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Introduction: youth sport and social capital

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Youth sport is an increasingly pervasive feature of family life (Theokas 2009), with up to 41 million participants in the United States alone (Frankl 2007). Children’s participation entails some form of 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 the highest levels, such financial commitment can subsume a significant portion of a family’s annual income (Turman 2007). It would thus be short-sighted to think of youth sport participation as a simply youth-oriented phenomenon. Participation requires coordination at even the most local levels of participation (in tandem with 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 how such participation might affect parents outside of what would be implied by the temporal and financial requirements to their children’s participation. In other words, is it possible that parents could (and maybe even should) get something out of this mass participation in child-centred activities, of which youth sport is only one form?

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 originated in recollections of my own parents’ countless hours sitting on hard metal bleachers in the often unbearable North Texas climate. While I made several friends while playing youth baseball and soccer, my parents had their own social life off the field, and their experiences later informed the early conceptualization of 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 largely how I remembered and experienced my parents’ sporting relationships. For example, for years after I stopped playing on my 10-year old team – whose coach, I might add, was so adamant that his son play first base that he made me the only left-handed shortstop that anyone in the league could recall – I continued to have my hair cut (at a steep discount) at the home of one of my former teammates. Meanwhile, my father, on the rare occasion that he needed...
an auto mechanic, went to see the father of a teammate I had all the way back in Tee-ball some 30 years ago.

The story of parent relationships experienced through youth sport – Little League baseball, in this instance – deserves to be told, as it enlightens our understanding of participation, commitment, social capital building in a time when pundits mourn its modern-day decline (see especially Putnam 2000). While there is no reason that youth sport would be the only context in which this process occurred (certainly, there are parallels with any youth-centred 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 that the sporting event creates is a very powerful catalyst for the formation of in-group sentiments between participants and spectators (Sage 1978). During my fieldwork, I was told repeatedly that higher levels of competition led to higher levels of parent interaction and stronger relationship bonds. The Valley City Little League (VCLL) was widely considered as a middle-of-the-road league in terms of competition emphasis. Many parents whose children also played football (the American version) told me that the parent identification and relationship formation was much greater in that league, largely because it was the most competitive league in town. Within Little League, the All-Star season was far more competitive than the regular season, and parent interactions within that season also tended to be more prevalent and more intense, though not necessarily longer lasting.

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 seems to do, that spectatorship of youth (in his case, high school) sport consists of merely spectatorship (Putnam 2000). On the contrary, the bleachers of a Little League baseball or softball game are absolutely not filled with passive spectators, but active participants whose own commitment to the endeavour can even outpace their children’s. It would be counterproductive to ignore the social aspect of such participation, the relationships that inevitably grow out of such participation, and the benefits that are the natural by-product of relationship building. I sought out to capture a slice of that participation, those relationships, and those benefits in a town I call Valley City.1

Valley City is a rural/suburban town in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico, located within an hour of a mid-sized metropolitan area and with a population of approximately 15,000. Valley City is in the midst of a long-term transformation, as the older, rural areas have been joined in the past decade and a half by newer housing developments, predominantly on the western edges of the city. This has altered the economic and political structure of the area as well, with an influx of suburbanites paving the way for big-box retailers and fast-food chains to make their way into the area and for ‘outsiders’ to have a greater influence over local politics. From the freeway off-ramp, Valley City seems like nothing more (or less) than a typical South-western 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, and less uniform architecture in housing. Go a little further east and farmlands begin to dot the landscape, leading to a curious mix of newer housing developments, livestock pasture and crops. According to the 2010 Census, nearly 58% of the population of Valley City self-reported as Latino. While
the composition of the city has changed from rural to suburban, this percentage does not differ prominently from the percentage self-reporting Latino in 2000.

In the spring of 2010, I began my investigation by participating as a researcher and a volunteer with the 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 the players. I was particularly interested in how parents created, maintained and exchanged social capital benefits. I understand social capital as the resources embedded in social relationships that can be mobilized for some benefit (Small 2009). In this context, it 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 in conversations with parents). 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 emerged as parents and board members recounted their relationship, both positive and negative. That theme had to do with children, and children are central to the core ideas I want to convey in the following papers.

