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Tacon, Richard (2019) Social capital and social ties in organisations: a case study of two voluntary sports clubs. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 39 (9/10), pp. 883-898. ISSN 0144-333X.

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**Social capital and social ties in organisations: A case study
of two voluntary sports clubs**

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy</i>
Manuscript ID	IJSSP-09-2019-0177.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Social Capital, Social ties, Social networks, Voluntary organizations, Sports clubs

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Introduction

Social capital remains the locus of fierce debate. On one side, advocates argue that high levels of social capital can lead to a variety of positive outcomes – for individuals, groups, communities and even nations (Putnam, 2000; Helliwell, 2007). On the other side, critics argue that social capital itself is not clearly conceptualised (Fine, 2010); that it ignores, or de-emphasises, issues of gender and class (Adkins, 2005); and that the research tradition around social capital focuses disproportionately on its consequences (Daly and Silver, 2008) and relies excessively on quantitative analysis of large-scale survey data (Field, 2008).

One way of contributing meaningfully to this debate is to focus on the ‘components’ of social capital and investigate them qualitatively. A number of recent studies have sought to do this, by focusing on people’s social ties and the resources they access through them (e.g., Ryan *et al.*, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014; Moroşanu, 2016). These studies have produced important findings, including specifying how certain types of ties offer access to certain types of resources and challenging distinctions between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Geys and Murdoch, 2008). However, there is one significant element that these studies have not focused on directly, namely the role of *organisations* in shaping these processes and outcomes.

It is the contention of this paper that if social capital is to be understood properly, researchers need to study its components explicitly within organisational contexts. This paper seeks to do just that, by taking one key component – people’s social ties – and empirically investigating

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3 them in particular organisational settings, namely voluntary sport clubs in the UK. In doing
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5 so, the paper addresses the following key questions: (i) How do organisations shape the
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7 specific *processes* through which people form social ties? (ii) How do organisations shape the
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9 specific *types* of ties people form? In addressing these questions, this paper challenges
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11 existing assumptions around social ties and social capital and demonstrates the value of an
12
13 *organisationally embedded* perspective.
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19 **Social capital: Concept and context**

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24 Social capital is a contested concept. While some prominent social capital scholars (e.g.,
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26 Putnam, 2000) tend to treat it as a form of civic culture and examine its supposed effects at
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28 regional and national level, others view it as access to resources through networks and
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30 examine it primarily at the level of individuals, or small groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman,
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32 1990; Lin, 2001). A great deal of ink has been spilt adjudicating between these various
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34 versions – much of it arranged into very informative accounts (Portes, 1998; Foley and
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36 Edwards, 1999; Field, 2008) – so there is no need to spill more here. However, there are
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38 certain issues that demand attention.
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44 First, despite its prominence, Putnam's (2000) version of social capital has a number of
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46 conceptual and empirical flaws. Three are particularly significant. First, in equating social
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48 capital with various attitudes and examining it quantitatively on a macro level, Putnam and
49
50 his followers tend to treat social capital as a kind of 'portable resource' (Foley and Edwards,
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52 1999: 149). This largely ignores the importance of *context*. As a number of authors have
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54 argued (e.g., Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 2000; Crossley, 2008; Nast and Blokland,
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56 2014; Julien, 2015), social capital functions for particular people in particular settings for
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3 particular periods and enables access to particular resources. The conclusion here is
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5 straightforward, but significant: ‘context counts...and counts crucially’ (Foley and Edwards,
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7 1999, p. 151). Second, Putnam’s conception of social capital – and, in fact, Coleman’s (1990)
8
9 earlier, functional conception – fail to distinguish between the resources accessed *through*
10
11 social capital and social capital *itself* (Portes, 1998; Daly and Silver, 2008; Field, 2008;
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13 Julien, 2015). This ‘logical circularity’ has led to tautological statements and has tended to
14
15 obscure the *sources* of social capital (Portes, 1998). Third, accounts such as Putnam’s (2000)
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17 and Lin’s (2001) are based on rational choice models, which tend to emphasise the deliberate
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19 actions of individuals and neglect the ways in which social structures shape the processes
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21 through which social capital develops (see, for discussion, Small, 2009a; Christoforou, 2011).
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28 This concise conceptual critique has a number of key implications. First, following Portes
29
30 and Landolt (2000, p. 532), this paper argues that social capital is most coherently
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32 conceptualised as ‘the ability to secure resources by virtue of membership in social networks
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34 or larger social structures’. Of the early social capital theorists, this is closest to Bourdieu’s
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36 position, as Portes (1998) explains in an earlier treatment. Conceptualising social capital in
37
38 this way implies that researchers need to investigate – and maintain analytical distinctions
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40 between – the components of social capital, namely individuals, their social ties and the
41
42 resources they (might) access through them. Second, following Portes (1998) and others (e.g.,
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44 Crossley, 2008), the paper argues that research needs a more fine-grained understanding of
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46 the sources of social capital, i.e. how it *develops*. This, in turn, implies that researchers need
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48 to investigate how people actually form the social ties that constitute the basis of their social
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50 capital.
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58 **Social ties: Processes and organisations**
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6 There is a rich literature on social ties that dates back at least as far as Durkheim (1951
7 [1897]) and encompasses studies by Simmel (1950), Granovetter (1973; 1983) and more
8 recent work on social network analysis (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Wasserman and Faust,
9 1994; Borgatti *et al.*, 2009). This work is concerned with issues such as the structure of social
10 networks, types of social ties and flows of resources. Yet, as Moody and Paxton (2009, p.
11 1491) note, there has historically been little overlap between this literature and the literature
12 on social capital, despite their ‘obvious topical affinity’. Recently, this has started to change.
13 Following the argument above – that research on social capital should focus on its
14 components – a number of authors have started to explore social ties explicitly within the
15 broader context of social capital (e.g., Ryan *et al.*, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Ryan and Mulholland,
16 2014; Moroşanu, 2016; Gayen *et al.*, 2019; Patulny *et al.*, 2019).

