

SURVIVING A FOOTBALL CLUB CRISIS: FOCUS GROUPS TALKING

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Abstract

Outside of an earlier set of research questions, it was amateur football club focus group data which revealed previously unidentified research questions of key interest to participants: how do amateur sports organisations weather a crisis for survival? What are the roles of leadership which empower rebuilding, rather than complete disintegration of an amateur club? Focus group and interview data was combined in the analysis to answer these two questions, supported by the Theory of Practice (Bourdieu). Five case studies clearly identified the roles of habitus and the uses, or transformative capacity, of different forms of capital (in particular, social capital) during crisis management. Two different leadership models were apparent in this Bourdieusian analysis of these amateur clubs which survived such a crisis. The sports field may be seen as solely an arena where there is competition for the ball, but it is also a bounded space of symbolic actions, building culturally identifiable commonalities for participants, and a deep commitment to the specific sport. This study offers a fresh appreciation of the role of leadership and the transformative capacity of different categories of capital in amateur sports club. Such findings may well be transferable to other entities in the not-for-profit and charities sector.

“I’ve been made a life member and I’m relatively young to be made a life member, so yes, but you feel tied to it and you want to do it because it’s what you want to do, and you’re not going to go anywhere. But life would be a hell of a lot easier for us, not just inside of football, but out of football, if some of these things that we’ve all been complaining about for some time now could be sorted. So...just thanks for the opportunity to come along and vent really”.

1. Introduction

Community-based (grass-roots) amateur sports clubs are essential sites of social capital; places where people of various ages and abilities participate in sport and physical activity, but also develop cohesive communities (Misener and Doherty, 2013). Many factors may undermine these grass-roots sports clubs’ ongoing sustainability; some serious enough to threaten their survival and their ability to achieve their goals. Prior research focuses on financial resources, or the lack thereof, including the development of statistical models to predict and explain financial vulnerability (Tuckman and Chang, 1991; Hager, 2001; Trussel, 2002; Cordery *et al*, 2013; Tevel *et al*, 2015). Financial resources, human resources, relationships and networks, infrastructure and processes, all affect the capacity of nonprofit organisations to achieve their goals (Cordery *et al*, 2013; Misener and Doherty, 2013; Wicker and Breuer, 2011).

This study offers a complementary perspective on the risks of clubs’ demise, derived from qualitative analysis of focus groups and interviews with those involved at grass-roots level in sports club administration and organisation. As reminded by Llewellyn (2007), “[i]n terms of capturing inter-subjective cultural understandings, particularly during change when these understandings are shifting and, hence, not uniformly reflected in personal subjective views, the focus group may well be the most productive research strategy” (2007, p. 66). Principally from the focus group data, this paper analyses five case studies of sports clubs’ crises for survival, drawing on Bourdieusian concepts for analysis of narratives. Too often, analysis of nonprofit failures dwell on economic capital, or ‘the bad apple in the barrel’ (Tuckman and Chang, 1991; Hager, 2001; Trussel, 2002; Gibelman and Gelman, 2004;), but we argue that there are benefits for researchers in giving equivalent weight to social, cultural and symbolic capital in amateur sports clubs’ survival of crises. The clubs in these case studies do survive following a period of instability and the threat of dissolution, or exit from the field.

From these phoenix-type clubs, what learnings can be gained from their narratives of survival? This data reveals cases where either an individual or a leadership group were committed to the long term survival of their own club, and recognised the need to provide leadership over the time of crisis. In analysing these survival narratives using the Bourdieusian concepts of field, capital and habitus, a turnaround point was pinpointed, the point at which the ‘failing fortunes’ of each club began to reverse. Kitchin and Howe (2013, p. 123) are an example of researchers who have called for more sports management research using “a dynamic, relational approach to the implementation of his [Bourdieu’s] practice theory”. It is the intention of this research to respond to this call and Bourdieu’s theory, including habitus, is explained in Section 2.

