children, or do they differ in quality or kind? The main idea presented here is that children’s participation represents an avenue for their parents’ social capital development. The question remains, however, if this simply replaces relationships and benefits that parents would enjoy from other activities, or if sport participation represents something additive and unique in their social capital development.

As I presented above, one of the missing populations from my study of the VCLL comes from the category of parents I refer to as “Isolates.” Including them in future research is absolutely imperative. Questions regarding the reasons for their isolation and its impacts on their relationships with other parents might be fruitful. Further enhancing this line of study would be an exploration of dropouts, especially from the isolated population of parents. One element of social relations that I thought I might see but never did was exclusion of parents on a particular team. Was this because parents really band together and simply avoid or tolerate parents with whom they have a poor relationship, or is exclusion sometimes the cause of the isolation of these parents? Without representation from this population, the question is an impossible one. Might such exclusion early in a parent’s experience actually be a factor in the child’s attrition from youth sport altogether? The dropout population was another unexplored frontier suggested by this research. If attrition is not solely a child’s decision – and research presented above suggests
that it is not – then what parent experiences contribute to their withdrawal of support or their active construction of barriers to their child’s continued participation in a sport? Social isolation may in fact play a part in such decisions on the part of parents. Thus, exclusion effects may end up creating a largely self-selecting population of parents who can, at the very least, tolerate one another’s presence enough to allow their child to continue in the sport. My lack of observation of active exclusion in no way convinces me that it does not exist. However, only scholars who are able to effectively access both Isolates and dropouts will be able to address this question with any authority. In terms of attrition, I believe further research should be conducted that explores the logical claim that I have made that parent satisfaction and positive experiences may lead to lower rates of attrition. From the body of existing research, this is a logical conclusion, but it does not have empirical backing (nor does empirical research refute the idea; such research simply does not seem to exist). This question may have different answers based on a number of factors, including the age and ability of the competitors, their own commitment to the sport, and the social factors I have already outlined.

If parent experiences have an effect on attrition levels, then researchers should begin to explore what methods of enhancement are most effective. This involves first finding youth sport programs that are already working to enhance the parent experience or are willing to allow such programs to be implemented. After that, any ideas would need to be evaluated for efficacy. It is left to innovative and creative minds to devise such schemes to improve parent experiences of youth sport, but they may include opportunities to socialize or to volunteer that would not take such commitment as running for the Board of Directors or even umpiring or managing teams. One such program existed in the local AYSO program where parents could sign up for “small jobs” that required only a couple of hours of commitment at a time. While I conducted no formal
evaluation of the program, parents did seem grateful for the opportunity to pitch in without making too large of a commitment.

Finally, social capital researchers should begin to rethink the idea of the sport spectator as a merely a passive consumer of someone else’s product. While this may be true of large-scale college and professional sport, the idea holds less and less water as one moves down the ladder to high school and youth sports. Many of the parents who sit in the bleachers under the Friday night lights are not only taking in the product of the hard work of the players, but also of their own time, effort, energy, and dedication to the product on the field. They have often created the banners, raised funds, nurtured their children’s passion for the sport, and supported the team in any number of ways. During this time, they create bonds with other parents who, they often believe have similar worldview to their own. The consumers of youth sport are not merely passive spectators; they are active producers whose support is crucial for the staging of the games themselves. The relationships created may be a byproduct of that participation and labor, but this changes the dynamics of how scholars view the consumption of sport. Further research must be undertaken to understand how these community institutions facilitate and constrain the creation of relationships among the behind-the-scenes producers that are perhaps only visible to the public in their role as consumers. And while the community created between spectators of sporting events may be imaginary (Anderson 1991) or short-lived and shallow (Ingham and McDonald 2003), it is likely that among the community of producers who also consume, the relationships and sense of community is real, as are the potential benefits of those relationships. If so, this is a valuable source of social capital that has yet to be fully captured and understood by scholars interested in sport and social capital.
CONCLUSION