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33 This research has produced some important findings. First, it has started to specify how and
34 in what circumstances people access different types of resources through their different ties.
35 As just one example, Ryan *et al.* (2011) found that ‘horizontal’ ties among Polish migrants in
36 the UK generated practical support, whereas ‘vertical’ ties to professionals widened career
37 opportunities. Second, it has challenged the common distinction between ‘bonding’ and
38 bridging’, terms that broadly stand for ‘people like us’ and ‘people unlike us’ (Putnam,
39 2000). Ryan and Mulholland (2014, p. 163) found that this theoretical distinction did not hold
40 in practice and, drawing on their empirical findings and on those of earlier studies, argued
41 that, ‘rather than a simple dichotomy of bonding versus bridging, it may be more helpful to
42 think about a range of mixed and dynamic connections’.

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3 These are important insights. However, there is more that needs to be examined. First, while
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5 these studies usefully introduce a more dynamic view of social ties, research still requires
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7 more fine-grained analyses of the *processes* through which people actually form social ties.
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9 This is a perennial plea within social network analysis. More than 30 years ago, Granovetter
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11 (1983, p. 229) was calling for ‘a move away from static analyses’, yet just recently, Ryan
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13 (2016, p. 955) called for the same. Second, research needs to develop a better understanding
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15 of the different *types* of ties that people form. While this recent stream of research has argued
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17 that a range of ties exists, research now needs to develop a better understanding of what these
18
19 various ties are and how people themselves draw distinctions between them. Third, research
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21 needs to expand the range of *contexts* within which social ties are examined. The studies
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23 discussed above, while extremely valuable, have predominantly focused on migrant groups
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25 within the UK. Research also needs to understand how and why other (non-migrant) groups
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27 form ties in other contexts.
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35 Fourth, there needs to be a better understanding of the role of *organisations* in these various
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37 processes and outcomes. As Ryan and Mulholland (2014, p. 152) point out, ‘Building new
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39 relationships requires opportunities. These processes of network formation do not occur in a
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41 vacuum, but reside in specific social structures and locations.’ This observation is key; and a
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43 number of authors have made it. However, very few have directly examined, in depth, *how*
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45 specific organisations shape the processes through which people form social ties and the
46
47 types of ties people form. Crossley (2008) is one exception: he examined how private gyms
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49 in the UK facilitated the formation of social ties and social capital. Small (2009a) is another:
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51 he examined similar processes in childcare centres in New York. Recently, Nast and
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53 Blokland (2014) studied how parents formed ties and exchanged resources in a mixed school
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55 in Berlin.
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5 All concluded that an organisational perspective was crucial for an holistic understanding of
6 social capital. As Small (2009a, p. 177) put it, his study ‘suggests, above all, that what
7 researchers have called a person’s social capital depends substantially on the institutional
8 practices of the organizations in which the person routinely participates’. Yet all also argued
9 that their studies were early steps along an important road and that much more in-depth
10 research in different organisational contexts was needed. As Nast and Blokland (2014, p.
11 495) maintained, ‘We must think more carefully about the ways in which settings influence
12 interactions’. This paper seeks to do just this, through an in-depth study of voluntary sports
13 clubs.
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28 In this study, a social tie is defined simply as some form of connection or relationship
29 between people (c.f. Kadushin, 2012). The focus here is on face-to-face interaction and the
30 ways in which certain aspects of the clubs – e.g., the way the sporting and social activities are
31 organised – shape how people interact. In this sense, the study has a predominantly micro-
32 level focus. However, previous research (e.g., Frank, 2009) has shown that people experience
33 both positive and negative outcomes from membership of a collective: their more generalised
34 sense of belonging and/or the cultural capital attached to membership. While some evidence
35 of this emerged in people’s accounts, by concentrating on the types of social ties people
36 formed and the processes through which they formed them, the analysis remains primarily
37 micro-level. As the accounts show, though, these aspects are closely intertwined. So, in
38 stating that these social ties are organisationally embedded, the accounts show that people
39 both develop specific social relationships with other members and (co-)construct a sense of
40 membership of the clubs themselves.
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Voluntary sports clubs: A valuable context

Ever since Putnam (2000) used the image of a lone bowler to illustrate the supposed decline of social capital in the U.S., sport and social capital have been coupled in the academic and popular consciousness (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008). Yet empirical research on sport and social capital has produced a mixed picture. Researchers in the political science tradition, following Putnam, have found a statistically significant, positive 'effect' of voluntary sports club membership on various indicators of social capital (e.g., Seippel, 2006; Perks, 2007), but this effect is generally weak, certainly compared to the effects of education, age, gender and so on. However, as some of the authors themselves note (e.g., Seippel, 2006), such research often relies on questionable statistical indicators. Moreover, as discussed above, the conception of social capital drawn on in such 'Putnamian' research has been subject to thoroughgoing criticism.

It is important, therefore, not to dismiss the possibility that voluntary sport clubs and other voluntary associations can act as important sites for the formation of social ties and the development of social capital. Indeed, as Ryan and Mulholland (2014) recently found, while French migrants in London, in general, found it very difficult to form friendships with English people, those who did form such friendships through sporting clubs and leisure pursuits. Their study did not permit them to analyse how or why this was the case; but this is what this paper directly seeks to do.