Furthermore, it was only the focus group data which revealed these five case studies, illustrating many commonalities. The research questions addressed in this study are: how do amateur sports organisations weather a crisis for survival? What are the roles of leadership which empower rebuilding, rather than complete disintegration of an amateur club? Thus this research also responds to the challenge from Warren and Parker (2009) that there are many limitations if we use ‘prejudged questions’ such as the risk of evoking respondents’ answers only to questions which may not be close to their own heartfelt issues, especially those most formative in their day-to-day experiences and challenges

To answer these two research questions requires us to unbundle/identify the roles of habitus and the uses, or transformative capacity, of different forms of capital (in particular social capital) during crisis management. Deep analysis of focus group transcripts permitted us to do so. As reminded by Qu and Dumay (2011), whatever category of interview method, all qualitative researchers require skills in the art of questioning and interpreting the answers, whether in a focus group or a one-on-one in-depth interview. Thus, this research contributes not only to an understanding of crises and survival, but also adds to the qualitative research literature on diverse experiences of the function and utility of focus group data.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section introduces Bourdieu’s theory and literature applying the Theory of Practice in sport research. In Section three we discuss how the focus groups were established, and methodological issues specific to focus groups. The analysis of five cases follows: these offer voices to those who recalled and reflected on a crisis, its causes and outcomes. Evidence is then presented for two different ‘survival models’ (a ‘Team’ model compared with ‘Inspired Leadership’), apparent from the clubs that survived a crisis. The study ends with a discussion of these findings, and the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

The sports field may be seen as solely an arena where there is competition for the ball, but it is also a bounded space of symbolic actions, building culturally identifiable commonalities for participants, and a deep commitment to the specific sport. Pierre Bourdieu's love of rugby led him to offer a fresh insight towards understanding the outcomes from changes in what he termed habitus, capital and field, and his Theory of Practice was a valuable theoretical foundation for this analysis. Bourdieu (1984) combined three concepts into a Theory of Practice of human behavior. The concepts (defined below) were expressed as follows:

$$[(\text{Habitus}) (\text{Capital})] + \text{Field} = \text{Practice} \text{ (Bourdieu, 1984)}$$

His theory ties to Llewellyn's description of the structural world: "the realm that governs human interaction. This is the world of habit, tradition, rules, roles and institutions" (2007, p. 57). The use of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice has been the primary theoretical foundation for research into many different aspects of business practices and behaviours, too numerous to list in this studyⁱ.

In the sports sphere, Cooper and Johnston (2012) applied it to understand motivations in the 'field' of professional football, when Malcolm Glazer instigated the takeover of Manchester United Football Club, and subjugated fan interests. Cooper and Joyce (2013) further applied such theories to insolvency practices in football clubs. Kitchin and Howe offer two other UK studies: Kitchin and Howe (2014) is specific to disability cricket, and Kitchin and Howe (2013) is a useful review of how Bourdieu's Theory of Practice may inform sport management research.

A Bourdieusian framework was further used in the analysis of amateur sports clubs by Zevenbergen, Edwards and Skinner (2002), in a study of junior golf clubs in Australia. The rituals of prize giving, playing a round of golf, golf lessons etc. experienced by junior players showed they "were exposed to a golf habitus that promoted and valued often contradictory discourses and practices" (Zevenbergen *et al*, 2002, p. 13). It required 'extensive effort' from these players to assimilate into this culture. This culture:

...allowed the club to preserve and reproduce the existing relationships of power [and] young players who resisted the culture of the golf club quietly found themselves marginalised and excluded. (Zevenbergen *et al*, 2002, p. 13)

However, that study was of a strong well-functioning single club, and did not look beyond club rituals and initiation to analyse crises for survival, as undertaken in this research.