It was a mistake for me to originally conceive of this project as an exploration of parental social relationships without taking into account the impact of the children who were on the playing field. I believed when I started out that I could ignore the players and concentrate solely on the parents. From a data-gathering perspective, this was correct. While it might have been fruitful to interview some of the players regarding their own relationships and experiences in the VCLL, it was unnecessary in the end to do so to appreciate the enormity of the significance of “the kids” at every turn in the league. I naively thought that what occurred in the stands during practices and games would be wholly separate from what was happening on the field. I could not have been more wrong. The lesson probably goes something like this: when in doubt, bet on a connection. I did not set out to create a project where the players were front and center, but that is the project with which I came out of the other side of my fieldwork. As I was advised in the beginning and at various parts thereafter: follow the story. It was this impulse that led me to the Board of Directors, and it was this impulse that led me to explore the disparity between supply and demand of the social benefits of relationships. It was perhaps the best advice I received during the entirety of this project.

I do not know what effects I may have had on any of the parents in the VCLL. I do not know if they pay more attention to the benefits they dole out and receive based on their participation in youth sports, and I do not know if they pay more attention to the parents who do not show up on a regular basis or if they make a greater effort to get to know the other parents on their children’s teams. But they have enhanced my own worldview a great deal. I believe beyond doubt that the vast majority of parents are involved in their child’s sporting endeavors for the “right” reasons. Excess and self-absorption are a part of the VCLL the same way that it is a part
of any voluntary organization. At the same time, the ideology of the league, the belief that the league exists on behalf of the kids is not empty rhetoric. The parents I met during my time in the league were committed not only to the ideal; they were its living embodiment. The amount of organization, work, energy, cooperation, and commitment to run a mid-sized league such as Valley City’s is truly immense. And each year, despite the grumbling, the complaints and the backbiting, the league continued due to the perseverance of its volunteers, those who do much of the work and receive little of the credit. Perhaps it is understandable that some of these underappreciated volunteers might appropriate the rhetoric of the league to their own ends and for their own aggrandizement. If so, then it is quite natural for others to oppose it on both principled and pragmatic grounds. While many people can toil away underappreciated and behind the scenes, far fewer can handle someone else claiming credit for work they have not done.

The work on youth sport and parent social capital, to the extent that it is a topic “with legs,” is merely beginning. This project represents the opening salvo into an area of research that I believe has implications in a variety of areas, including the sociology of sport, community studies, social capital studies, and the sociology of the family. Parents spend a great deal of time, energy, and resources in child-centered activities such as youth sport. It should not be considered a violation of the ethos of those leagues for those parents to derive some benefit from their participation. Such benefit is not at odds with the ethos of these leagues. It can, in fact, work hand in hand to enhance the benefit children see from their youth sport experience. Youth sports leagues would do well to treat less dogmatically the ideology of the league existing exclusively “for the kids” and acknowledge that not only can parents enjoy benefits from their participation,
but that they should, in fact do so. Parents, children, and communities stand to benefit by embracing this alteration of youth sport’s raison d’etre.

This is easier said than done, however. Too often, what I understood as social capital was understood as “politics” by parents. They were often predisposed to view the dark side of social capital as it exists in zero-sum situations. Within the league itself, this may be unavoidable. The idea that “It’s not what you know, but who you know,” does not exactly enjoy a great deal of popularity among parents, most often because they are observant enough to notice the harms of such situations as well as the benefits. They are less inclined to view social capital in terms of its positive-sum character when applied to situations where resources are less scarce, such as child care, emotional support, information sharing, and business contacts. This is likely a byproduct of the prevailing ideology of “for the kids,” which implicitly prohibits the extension of benefits to others operating within the league. It may be that expanding the horizons of parents to viewing their sporting relationships as existing outside of the league as well as within it, and to viewing social capital in its positive-sum as well as its zero-sum forms may soften their view of it. However, until the prevailing ideology expands to include volunteer and parent benefits to participation, it is likely that very little will change.
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