Methods

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3 Comparative case study research illuminates social phenomena in their real-life contexts and
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5 can tease out the ways in which particular settings shape social processes (Small 2009b).
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8 Here, as in other recent studies (e.g., Nast and Blokland, 2014), the aim was not statistical
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10 generalisation, but *specification* of how social processes operated in particular contexts. As
11
12 such, case selection was driven by theoretical considerations (Small, 2009b). While previous
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14 research did not provide detailed information on which elements of voluntary sports clubs
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16 were most significant in shaping social capital processes, there were indications that
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18 formality, size, type of sport and diversity of membership might all play a role. As such, this
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20 study involved two clubs (a cricket club and a tennis club) that enabled contrast and
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22 comparison across these features.
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29 The cricket club, founded around 40 years ago, is a one-team club, based in southeast
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31 London, with 12-15 playing members, which does not own its own facilities. The season runs
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33 from May to September, with one match every Sunday and a three-day 'tour' at the end of the
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35 summer. It is a good example of a small, 'informal', team-sport club, whose members are
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37 diverse in age (16-60s) and socio-economic background (some working-class, some middle-
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39 class), although not in ethnicity (the vast majority are white). In gender terms, it is mixed: all
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41 playing members are men, although many wives and girlfriends are considered (and consider
42
43 themselves) established members. The tennis club, founded over 100 years ago and based in a
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45 prosperous part of north London, owns and manages extensive facilities. It has around 500
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47 members and employs a full-time club manager. It is a good example of a large, 'formal',
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49 individual-sport club, whose members are relatively homogeneous: most are wealthy, white,
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51 well-educated, middle- or upper-middle-class, middle-aged or retired.
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3 The participant observation involved what Adler and Adler (1998, p. 85) refer to as a
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5 ‘peripheral-member- researcher’ role, one in which the observer interacts ‘closely enough
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7 with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in those activities
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9 constituting the core of group membership’. In practice, this meant observing the focal
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11 (sporting) activity, without participating in it, while also chatting, drinking, eating and
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13 watching sport with members and observing as they did all these things. In total, observation
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15 comprised around 100 hours at each of the clubs over a 15-month period. Fieldnotes were
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17 made either during observation by hand (if feasible), or immediately afterwards. These were
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19 then written up electronically and saved in NVivo and analysed along with the interview
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21 transcripts (as discussed below).
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28 The study involved 23 semi-structured interviews – with members, organisers and the
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30 partners of certain members. Interviews lasted between 50 and 150 minutes and interviewees
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32 ranged in age from 16 to 84; with eight women and 15 men; and with members who had
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34 spent between one month and 38 years at their respective clubs (please see Table 1 for details
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36 of the interviewees).
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42 *[Insert Table 1 around here]*
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46 The interviews explored a range of subjects, including members’ general experiences, their
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48 motivations for joining and staying at the clubs, how and why they had formed ties, how they
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50 described and valued these ties and how they felt the clubs had shaped these various
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52 processes. As Ryan (2016) argues, it is often difficult to ‘capture’ people’s social ties, in
53
54 particular the ways in which they change over time. The research sought to do this as much as
55
56 possible by establishing rapport with members through personal presence in the clubs over
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3 time, through observing interactions and through informal chats and more formal interviews.

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5 The interviews, which this paper draws on, sought to engage members in detailed discussions
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7 about how they saw their relationships with fellow members, how they had developed over
8
9 time and how they compared them to their relationships with friends, family members and
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11 work colleagues. This ‘comparative questioning’ led interviewees to explain, more precisely,
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13 how they interacted with other members and allowed them to identify how the organisational
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15 context at the clubs, as compared with other contexts, shaped these interactions. While issues
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17 of gender, age, ethnicity and life-stage of course played a role in shaping interaction, the
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19 analysis that follows focuses primarily on how the *clubs* shaped tie formation, in order to
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21 explore the influence of organisational contexts.
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29 Analysis of interview transcripts and fieldnotes was largely based on the constant
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31 comparative method. As Lincoln and Guba (1985: 339-344) discuss, the process of constant
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33 comparison involves assigning ‘units’ of data to various categories (often multiple), changing
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35 the content and definition of different categories and seeking relationships between these
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37 categories. In this sense, analysis was primarily a form of qualitative content analysis
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39 (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), where interviewees’ accounts are treated as descriptions of *their*
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41 realities.
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47 Analytically, the focus was on the processes involved and how these were shaped by context,
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49 as described by the interviewees. However, there is often no simple distinction between
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51 process and context. As Sayer (2000) explains, context is really just the relation of certain
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53 processes (or social mechanisms) with other processes. Typically, it is dependent on how the
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55 research subjects themselves view it: what constitutes process (how things unfolded over
56
57 time) against the backdrop of what appears as context. When it came to the central
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phenomenon of the study – social ties – these were analysed in line with the research subjects' conceptualisations. So, as the accounts demonstrate below, while some of the research subjects identified social ties that resembled pre-existing definitions of 'strong' or 'weak' ties, others identified forms of social relations that did not fit these standard categories.

Findings

How did the clubs shape how people formed ties?

It was impossible to spend long at the tennis club without the issue of 'fours' cropping up. A 'four' was shorthand for a group of four people coming together to play a doubles match and, for the majority, this was their most frequent form of participation. As Leslie¹, an established member, explained: 'I play on Monday with a group and then we might play Thursday... 'Cos there's lots of fours. If you go there today, you'll see there are lots of regular fours going on all day.' But how did these groups actually emerge? George, a member and club organiser, described it as follows: 'You know, they find people, maybe, of their similar standard and they say to them, you know, "You want to knock sometime?" So that's the way it works, I think, and then gradually you develop a group of people, you know, who you play with.'