In a study of the drivers to anti-drug regulation in Australian sport, and using Bourdieu's concepts, Stewart, Adair, and Smith (2011) show that Australian sport's drug-use regulations are driven by a set of values and dispositions that views sport as “an instrument for shaping the character of its participants, and drugs as a threat to sport's moral fabric and good standing” (p. 237). Dominant stakeholders comprised the Commonwealth Government, its sport agencies, and the major governing bodies for sport. This group imposed a set of beliefs and values through designing a ‘drugs-in-sport’ social field, yielding increasing capital (power) only to those participants who endorsed such values and dispositions. Less salient stakeholder groups, such as players, agents, and drug-treatment professionals, appeared to hold a different set of values and dispositions, and were denied any opportunity of strengthening their already limited resources or capital.

2.1 Applying Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Before addressing the research questions, an explanation of Bourdieu's (1986) categories of habitus, capital and field in the amateur sport context is offered (and is summarized in Table 1). Pierre Bourdieu played rugby as a young man in France, and saw in the rugby field an analogy for the life struggles of both human societies and individuals; that although death of the individual was not at stake, human societies and individuals were competing to retain or build capital (Thomson, 2012). “The social field consisted of positions occupied by social agents (people or institutions) and what happens on/in the field is consequently boundaried” (Thomson, 2012, p. 68). Limitations to what can be achieved are also shaped by field conditions.

Insert Table 1: Four types of Bourdieusian capital around here

A prime boundary for amateur clubs is the amount of economic capital to resource the club with physical assets (shoes, gear, training facilities). There is also the *esprit de corps*, the social capital in the club, or camaraderie; social capital is most often described as ‘family, religious and cultural heritage’. In the realm of professional football teams, Cooper and Johnston noted: “football also plays a key role in family life in much of Europe by linking the shared experience of family members across generations and creating a lasting sense of belonging and tradition” (2012, p. 615).

Cultural capital includes the knowledge about the rules, and training to apply tactical rules - more generally, forms of knowledge and football lore. As also reminded by Cooper and Johnston, in their discussion of professional football teams in the UK; The

“key feature of the field is the importance of cultural capital (skill). While fans may argue the merits of certain players, there is no doubt that players and managers with high cultural capital and a ‘feel for the game’ make a difference to the results of the team” (Cooper and Johnston, 2012, p. 612).

Symbolic capital of the team could be in their status, or any resources which can be ‘exchanged’ for the other three types of capital, as will be further discussed. In a team, club, or in any other organisation or society, resilience is closely related to the accumulation of both financial and non-financial capital (reputation, clan strength, symbolic power and control). What may have been symbolically valued in the team Bourdieu himself played for is not available to us.

In addition to Bourdieu’s (1990) four types of capital, he also saw there was another momentum at work, which he termed *Habitus*. *Habitus* is each individual’s disposition, the ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1994) such as predispositions, tendencies, inclinations, perceptions, values and appreciation structured by each person's past and present circumstances, but this is not confined to social background. We are not pre-programmed automatons (Thomson, 2012), although our dispositions obey certain regularities. *Habitus* is sometimes called “the material conditions of existence”; childhood experiences and family up-bringing undoubtedly create *habitus* but are not the sole influences (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56).

The concept of *habitus* arose out of the question ‘How can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?’ (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 65). It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledge that might be said to ‘go without saying’ for a specific group (Bourdieu, 1990). *Habitus* is constructed and reconstructed through upbringing, education and position in the fields which we inhabit (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1994). In the field of professional football, the extreme emotions of fans of those teams can be understood through Bourdieu’s idea of an embodied *habitus*: “those outside of the field can totally fail to understand the physical reactions of fans to winning and the frequently heated debates over all aspects of the game” (Cooper and Joyce, 2013, p. 118).

Therefore, Bourdieu (1994) argues that habitus is part of a regulated disposition which leads to regularity of different forms of practice. This is relevant to amateur sport where players seek to compete in local, regional and sometimes national competitions. Such players reflect well on their club and the ‘happy band of brothers’, but also the very act of registering in such competitions brings expectations that they will follow regularized practices. Taylor and Garratt (2010) provide an example of the national ‘push’ to regularize coaching activity in various different sports in the UK and the reactions of coaches to a push to change habitus through training, accreditation and payment. This was at odds to the individual and group consensus.