The central argument I want to advance in this volume is that not only are children significant social actors who affect their parents’ social capital, but I also want to highlight some surprising ways that children affect the social capital building process. These surprises form the foundation for three of the papers in this volume (Brown 2017b, 2017c, 2017d). As scholars interested in relationships, exchange and social networks build an increasingly sophisticated theory of social capital, understanding these effects is crucial. Parents spend, and are increasingly apt to spend a great deal of time and effort on their children’s activities and endeavours, many of which are child-centred (there is also evidence suggesting that parents are also incorporating children into their own leisure time). These child-centred activities, of which Little League is only one among many, rely on volunteer labour for their continued existence, and parental involvement in the VCLL is the life's blood of the league. Parents run every facet of the league, from the development of league policy to fund raising, coaching and officiating of games. Parental involvement, at a minimum, involves securing payment for the league (either through their own funds or through one of the scholarship programmes in the area) and ensuring that their child is able to make practices and games throughout the season. Most parents, however, involve themselves at much higher levels. Some highly involved parents even find themselves putting more time into the league than their children do. In laying out the arguments of this project within the papers of this volume – and the major assumption upon which it rests – I want to explore why youth activities are an important venue for parental relationship-building, how relationships grow and fade within seasons, and the role of children in the process.

Children's activities take up a significant part of a family’s discretionary time, and these activities can serve multiple purposes. An examination of time diaries by Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) suggested that participation in organized sports, for example, takes up between 5 and 6.5 h per week among children aged 6–12, making it one of the largest single sources of leisure time for children in that age group, though it lags significantly behind both unstructured play and television viewing. However, among leisure activities with a prominent social component, participation in organized sport ranks very high. Additionally, Hofferth and Sandberg’s work shows that 76% of children in that age range participate in
some form of organized sport. Though the actual time involved in such time use studies is small when compared to the overall number of discretionary hours in a week (about 50 in the above study), there is evidence to suggest that children’s activities play a substantial role in the way families plan and spend their time. Parents are mindful that ‘quality’ family time with children is imperative, and much of their leisure time as a whole is in service to their children’s needs (Daly 2001). Further, sports are not the only child-centred activities in which parents may be interested. Children also participate in after-school activities or hobby groups, and parents may participate as volunteers in child-centred activities such as church or PTA (Parent–Teacher Association) groups. There are any number of organizations in which children can participate, and concurrently a number of ways for parents to be involved in such groups, even if that involvement entails merely dropping off and picking up children from an activity. At the same time that scholars have noted a ‘time bind’ due to the increased demands of the workplace and the high rates of dual-earner households (Hochschild 1997), parents have also stepped up their children’s organized activity participation rates. Parents thus can find themselves both controlling and controlled by their children’s increasingly involved schedules, which result from continued encroachment on their children’s unstructured play by more and more organized, adult-sponsored activities (Thorpe and Daly 1999; Lareau 2000; Chudacoff 2007). These time diary studies suggest that parents may be investing increasing amounts of time with their children when compared to parents in the 1960s and before. Other research suggests three different reasons for this increased investment: the increasingly voluntary nature of parenthood, increased concern for children’s safety and the changing cultural context of parenthood (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). These changes result in the replacement of unstructured play with organized activities that are child-centred, but parent organized and supervised (Devereux 1976; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004).

With the increase in organized activities comes concern about a new form of time bind, one that concerns children as well as parents. Fears of ‘over-scheduling’ children have led some scholars to question the benefits of such activities for participants. These scholars argue that the benefits of high levels of participation suffer from diminishing returns for children who, either due to their own drive or that of their parents, try to have too much of a good thing. Specifically, fears of overscheduling include pressure from parents, increased time commitments and stress, and risk of developing behavioural problems. In reviewing the accumulated data, however, Mahoney, Harris, and Eccles (2006) found very little evidence to support the ‘over-scheduling hypothesis’, arguing instead that the larger concern for policy-makers and parents should not be the amount of participation by children, but instead the number of children who do not participate, as participation in organized activities is positively associated with a number of benefits to participants, academic and social alike. Specifically when talking about the benefits of sports participation, however, the authors did notice a levelling off of benefits after participation in two competitive team sports.