At the cricket club, Ben, like the vast majority of members, had joined the club through an existing member (in this case, Tom). In his interview, he discussed how this influenced his initial interactions:

So, the process went – went along to the first few sessions, following Tom basically, going to Tom's house and saying, 'Right, let's go to the nets together.' Um, 'cos you still don't really know people,

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3 'cos the odd people do or don't turn up and so it's all a bit, it's still a bit nerve-racking. You chat to
4 people a bit about what they do and, um, and then I played the first few games in the first season.
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9 The process of forming ties, Ben said, was rooted in participation and social interaction:

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11 'Yeah, so it's just playing and getting to know the people and then meeting the people and the
12 family and then Jill [Ben's wife] would come along and that helped as well, 'cos you were
13 meeting the families...and you bring your kids along and they talk to other people and it's
14 just a slow process.' These brief sketches highlight the obvious fact that people formed social
15 ties at the clubs through interacting regularly over time. However, they also start to reveal
16 how the opportunities for interaction and the nature of interaction were shaped, in large part,
17 *by* certain aspects of the clubs. So, how did this work in detail?
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30 At the most basic level, the clubs provided a space for interaction. As George at the tennis
31 club said, 'One aspect of being a member of the club is that often people just sit down and
32 *talk* after matches and things like that...there's a whole process of social interaction which
33 wouldn't take place if you weren't a member.' This is an obvious point – as Blau and
34 Schwartz (1997) point out, the fact that people need contact opportunities to form ties is
35 virtually self-evident – but it is important, because it highlights the fundamental way in which
36 an organisation based around a focal activity can facilitate tie formation (Feld, 1981).
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48 Indeed, George's discussion of tie formation at the tennis club identified this:
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53 Often people start by coming down, they join in this club period, which is this period we have at
54 weekends, between 2 and 5 on Saturday and Sunday, where everyone just joins in...So, it's a really
55 good way of people who haven't, who don't know anyone, maybe new even to London, they join a
56 tennis club, you can come down and they start playing with different people and they're then mixed
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3 in...Also, if you're at a certain level, people start playing in the teams and so you get to know people
4 there and there's group coaching sessions that people run and so people go along to that and you start
5 to get to know people, so they sort of mix in there and you develop your own circle of people that you
6 play with.
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13 Club activities – 'club period', club teams, coaching – structured the opportunities people had
14 for interacting and forming ties. Likewise, at the cricket club, the pre-season 'nets', which
15 Ben discussed, and the weekly matches provided regular interaction opportunities.
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22 Yet members' accounts showed that just participating in a shared activity did not necessarily
23 lead to the formation of social ties. For example, Ben compared his experience at the cricket
24 club with his experience at a golf club:
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31 I tell you what's different about it...I play with my father-in-law [at the golf club] and it's quite an
32 individual sport. I think I'm quite introverted when I'm not at work... 'cos I spend a lot of energy at
33 work, and I'm quite happy just to not make any effort. I imagine if I made the effort, I'd get to know
34 lots of people...But I don't make the effort. And I didn't really make the effort at [the cricket club], but
35 it just happened. 'Cos you go along and it's a group of eleven people. And it's the *same* eleven people
36 you spend eight hours with – and you're all relying on each other. In golf, you can not talk to your
37 playing partner an entire round, he'd think you're a bit rude, or you can say ten words to him and he'll
38 think you're a bit rude, but not hugely rude. But at [the cricket club], you're forced together and you
39 have to throw the ball to each other, you have to help each other just by playing.
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51 This reflection on 'effort' is important. It does not suggest that people do not form ties
52 through golf clubs (indeed, one of Bourdieu's (1984) few indicators of social capital in
53 *Distinction* was membership of golf clubs). Instead, it points to a more subtle interplay of
54 structure and agency. It recognises the actions of individuals – whether Ben 'made the effort'
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3 – but it shows that the organisational context of the cricket club, by bringing the same people
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5 together week after week, year after year, and the nature of the activity (interactive team
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7 sport) fostered the development of social ties. It also shows how this is often perceived by
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9 those involved. As Ben said, ‘I didn’t really make the effort at [the cricket club], but it just
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11 happened’. It is precisely what members experienced as ‘just happening’ that research needs
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13 to focus on and illuminate.
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19 At the tennis club, members also discussed how the nature of the sport affected interaction.
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21 For example, Neville explained the importance of matching ability: ‘It’s quite important in
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23 *tennis*, ‘cos if you get somebody of a different standard, er, either the ball whizzes past you
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25 [laughs], and you don’t get a game, or when you hit the ball to somebody else it doesn’t come
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27 back.’ This could affect the ease with which people formed ties. For example, as Michael
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29 said,
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35 If you spoke to some people, I think, who weren’t as good at tennis, they’d find it very difficult to
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37 break through into established relationships. Because people don’t want to play with them. So, it’s
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39 always a Catch-22 situation in tennis clubs...if you come in as a beginner, the, the work you have to do
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41 is much, much more...You know, the process is tougher because you have, you know, you have to go
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43 through a lot of rejections...because people won’t invite you to join their four, because they can see
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45 you’re not good enough.
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49 This focus on actual sporting ability is important, because it shows again that tie formation is
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51 not an automatic process, even in sports clubs organised around shared interests. But it is also
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53 important, because it goes some way to explaining why tennis clubs organised activity in the
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55 way that they did. For example, the ‘club period’ sessions that George described above were
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57 able to take on much of the initial ‘burden’ of matching members with one another. This
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3 shows how particular ‘organisational routines’ (Feldman, 2000) are able to facilitate the
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5 formation of social ties.
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10 Yet, even this kind of seemingly standard routine varied between clubs offering the same
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12 sport. As Neville said:
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17 Um...I’ve been at quite a small London club with three courts...And they had a *very* good system.
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19 People turned up and they were put on a board with moveable pegs. So, the, the fours rotated on a very
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21 fair basis. So, if, er – what it meant was that everybody played with everybody and there were never
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23 any grumbles about standard.
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27 This may seem like overly microscopic examination, but the point is a wider one, namely that
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29 it is very often the subtle variation in organisational routines that explains whether people
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31 form social ties and the types of ties they form. Indeed, Small (2009a) found something
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33 similar in his study: two ostensibly identical childcare centres in New York, one of which
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35 appeared to facilitate close ties between mothers and one of which did not. When he
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37 investigated more closely, he found that the most significant factor was that the first had very
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39 limited drop-off and pick-up times, whereas the second was much more lax. This meant that,
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41 in the first, mothers were much more likely to encounter each other regularly and thus struck
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43 up conversations, made connections and developed closer social relationships over time.
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50 Variation was also evident among cricket clubs. Indeed, Duncan, in comparing his experience
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52 at the cricket club with that at another club, highlighted the way that size and structure could
53
54 influence the nature of interaction:
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3 I used to play for [another club] on a Saturday. Um, and that was, that was very different...because it's
4 a *big* club, it's so structured, and you have kind of like...selection meetings and all of that kind of stuff
5
6 and it's... maybe the thing about [the cricket club] that's different is the informality of everything. Um,
7
8 I think at [the cricket club], everyone feels at the centre of things, you know, everyone, um, kind of
9
10 feels that they have a like a role to play in building the club to some extent.
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15 Nearly every member at the cricket club mentioned this feeling of being 'at the centre of
16
17 things' and explained how it underpinned their formation of social ties. Yet, as we go on to
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19 examine now, it not only explained whether they formed ties, but also what *types* of ties they
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21 formed.
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26
27 *What types of ties did people form?*
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31 The classic distinction in the academic literature on social ties, at least since Granovetter
32
33 (1973), is that between 'strong' and 'weak' ties. Strong ties are usually conceived of as tight
34
35 bonds, characterised by the sharing of intimate feelings and strong emotional support, among
36
37 people that cluster together and interact in multiple social contexts, whereas weak ties are
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39 conceived of as loose bonds that offer less emotional support, but may offer more
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41 information, because they act as bridges to other networks of unknown people.
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47 At the clubs, a majority of members formed strong ties. For example, Neville, a member of
48
49 the tennis club for more than 30 years, described the 'close friendships' he had formed: 'I
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51 mean, say like Marion, she joined round about the same time as me and I know her really
52
53 well. I, I've been on holiday with her on numerous occasions. So, there are a few people like
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55 that who I know really well and, you know, would expect to see in my house from time to
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57 time.' At the cricket club, Pete and Sarah also told me they had formed close friendships:
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5 Pete: For us, there was a real compatibility with, with the Taylors in particular.
6