In the study by Zevenbergen *et al* (2002) they described three applications of habitus in a golf club setting:

First, there is the primary habitus with which young players will enter the golf club context. This has been influenced by the familial circumstances within which players have spent their early years. It will be influential in the ease, or difficulty, with which players assimilate into the golf context. Second, there is the golf club habitus. Often referred to as the ‘agenda’ whereby young players are expected to display certain desirable behaviours if they are to be constructed as good club members. Third, there is the golf habitus, which also valorises certain behaviours and ways of thinking. To be constructed as good club members, young players need to display those aspects of the golf habitus valorised within the context of the golf club (Zevenbergen *et al*, 2002, p. 4).

Thus habitus produces individual and collective practices. As Bourdieu made clear, habitus is heavily dependent on history and human memory. When a club survives a near-collapse, narratives of this episode in the club’s history remain in its oral tradition and members enjoy the re-telling and interrogation of causes and solutions, in much the same way as Cooper and Joyce (2013) noted fans enjoy recounting specific games.

The third category in Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice is that of Field. As noted above, the field is “the site of a struggle of interests, between agents or institutions unequally endowed in specific capital (as specific resources or specific weapons for the conquest) ... [and] presupposes a consensus on what is at stake in the struggle” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 111).

Amateur football clubs are not alone in a constant struggle for funding and members (Cordery *et al*, 2013), and this struggle takes place in such fields, contesting for the retention

or distribution of different forms of capital. “At bottom, the value of a species of capital...hinges on the existence of a game, of a field in which this competency can be employed ...both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p. 98).

These three attributes: habitus, capital and field, together provided an explanation of human behaviour, a Theory of Practice, in these clubs. Those which can rapidly adjust a dysfunctioning habitus (perhaps due to the dynamic rate of change in their field of operations) may accumulate more capital to replace that which has been lost. A disturbance, such as a financial or membership crisis, and then the resolution of the crisis provides a new equilibrium, consistent with Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, as further illustrated by these case studies.

3. Method

3.1 Data and Method for these Focus Groups

The data for this research was collected as part of a larger project into the financial vulnerability of golf and football clubs in New Zealand. In conjunction with Sport New Zealand and the relevant National Sports Organisations (New Zealand Golf and New Zealand Football), we selected three regions of interest, and as part of this larger project, an on-line survey was sent to 98 football clubs, of whom 48 (48.9%) fully completed the survey. This particular study considers only football data as now described. Three football regions were selected due to their coverage of large numbers of clubs and members, urban and rural issues, as well as clubs of all sizes. In the selected regions we interviewed representatives of the major Territorial Local Authorities, Regional Sports Trustsⁱⁱ, and Regional Sport Organisations’ officers. As well, we interviewed New Zealand Football staff. This was very similar to the approach taken by Nilsson and Ohman (2012), who used the combination of a questionnaire study and a focus group interview session. The focus groups included club managers or presidents of local football clubs, with six to nine attendees at each group (in one geographically-dispersed region, two focus groups were undertaken in different locations). These clubs ranged from the smallest clubs without their own clubrooms or changing rooms (using City Council grounds, for juniors only), to the largest clubs with 1700+ members, also using grounds owned by their City Council but with good changing rooms, and clubrooms. These interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with both researchers

coding the data individually and further discussing and agreeing findings relative to the key research questions.

The ethics processes followed for this project were approved by the authors' affiliated University. Care was taken to ensure participant anonymity in publications. The sponsoring funder was supplied with four reports on the larger study, in language accessible to a wide range of stakeholders of the funding body. This larger research project focused on financial vulnerability and resilience, and also included analysis of financial accounts, surveys of clubs and feedback. Other papers and reports have presented the findings [reference omitted to maintain anonymity for reviewers] which suggest financial weakness due to over-spending, but also non-financial issues relating to financial vulnerability, such as issues with recruitment and retention of volunteers. In football clubs, a lack of planning which affected facilities' availability, also were evident in clubs that were identified as financially vulnerable. In this particular paper we analyse football clubs' narratives of surviving despite these weaknesses, to show how amateur sports organisations harness habitus and capital to weather a crisis, and critical aspects of leadership which empowers rebuilding.