Parents do not sign their kids up for activities strictly as means to their manifest ends. That is, parents do not always (or even usually) enrol their children in soccer leagues just for them to develop as soccer players, nor do most children participate in art clubs to become the next Monet. Parents enrol children in these activities for a variety of reasons, including physical fitness, to keep them occupied (and out of trouble), concerns for safety, secondary child care, to build character and teach life lessons, to provide access to quality family time, or to give their children a place to socialize with other children in their age group with
similar interests, and youth sport organizations have been eager to embrace these aspects of their activities. Such goals will probably sound familiar to parents with children who participate in extracurricular activities. However, while scholars have spent a great deal of time interrogating these outcomes for children, they have paid scant attention to the potential ancillary benefits that children’s participation can have for their parents. In the context of concern about the time bind and having enough ‘quality’ time to spend as a family, I suggest that both policy-makers – particularly those who have spent time lamenting the great drain on social capital that has taken place since the 1970s – and scholars may want to pay greater attention to children’s activities for their role in facilitating social network and social capital building for parents and volunteers. Parents can and do use this time, ostensibly for their children, for multitasking, whereby they can find relaxation, leisure and sociability in the activity as well (Small 2009). For its part, social capital scholarship, where it has dealt with children, until recently emphasized the one-way flow of benefits from parents to children, in the form of time investment or social connections parents can leverage to the advantage of their offspring. However, sociologists have become increasingly attuned to the existence of a reciprocal flow of benefits that characterize the parent–child relationship, and the substantial potential for children to act as social capital brokers for their parents. The major assumption that the central argument in these papers rest on is that children are capable of, and do in this context, build social capital for their families. This is an emerging idea in the literature on children’s activities, but my own evidence strongly supports it as well. I will detail this in the following chapter. The central theme beyond this starting point, however, is that children’s activities have distinct and possibly unique effects on social capital building for the parents of participants.

**Children and social capital**

The sociological investigation of children and social capital is characterized largely by the flow of resources from parents and significant others to children (for a notable exception, see Small 2009); and the exploration of this version of resource flow predates the modern conception of social capital (e.g. Cochran and Brassard 1979). Of course, this conclusion is not without warrant. Children in the United States are rarely in a position to benefit their parents materially, particularly in modern economies. This has not always been the case, however; 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 labour market (Caldwell 1982; Handwerker 1986). Consequently, sociologists have spent the majority of their research efforts detailing the benefits that parental networks and time can and do have for children.

James Coleman’s (1988) work is seminal in this regard, for it offered the foundational document upon which much if not most work detailing family social capital rested. Coleman was interested in how parents invest time and resources to enhance education outcomes for their children (their human capital). Coleman’s contribution represented a crucial moment where social capital and children are concerned. He 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 merely set a precedent for this understanding of social capital between the generations or if he was simply the first to exploit a ‘natural fit’, sociologists largely
followed his lead for several years (for a useful review, see Dika and Singh 2002). A unifying thread of the work undertaken in Coleman’s wake is the mostly implicit but occasionally explicit notion that whatever social capital children possess is due exclusively to 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 own social lives.

The expansion of social capital as an area of inquiry touched on nearly every discipline and sub-field in the social sciences, particularly sociology. Naturally, sociologists of childhood and adolescence began to look at social capital in relation to children and youth. They found existing social capital scholarship lacking, particularly in the way it failed to account for children’s agency in their own social lives. While scholars have been investigating the social networks of children in various contexts (for an early review, see Belle 1989), ‘social capital’ did not enter the lexicon of childhood and adolescent researchers until the late 1990s. 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), for example, began her discussion of children and social capital by noting that social capital, as then characterized and applied (particularly Coleman’s conception) was ill-suited to provide an adequate understanding of the lived experience of children and adolescents. Of particular concern to Morrow was that scholars had ignored children as agentic social beings who had social lives and 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)