7 Sarah: Yeah, we hit it off with them straight away, to be honest...
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9 Pete: And that's about values and it's about shared kind of perspectives on, on broader things than just
10 cricket. Obviously, it's about life and politics and things like that.
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15 Members also formed weak ties. For example, Leslie at the tennis club said she had made 'a
16 few very, *very* good friends. And an awful lot of people I'm on nodding acquaintance with.'
17 She said of the latter, 'I know lots of little bits about their lives'. This latter category
18 corresponded to the classic conception of weak ties: loose acquaintanceships, characterised
19 by a lack of emotional intensity, based solely in one social context (in this case, the club), that
20 often serve as sources of information. For example, elsewhere in her interview, Leslie
21 described the tennis club as 'quite a full reference system'. In detailing this, she explained
22 how 'you might say something to someone and they say, 'Well, you really need to speak to
23 *this* guy'''.
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38 So, members formed both strong and weak ties, as standard network theory might predict.
39 Yet a large number of members at the cricket club also formed *other* types of ties – ties that
40 were, in some ways, both strong *and* weak. They were weak, in that interaction was almost
41 exclusively limited to one context: the club. But they were strong, in that they were intimate
42 and often family-like, involving the sharing of personal details and characterised by mutual
43 support. For example, Sarah explained that she had formed a friendship with Darren at the
44 cricket club:
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56 I've always got a soft spot for Darren, for example. And Darren and I, certainly on *tour*... we used to
57 have a lot of heart-to-hearts out on the boundary, you know, at midnight, be sat on the bench and I'd be
58
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3 doing my social worker counselling thing, older sister, whatever troubles he was going through with –
4
5 ‘Oh, Sar,’ this and – so, I’ve always got a soft spot for Darren.
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9 This seemed like a strong tie, yet she never saw Darren outside the cricket club. For her,
10
11 Darren fell into the category of members she was ‘always happy to see’ but ones she did not
12
13 ‘keep in touch between tours or anything’.
14
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17
18 Glen described his ties with the majority of cricket club members in a similar way: ‘You’re
19
20 not, you wouldn’t say you’re friends with them and they’re not close family or anything, but
21
22 there’s some sort of connection that’s fairly permanent and, you know, it’s nice.’ These were
23
24 not strong ties; Glen was clear on this. However, in describing the nature of his interactions,
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26 he said, ‘you become so familiar with everyone, like *deeply* familiar’. He thought hard about
27
28 how to characterise these sorts of social ties and eventually suggested they were ‘like your
29
30 wife’s cousins’ who had ‘sort of become your cousins’. Small (2009a, p. 92) found
31
32 something similar in his study of childcare centres in New York and labelled them
33
34 ‘compartmental intimates’ – relations ‘characterized by openness, trust and the revelation of
35
36 privacy, but only within confined domains’. At the tennis club, this was much less common.
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38 In describing the nature of their relationships, members tended to discuss either ‘classic’
39
40 strong ties, or ‘classic’ weak ties. Below, the paper explores why this might be the case.
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48 Before that, there is one final aspect members discussed, namely how they *valued* the ties
49
50 they formed at the clubs. Here, a number of members discussed how they derived significant
51
52 emotional benefits from their weak ties. Indeed, it was often precisely the fact that such ties
53
54 *were* weak that gave rise to such benefits. As Henry at the tennis club said, ‘I didn’t take my
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56 home here and I didn’t take any of these guys to my home...in fact, that was, was really the
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3 greatest *thing*, is actually to get away from the house...it is just a breath of fresh air that you
4
5 need now and then’.

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10 *How did the clubs shape the types of ties members formed?*

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14 ‘Family club, isn’t it?’ said Kate at the cricket club, ‘It’s a big family club.’ Every member of
15 the cricket club said something similar and, in a basic way, this characterised the ‘culture’ of
16 the club. Of course, ‘culture’ is a complex and contested concept (Fine, 2003) and detailed
17 analysis of the culture(s) of the clubs would require ethnographic accounts beyond the scope
18 of this paper. Nevertheless, the research showed that: there were basic, shared constructions
19 of culture at the clubs; these constructions differed between the clubs; and, in turn, they
20 appeared to explain certain differences in the types of ties that members formed.