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 2006), neighbourhood ties (Leonard 2005; Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007; Hossain et al. 2007) and recreation opportunities (Morrow 2007). In these analyses, scholars explained that the social lives of children are important in their own right and not merely as a by-product of the adult social world. As children’s socialization progresses away from the family and to the peer group as children grow up and mature, it follows logically that their social networks 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 consists primarily of 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 from a position of passivity to one of agency and to a position that required scholars to examine their social lives concurrently to, if not independently from, that of their parents. The idea of children acting as social agents also implies the possibility that children could actually serve as benefactors.
to their family’s stock of social capital, and researchers generally acknowledged this point. However, while demographers were active in deriving the social capital benefits of children for their parents – especially in the ‘value of children’ approach or ‘wealth flows theory’ (see e.g. Hoffman and Hoffman 1973; Caldwell 1982; Handwerker 1986; Schoen et al. 1997), sociologists have only within the last decade began engaging the question seriously.

Sociologists first noted that, when children are born, their parents’ social networks 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 most new parents share the news of the birth with family members and most family members reciprocate with kind words, congratulations and visits to the new family member. Contact with other new parents may come from visits to the paediatrician or through new parenting groups. These contacts can have therapeutic benefits for new mothers, as those reporting more supportive social networks have reported lower levels of post-partum depression than mothers with less supportive networks. Such support often is a by-product of new parenting groups. A high percentage of parents taking part in the groups studied by Jann Fielden and Lou Gallagher (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 was augmented by social capital creation, which contributed to the overall success of the programme:

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)

Offer and Schneider (2007) were also 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 intergenerational 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. Weller and Bruegel (2009) took a similar path in their work, as they showed how children’s circulation through the neighbourhood can create a sense of community within the neighbourhood 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 capital, 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,’ (p. 631). Thus, not only are children in the neighbourhood seen as possessing valuable resources available for mobilization by others in the neighbourhood – as when a neighbourhood youth house or plant-sits for members of the community when they are away – but they can also be viewed as social brokers within the neighbourhood 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 … 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,’ (Weller and Bruegel 2009).
The connection between parents, children and social capital has evolved from Coleman’s original view, where children were viewed as simply beneficiaries. Clearly, children are neither mere 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 small-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.

Another recent study examining the link between children, contexts and social capital deserves an in-depth look. Mario Small in *Unanticipated Gains* (2009) argues that the context of an organization, more than the structure, is critical in understanding the ways in which ties form within institutions. As such, he notes 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). Like the day care centres that were the setting of Small’s research, youth sport is also an interesting context within which to investigate this argument, as it fulfills all of his criteria that facilitate relationship formation, and parents do form ties on the basis of this participation. My evidence 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 at least somewhat 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 at least potentially bypass the interactional process that leads to interpersonal trust. This is to say that the youth sport context facilitates both simple and generalized reciprocity. Certainly, parents trade favors when they 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 favours granted and resources traded will be repaid, even if not by the original beneficiary (generalized reciprocity). Small’s research is crucial to understanding and contextualizing this research, and I will come back to it from time to time where appropriate.

So, there is a growing amount of research suggesting that children, on top of living their own active social life and building their own relationships – within which are embedded resources they can access – may also be able to influence the social networks, social lives and social capital of their parents. I propose to extend these analyses in three significant ways, and these are the three major aims of the subsequent papers in this volume. First, this research is an extended exploration of the two-way flow of benefits and resources between children and parents *in situ*. Its emphasis, however, is not on establishing the link between children and social capital formation, but instead on *process, context and type*. That is, I explore how social capital is created among parents of Little League participants, how Little League as an organization and the physical sites of practice and games (colloquially referred to as ‘the fields’) influences the formation of relationships between parents (the *context*), and what *types* of resources parents exchange once they establish relationships with other parents. Social capital between parents does not exist as a binary, in that it does not exist as a ‘yes or no’ issue. The strength of relationships between parents should logically have some effect on the resources that each party might be willing to exchange with the other.
In Little League, where (as I learned) relationships are generally weak and ephemeral, I am interested in what specific resources are typically shared between parents who may not know each other very well and who may part ways for good once the two-month regular season is over. It seems unlikely, for example, that a parent would be able to ask for (or willing to offer) a $500 loan to another parent on a baseball team, particularly if they only marginally participate in team activities or if their child is a new player and they, consequently, likely do not know many other parents on the team. However, these same parents may be quite willing to part with other resources, such as a willing ear for problem sharing, a ride for a child to and from practice when a parent is working late, or information about a job opening in their company. Were their children to play on teams together for several years, they may develop such a relationship that could support money loaning between them (or some other commensurate resource such as a place to stay in an emergency). For the most part however, even for experienced players, parents in the VCLL do not tend to form strong and long-lasting bonds through these teams alone, and close friendships are somewhat rare.