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33 At the cricket club, the ‘club-as-family’ culture underpinned all interaction. For example, as
34 Ben said (quoted earlier), ‘you bring your kids along and they talk to other people’. Likewise,
35 Pete and Sarah said:

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42 Pete: I think what *really* sparked it off for me was the sort of, the family aspect of it...

43
44 Sarah: Yep.

45
46 Pete: Yeah. You had Keith and his daughter who was three years old. You had others who were
47 bringing their kids. You had Dennis who had a couple of kids, who were very young. Um, we at the
48 time were trying to start a family and were very interested in that kind of side of things.

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54 As discussed, a number of members formed strong ties at the cricket club through their
55 involvement. But, arguably more unusual, the majority of members also formed

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3 'compartmentally intimate' ties; and members' comments repeatedly linked this to the
4
5 prevailing 'family' ethos.
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10 But how did this 'club-as-family' culture manifest itself and actually shape tie formation?

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12 Most members explained it with reference to the annual 'tour' – the three-day weekend at the
13
14 end of each season. For example, Duncan said:

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19 You know, for all our talk about playing like league cricket and blah-de-blah-de-blah, I think the most
20
21 important thing in the whole year is that weekend [i.e. the tour]. Because that's the thing that I guess
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23 the club kind of perceives itself as, you know, it's like this kind of family scenario where everyone's
24
25 kind of involved, everyone's pitching in and stuff like that and I think that's the one opportunity, the
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27 one time in the year when it actually becomes like a real thing. Um, and, yeah, I think again, and for
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29 that reason, like you're kind of, the real acceptance comes through participating in that and everything
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31 that goes with that, rather than the kind of week-to-week...

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35 Ben's account provided strong support for this: the 'tipping point' when he felt his
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37 relationships with other members moved to a more intimate level was the second annual tour
38
39 he attended with his wife and their children.
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45 We stayed with the kids on the outfield with everyone else and...we basically got absolutely wasted
46
47 every night and somehow the kids survived and, er, we had a great time. And we won tourist of the
48
49 year award [laughs], which is normally a cricketing award, um, for being the best cricketer on tour. It
50
51 wasn't, it was basically for Jill and I being the best tourists, for getting absolutely hammered. I think
52
53 that was when, when we, or I, thought I was part and parcel of the team.
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56 The culture of the tennis club, by contrast, was somewhere between a commercial leisure
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58 enterprise and a traditional members' club. The club was 'professionally' run, with excellent
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3 facilities, but members also typically described it as ‘friendly’. Most significantly, members
4
5 referred to the club as a sort of ‘sanctuary’, or ‘refuge’. This ‘club-as-sanctuary’ culture also
6
7 facilitated the formation of social ties, but in a somewhat different way than at the cricket
8
9 club. Those members who played in club teams and/or regular ‘fours’ often formed strong
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11 ties, as they interacted frequently and over long periods. However, the ‘club-as-sanctuary’
12
13 culture also created a space for members to form a large number of weak, significantly *low*
14
15 *commitment*, ties. As Henry put it, during our interview, ‘Conversation starts here straight
16
17 away...And so, there is no shyness about saying hello. Um, and that is, that is what is
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19 pleasant. It’s easy going. Um, you are not committed, they’re not committed, you just, I don’t
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21 know [laughs], behave like human beings.’
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28 These notions around a lack of commitment, or, at least, the absence of a *feeling* of
29
30 commitment, were prevalent. As Roland said, in comparing the nature of his interaction at the
31
32 tennis club with his interaction at other voluntary associations:
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37 The organisations I’ve been involved with in a voluntary way, outside of tennis, outside this, have been
38
39 very specific objectives, things to pursue, um, structures, er, agendas. So, I think of them
40
41 predominantly as being the world of committee meetings and, um, tasks to be performed. A bit like
42
43 work, in a sense. Whereas the tennis club, um, I see as completely me deciding what I like doing, what
44
45 I don’t like doing...This seems like pure and utter, er, indulgence [laughs].
46
47
48

49 This contrasted with the cricket club, where, as we saw earlier, members typically felt at ‘the
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51 centre of things’ and, as Duncan said, felt like they have ‘a role to play in building the club to
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53 some extent’.
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3 Although this contrast was apparent when comparing between the clubs, in a wider sense, this
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5 notion of obligations should not be taken too far within a voluntary leisure context with low
6
7 'exit costs' (Fine, 2003). Indeed, as Daisy at the cricket club said, it was in some senses the
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9 lack of obligation that differentiated the club context from other interaction contexts, such as
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11 work and friends:
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17 I think that sense of belonging to something that isn't stressful, but also has a *purpose* is quite unique.
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19 Like you can have like a social group of *friends*, which is great and you spend lots of time and you
20
21 organise to go and see them and that's relaxing time 'cos it's not work. But it's something different
22
23 about a group that meets for a reason that's not about you socially, 'cos it almost takes away, 'cos even
24
25 in your social setting there's hierarchies, there's obligations, things that you have to do, 'Ooh, have I
26
27 not called someone? Have I not seen someone enough this week?' Or something like that. But there's
28
29 no obligation here...
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33 This re-emphasises the way the organisational context can create a space in which people can
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35 form compartmentally intimate ties. As Daisy explained, by taking on the 'obligation' of
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37 organising interaction, the club removed this potential tension from the interaction among
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39 members.
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44 Glen, like Daisy, identified the relative lack of hierarchy and explained how the 'club-as-
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46 family' culture fostered this and thus underpinned the way he and others valued their weak
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48 ties.
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53 Glen: No-one wants that particular position...you know, no-one wants to bat high, no-one wants to be
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55 captain, to be friends with this bloke, not with that bloke...there's no argument, no tetchiness or
56
57 whatever, which is quite unusual...
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59 Me: What, the non-hierarchical aspect of it?
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3 Glen: Yeah, non-hierarchical and it's really *completely* non-hierarchical. Entirely, you know, which is
4 really – you just don't get at work, or even with your mates you don't get it actually, 'cos even with
5 your mates there's always a thing, you know...
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11 While not everyone experienced this complete absence of hierarchy, many, like Glen, Daisy
12 and Henry at the tennis club, explained the emotional benefits they derived from their weak
13 ties by contrasting them with the 'strains' of close friends and family. This contradicts some
14 of the assumptions implicit in traditional understandings of social ties, something the paper
15 turns to now, as it discusses the broader implications of these findings.
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25 Discussion