Second, I argue in the following papers that, not only do children influence the relationships of their parents (and, by extension, their social capital), but also that the presence of children in the league and the league's focus on children as its sole beneficiaries influences how parents view social capital exchanges with other parents. To the extent that parents buy into the league's child-centred mission, they tend to view their relationships with other parents as well as their potential exchanges with them differently than they might otherwise. For one thing, there are situations where parents who bestow favours within the league see the children as beneficiaries rather than their parents, particularly when the favour involves some form of child care. When parents or coaches wait with a child whose own parents are late, or when parents offer to give a player rides to practices or games, they often seem the favour in terms of what they want to do for the child, rather than that child's parents, though the parents doubtlessly also benefit from such an act. Additionally, the child-centred mission of the league dismisses the idea that parents will invest in relationship building for their own benefit. Instead, any benefits that accrue between parents are simply by-products of their mutual participation. However, some parents are uncomfortable with their own ancillary benefit as even a mere by-product of their child's participation, and these views can inhibit social capital building, especially that which might be thought of as instrumental.

When exploring how child-centredness alters views of social capital building, I focus on a persistent site of neglect in social capital scholarship: motives. Motivation 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 a link to some of the extremely important antecedents to social capital theory, particularly help-seeking studies. 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 and sociological research help-seeking behaviour 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 (Mauss [1950] 1990). Receiving help places the beneficiary in an ambivalent position that may be fraught with implications for self-esteem and group standing. In fact, based on my time in the VCLL, the motives of
recipients in social capital exchanges are complex and, in some cases, even more problematic than those of potential benefactors. This, I argue, is down to the presence of children in the league and as part of many forms of exchange.

Finally, I examine another oft-neglected aspect of social relationships: negativity and its consequences. While the study of conflict in relationships is far older than the social sciences, social capital studies have been loath to account for negative relationships and the fallout for both the individuals involved as well as the contexts within which they exist. Again, in this process, children play a unique role in the production of and reaction to negative relationships. I argue that, because the league's mission is child-centred, and the adults who run it are desperate to be seen as embodiments of this mission, antagonists in a conflict between parents (board members, in this particular instance) will invoke the welfare of children (known colloquially as 'the kids') as a justification for whatever malevolent actions they may take against their adversaries. In such a situation, 'the kids' become a rhetorical device utilized in service of what I call negative social capital. The fallout from negative relationships has not always been referred to as negative social capital, and the term 'negative social capital' has not always been utilized as I will do so. However, I find it to be the most appropriate term for the process that I observed in the VCLL, particularly through the board of directors. I define negative social capital as the individual and organizational consequences of toxic relationships between antagonists.

With regards to negative social capital, I want to focus on three substantive 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 as a whole 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 a simple negative relationship morphs into negative social capital. 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 having enemies is not considered to be a prominent reason for leaving the job (hypothetically). Voluntary associations, especially those having little to do with material concerns, are thought of as much easier to exit and thus the persistence of negative relationships is more difficult to understand. Because of this, it is imperative to understand the motivations of parties involved in such relationships in failing to remove themselves from toxic relationships when the costs of doing so are low and the potential costs of maintaining them are so high. Finally, as with the rest of this work, I want to examine the distinct impact that children in the context have on negative social capital. I argue that the presence of children not only raises the stakes for participants to such an extent that exit becomes very difficult, but that they also become a manner to justify actions against enemies that might be very difficult to justify otherwise.