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29 These empirical findings have a number of important implications for the study of social ties
30 and social capital. First, most simply, the fact that the clubs shaped tie formation in
31 meaningful ways demonstrates the significance of an organisationally embedded perspective.
32 While recent research (e.g., Ryan and Mulholland, 2014) has noted the potential role of
33 organisations, this paper adds to the relatively limited number of studies (Crossley, 2008;
34 Small, 2009a; Nast and Blokland, 2014) that directly analyse *how* organisations shape the
35 processes and outcomes of tie formation. In addition, by directly comparing across
36 organisational contexts, this study has also been able to identify, more precisely, some of the
37 ways in which organisational routines and culture shape interaction.
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52 Second, these findings challenge theoretical accounts of social capital that argue – implicitly
53 or explicitly – that it emerges from deliberate investments on the part of rational actors. Lin
54 (2001), for example, who rooted his analysis in rational choice theory, argued that people
55 make connections because of the gains they anticipate. Bourdieu (1986, p. 249), too,
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3 maintained that social networks result from ‘investment strategies, individual or collective’,
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5 although there is some debate about how ‘instrumental’ he considered such actions to be
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7 (Small, 2009a; Nast and Blokland, 2014). This has followed through into the more specific
8
9 work on social ties, with Ryan et al. (2008, p. 677), among others, focusing primarily on
10
11 people’s ‘networking strategies’. Of course, the findings here do not deny the importance of
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13 individuals’ actions. However, they should encourage researchers to rebalance their
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15 perspective and focus much more closely on the *organisational* practices that structure
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17 individuals’ opportunities for interaction and shape their content.
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24 Third, concerning *types* of ties, this research builds on recent studies (e.g., Ryan, 2011; Ryan
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26 and Mulholland, 2014) that have challenged the supposedly clear distinctions between
27
28 ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties and ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital. Those studies rightly
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30 concluded that research ought to consider ‘a range of mixed and dynamic connections’ (Ryan
31
32 and Mulholland 2014, p. 163), but this study goes further in identifying some of these other
33
34 types of ties and explaining how and why they emerge. In particular, it identifies how, in
35
36 certain organisations, people can form ‘compartmentally intimate ties’: relations
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38 characterised by intimacy, but in which activities and interaction are limited to a single
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40 setting.
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47 Fourth, the study found that many members appeared to value their weak ties for the
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49 *emotional* support they provided, something theoretically unexpected. Indeed, while there are
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51 debates about the advantages and disadvantages of certain types of ties for accessing certain
52
53 resources (Moroşanu, 2016), to date, the typical assumption remains that strong ties provide
54
55 emotional support, whereas weak ties provide information from diverse sources. Indeed, this
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57 is incorporated in the common bonding/bridging distinction, in that bonding (through strong
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3 ties) has been seen as 'getting by' and bridging (through weak ties) as 'getting ahead'
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5 (Putnam, 2000). The finding here, which challenges that assumption, points again to the
6
7 importance of an organisationally embedded perspective on social ties and social capital: it
8
9 was the fact that such weak ties were embedded within a particular organisational setting that
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11 explained their emotional value.
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17 Together, such findings demonstrate the importance of 'surfacing' and, where necessary,
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19 challenging implicit 'hierarchies of ties', which prevail in much of the literature. This relates
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21 to what Lofland (1995, p. 192) identified as 'the critique...of the "primacy" of the primary'.
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23 Interestingly, this critique, when it has been made, has to date largely taken the form of
24
25 'positive' claims about weaker ties, such as Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties'
26
27 argument. Yet here, members often identified the significant emotional benefits they derived
28
29 from their weak ties by contrasting them with certain harmful, or burdensome, aspects of
30
31 strong ties, such as close friends and family. There was not enough space to fully develop this
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33 particular discussion, but in its initial insights, this paper offers a less-common 'negative'
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35 slant on the 'critique of the primacy of the primary'.
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43 In addition, while members themselves scarcely discussed social class, it is very likely that
44
45 class background played a role in how and why people joined and subsequently experienced
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47 the clubs in the ways that they did. As Bourdieu (1978, p. 835) argued, more than 40 years
48
49 ago, 'class habitus defines the meaning conferred on sporting activity, the profits expected
50
51 from it; and not the least of these profits is the social value accruing from the pursuit of
52
53 certain sports by virtue of the distinctive rarity they derive from their class distribution'. In
54
55 England, tennis has historically been a middle- or upper-middle-class sport (Lake, 2014),
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57 while cricket has slightly more mixed class associations – often middle- and upper-middle-
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3 class, but also with more working-class participants, certainly in comparison to tennis (Holt,
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5 1990). As discussed below, this paper did not focus directly on social class, but an alternative
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7 (class-based) reading of this data may well be feasible.
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12 Finally, and most significantly, these findings open up more fundamental questions about the
13
14 way researchers typically conceptualise social ties (and thus also social capital). For example,
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16 Granovetter's (1973, p. 1361) original formulation, upon which many subsequent analyses
17
18 have drawn, stated:
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24 The strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity,
25
26 the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. Each of these is
27
28 somewhat independent of the other, though the set is obviously highly intracorrelated.
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32 These caveats – 'probably linear' and 'somewhat independent' – are crucial, but often
33
34 ignored. Indeed, by collapsing several dimensions – length and regularity of interaction,
35
36 emotional intensity, resource flows and so on – into one dimension, i.e. strength, typical
37
38 definitions tend to obscure the way in which these dimensions may 'coalesce' differently into
39
40 different types of ties (such as 'compartmental intimates'). The immediate implication of this
41
42 is that, in examining social ties, research ought to recognise and maintain clearer analytical
43
44 distinctions between these various dimensions.
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51 The recent studies on migrant networks, discussed above, acknowledge this; yet, further
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53 theoretical refinement is necessary. The main conclusion from that group of studies is that
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55 researchers need to move away from a rigid dichotomy of bonding and bridging and think
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57 instead of 'a continuum of relationships that are spatially and temporally dynamic' (Ryan and
58
59 Mulholland 2014, p. 149). This paper strongly supports this move towards a more spatially
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3 and temporally dynamic way of thinking. However, the notion of a continuum, stressed in
4
5 both Ryan (2011) and Ryan and Mulholland (2014), is potentially problematic. In the most
6
7 extensive treatment of this continuum, Ryan and Mulholland (2014, p. 164) explain how their
8
9 empirical findings ‘showed how migrants access and maintain a plethora of social ties
10
11 ranging from a strictly business relationship, to workplace friends, local friendships with club
12
13 mates, parenting groups and extended and spatially dispersed kinship ties’. This suggests that
14
15 such ties are still being conceptually arranged along a single (privileged) dimension, which,
16
17 while remaining implicit, appears to be a notion of ‘closeness’, or ‘intimacy’. This runs the
18
19 risk of what Julien (2015, p. 361) identifies as ‘normative statements [being] unreflectively
20
21 read into analyses that should remain ethically neutral’. In this sense, it seems more
22
23 theoretically sound to avoid the notion of a continuum and instead emphasise the simpler
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25 notion, which they advance elsewhere, of various ‘mixed and dynamic connections’ (Ryan
26
27 and Mulholland 2014, p. 163).
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35 **Limitations and future research**

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40 This study, like any other, had certain limitations. First, and most obviously, the empirical
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42 research was conducted in two specific organisations. While this approach was deliberate, in
43
44 order to examine as closely as possible how specific aspects of organisations can shape
45
46 processes in particular contexts for particular individuals and groups, it nevertheless makes
47
48 any attempt at generalisation (in the neo-positivist sense) inappropriate. The aim here was to
49
50 provide thick description, primarily in the form of interviewee accounts, to enable the kind of
51
52 transferability that Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue is the most appropriate form of
53
54 generalisation in research of this type. Second, there was a lack of focus here on certain
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56 dimensions – in particular, gender, class and power. Several authors (e.g., Lowndes, 2000;
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1
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3 Fine, 2010) have argued that these dimensions are under-theorised in many social capital
4
5 accounts. While these aspects did not emerge strongly in the accounts of the research subjects
6
7 and the focus here was the organisations themselves, it is nevertheless likely that more
8
9 analytical attention to such issues would have revealed how they shaped people's experiences
10
11 and the ties they formed. Third, as noted earlier, this study focused mainly on micro-level
12
13 face-to-face interaction and the way people accounted for this. Yet, as Foley and Edwards
14
15 (1999, p. 148) argue, 'the value of social capital at any given level depends on the larger
16
17 context, including the insertion of the individual or group in question into networks of
18
19 relations at higher levels'. A more meso- and macro-level analysis would have enabled more
20
21 discussion of the cultural context – e.g., how such organisations are generally regarded in UK
22
23 society and so how membership might function symbolically for members.
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31 A discussion of limitations naturally heralds a discussion of possible future research. First,
32
33 and most simply, future research could examine more and different types of organisation.
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35 This study looked at two voluntary sports clubs in the UK, but experiences will of course
36
37 vary even between clubs in the same sport, as well as between sports, between sports and
38
39 other activities, between regions, between countries and so on. The key here is to identify as
40
41 carefully as possible the fundamental processes, or social mechanisms, through which people
42
43 form and maintain social ties, while trying to identify which aspects of organisational life are
44
45 most important in shaping these processes. Second, while this study examined the different
46
47 main types of social ties that people themselves identified, future research could usefully
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49 specify these even further. Ryan (2016) demonstrates how such research might work, with
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51 the use of innovative sociograms to capture how people themselves see their social relations.
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54 Finally, future research could usefully involve long-term observation in particular
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3 organisations over several years, in order to understand how these processes of tie formation
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5 unfold over time.
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10 **Conclusion**

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14 This paper has advanced an organisationally embedded, processual view of social capital,
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16 which argues that social capital should be understood as a set of processes in which people
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18 interact, form ties and exchange resources with one another in particular organisational
19
20 settings. Moving forward, research should both zoom in and zoom out. It should continue to
21
22 deepen understanding of how these processes work in different organisational settings and
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24 critically reflect on how, over time, these processes intertwine to affect the outcomes of
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26 individuals, groups and wider society.
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33 **Notes**

- 34
35 1. All names used here are pseudonyms.
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Table 1. Interviewee details

	Club	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
1	Cricket	Ben	Male	Early 40s	White British
2		Bob	Male	Late 50s	White British
3		Duncan	Male	Early 30s	White British
4		Glen	Male	Mid-20s	White British
5		Olly	Male	Late 30s	White British
6		Daisy	Female	Late 20s	White British
7		Fran	Female	Early 30s	Indian
8		Karen	Female	Late 30s	White British
9		Kate	Female	Mid-50s	White British
10		Pete	Male	Late 30s	White British
11		Sarah	Female	Late 30s	White British
12		Rob	Male	Mid-20s	White British
13		Roger	Male	Late 50s	White British
14		Tom	Male	Mid-40s	White British
15	Tennis	Claire	Female	Late 30s	Chinese
16		George	Male	Mid-50s	White British
17		Henry	Male	Early 80s	White British
18		Leslie	Female	Mid-40s	White British
19		Mary	Female	Mid-50s	White British
20		Michael	Male	Late 40s	White British
21		Neville	Male	Mid-60s	White British
22		Patrick	Male	Mid-50s	White British
23		Roland	Male	Late 50s	White British