Most of the interactions I witnessed in the VCLL were friendly, and most parents on teams which I observed either got along well, or at worst avoided one another. I saw scenes of complex and intensive coordination and cooperation between parents, and many acts of kindness pass between parents and players, and between parents and other parents. Certainly there was conflict on any team. Sometimes parents were unhappy with their child's playing time or position. Other times parents on the same team simply had contrasting personalities. Of course, there was also conflict when teams came together to play one another. Teams built rivalries, and parents found plenty to complain about where umpires
were concerned. On the whole, however, life ‘on the ground’ was generally harmonious. The board of directors, however, was not so tranquil during my two seasons with the league. The board suffered from a great deal of infighting and jockeying for influence and position, as rival groups struggled to impose their own vision of a successful league. It was difficult for me, at first, to reconcile the divergent forms of relationships I witnessed during my first season with the league. It took a serendipitous moment where the two different streams laid themselves bare to me in close proximity for me to grasp how children could so easily and seamlessly bring parents together and simultaneously drive them apart.

**An afternoon in the VCLL**

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 or create. July and August usually bring the relief of the monsoon rains and slightly cooler temperatures. In 2010, during my time with the Mariners (an all-star team of 11–12-year old boys), 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 Nelson (the team’s manager) would cancel practice because of the weather, but with the district tournament rapidly approaching, it began as planned. The parents sat on the hard metal bleachers under the aluminium awning and made nervous jokes about the weather, but no one complained and no one suggested curtailing practice.

The mothers on the bleachers talked about the weather and about the upcoming tournament, but mostly they talked about hair. One of the boys on the team had dyed his hair to match both the colours of the league as well as the local high school, and other boys had spoken about following his lead. Another group of boys had attempted a to start a more audacious trend of mohawk haircuts among the team, but too many mothers intervened. Team mother Rita, a short, affable Latina in her early 40s was one of the mothers who was firmly against mohawks, but did not mind the hair colouring, telling me, ‘I can always dye it back before school starts’. As the lightning got closer, I began to notice increasingly 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 merely switched from aluminium to wooden bats to hit grounders and fly balls to the fielders.

Around this time, I saw Joshua, the newly elected President of the league, arrive at the fields. 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 that he was around for a managers meeting. I resolved to attend after practice was finished. Finally, after a particularly loud crack of thunder, Nelson (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. Rita took out her phone and called Maria (the other team parent), asking about her status. She hung up and told everyone that Maria was due to arrive in 20 min, 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 talking, chasing each other around and generally passing time. As I had missed the previous practice, I felt like I was missing out on something and I asked Rita what they were waiting on. Rita informed me that Maria was bringing dinner
for the team and parents. Since the team was practicing five nights a week until they were eliminated from tournament play, the parents got together and collectively decided that they would take turns feeding the team and the parents by providing dinner at the end of every practice. Maria was providing the evening meal, but was going to be ‘late’ on account of practice ending early. Twenty minutes later, Maria arrived with an enormous pot full of spaghetti, a mountain of 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. The storm passed as they were eating, but Nelson did not resume practice after dinner.

As the Mariners continued eating together, Joshua called the assembled All-Star managers together and headed upstairs to the VCLL conference room above the concession stand, and I followed them up. By this time, I had been observing the league for nearly four months and had recently been elected to the board of directors, so no one questioned my presence at these meetings anymore. Joshua’s then three-week tenure as president had been turbulent at best, as he fought what he believed to be the major concern of the VCLL: adults. Joshua was built like a teddy bear, and had a public image to match. He had a large, friendly personality and wanted desperately to be liked. He spoke to me often about his belief that adults were taking Little League from ‘the kids’, and using it to further their own agendas. 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 or 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 types of accusations during his time as president. This time, however, Joshua was addressing a lack of enthusiasm and participation from his All-Star coaches. The Opening Day ceremonies for the upcoming District 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 or outstanding financial issues. According to Joshua, these issues were indicative of (in his words) a lack of cohesion, respect for leadership, community, integrity and a poor public image. Joshua dismissed the various explanations of the All-Star coaches, lectured them on his vision for the league, and tersely dismissed them from the meeting about the same time the Mariners were beginning to disperse from their dinner together. The entire meeting took no more than 15 min.

In many ways, the story of the VCLL is one of contrasts. The overlapping, yet almost paradoxical scenes above illustrate disconnect between how the league ran ‘on the ground’ and how it ran ‘from on high’. 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, enmity nearly tore the entire edifice 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 one from the other. 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 popping
out at me. Over and over, I noted it 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 to endure. 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 members 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 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 reputations and well-being 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.

Research questions: evolution of a project

It would be both unenlightening and supremely uninteresting to simply to focus on the formal structure of the league. I could have written much of the above description after reading the Little League Operations Manual, but the formal structure fails to capture any sense of what the league felt like on a day-to-day basis. Missing 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. Significantly, it also ignores how antagonistic relations between Board members threatened the integrity of the league, its finances and perhaps its very existence. Margaret Mead (1933) was among the first to advise ethnographers to look beyond formal structures, ‘… the inexplicit, the unformulated, the uninstitutionalized, is as important to an understanding of the whole …’ (p. 15), and such advice was especially helpful in this study. In order to gain an appreciation of how the league functioned ‘on the ground’, I found four teams over two seasons whose coaches were willing to let me ‘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. Before each season, I selected age divisions to study, and presented my ideas and my research project to the coaches before the draft (in the older divisions) or during coaches’ pre-season meetings (in younger divisions). After presenting the project, I asked if any coaches were willing to let me follow their teams for the upcoming season. There was never a shortage of volunteers, and I chose teams based on a number of factors, including the managers’ enthusiasm, connection to the board and previous experience. After my first regular season, I chose two additional teams to follow. One I followed because it was an All-Star team and the other I followed because it had no connections to the board. Between the four teams, I feel I captured the flavour of the league.
from a variety of viewpoints, age divisions and composition (see Brown 2017a for a more detailed explanation of league structure, teams and parents featured in this volume).

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 (Schwandt 2007). 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 the methodological appendix in Foley 1990). 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 were not necessarily appropriate 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—both potential and realized—between them. When I began to take stock of the data that I had, certain themes emerged. 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 the remainder of the papers in this volume. In particular, these are the questions that guided my inquiry:

1. How does social capital manifest in the particular types 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 processes throughout the season facilitate or inhibit the creation and/or mobilization of these exchanges?
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?' These questions guide the remainder of the book, as I explore parental relationships that developed over the course of the 2010 and
2011 seasons of the VCLL. Though the focus of my fieldwork was a youth baseball league, I do not want to restrict my conclusions and summary statements to an exclusively baseball or softball environment. As parents in the VCLL were often involved in multiple youth sports leagues and contexts, I have occasionally drawn examples from their recollections of those other activities, as I do not feel that youth baseball represents an entirely unique experience in either youth sports in general or in child-centred leisure activities.

**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), Small (2009) 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 noted 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 VCLL. 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 Geertz (1972) so deftly appropriated for his observations of Balinese cockfights. In deep play, the stakes of the game become so high that even to engage in it is an irrational act. 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 accusations. 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. The remainder of the papers in this volume tackle these issues, and they represent the ‘results’ of the fieldwork I carried out in Valley City.

**Notes**

1. The names of all places and people named herein are pseudonymous.
2. Intergenerational closure, from Coleman's work, describes a situation where the parents of a pair of child friends also know each other.

3. Small (2009) has argued that the strength of relationship may not be as important as social capital scholars have made it out to be, particularly where the exchange is domain-specific.

4. In the VCLL, the head coach is called a manager (like on a Major League Baseball team) and all assistants are known as coaches. Throughout the text, I will use ‘coach’ and ‘assistant’ interchangeably, but I will refer to all head coaches as managers.

5. Though I do not address it extensively in these papers, I want to note for a minute the utility of electronic communication, specifically text messaging, for this project. The members of the VCLL, particularly the Board of Directors, texted each other extensively. This presented a written (though truncated) account of many of their interactions. It also allowed for private or ‘backstage’ style communication between board members during meetings. In such environments such as these, and where appropriate, I strongly encourage ethnographers to both use and attempt to gain access to these forms of communication with informants. In situations such as this one, it effectively though briefly allowed me to be in two places at once.

6. Little League has a hierarchical organization which begins at the local level. Leagues are not coterminous with city limits, however. A group of local leagues together form a District. Each year, the All-Star teams from the leagues in a district will compete to represent the district in the State tournament.

**Disclosure statement**

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**References**