The data is from football focus groups and interviews with regional and national CEOs, wherein we were searching for narratives of crisis. Earlier analysis of twenty interviews with those involved with sports at both a local and national level also informed our analysis. In all, from twelve specific narratives identified of crisis within clubs and Regional Sport Organisations, the five strongest evidential cases (and description) were selected for this study. Such 'voices from the clubhouse' provide an important balance to existing research in exploring the human dimensions of leadership and vision at the grass-roots. The narratives of positive outcomes are focused on, in order to develop an understanding of successful management of crisis at the grass-roots level.

3.2 Focus groups - a source of inspiration for the careful listener

As with the exemplar offered in the Mansell *et al* study (2004), focus groups were used to explore existing survey results. And yet these focus groups added a dimension of understanding of issues outside those which the survey questions had intended to probe, and insights of other potential research questions emerged. This confirms the view that in a focus group, the interactions between participants are more important than the interaction between the interviewer and interviewees (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Furthermore, focus groups are acknowledged to offer a unique opportunity to allow different agendas to emerge (Llewellyn,

2007), often differing from the preconceptions of key issues provided in initial discussions in the scoping of such a project by the sponsors.

Careful consideration of focus group participants and their interrelationships is necessary. Blackburn and Stokes (2000) suggested that one of the strengths of focus groups is they allow members of a similar group/level to interact, compared with interviews which may unavoidably represent an imbalance of power. Seating participants around a table, or in a circle was noted afterwards as an advantage for the new CEO of the regional body in one centre, as he ‘came to learn’, and certainly did so, through such a different non-hierarchical setting.

3.3. Control over attendance

The importance of keeping control over who attended the groups was emphasised by Mansell *et al* (2004). In their “What we learnt” section:

Perhaps the most important is the importance of keeping control of the selection of groups. There needs to be clear criteria as to why individuals are included. ... While no one was coerced to take part and the opportunity to withdraw was offered at the start of the interview, it would appear that some participants were less than comfortable to participate, and had been told to attend by managers”. (Mansell *et al* 2004, p. 86).

Similarly in this research, the local CEO of each sports organization invited participants that he deemed suitable. The researchers had outlined the types of participants desired and the purpose of the focus group when one CEO reviewed a list in front of him and indicated... “not him, he is just a whinger”; or “Yes to him, he would really learn from this”. This suggests the expectation of catalytic validation (i.e. the person attending the focus group will change their own behaviour in future from the evidence presented and discussed). In addition, the large geographical distance between clubs and a central meeting point may have deterred inviting some participants.

3.4. Size

Although much literature suggests that focus groups should consist of eight to 12 members, this appears to be a large number. Morgan (1998) suggests that a group of six to ten participants affords the opportunity for a rounded discussion; and with possible non-attendance, researchers should over recruit (notwithstanding the risk that all the potential participants will arrive – Mansell *et al*, 2004), although Nilsson and Ohman (2012) were

satisfied with five members. We did not control numbers, and eventually numbers ranged from three to nine of mainly male, but around a quarter were female, participants. However, even in the group which had only three participants there was considerable value to both us and the participants in the interactions. A perceived trust and openness between participants may be enhanced in a smaller group.

3.5 What's in it for them?

Mansell *et al* (2004) state that focus groups are one-sided, with the participants merely sharing experiences and the researcher being the one that gains. Nevertheless, in this research, the focus groups offered participants the chance to interact and surface issues and experiences which were of tangential interest to the researchers. These participants shared a common bond - in this case the promotion of amateur football clubs and players - that they were very keen to air their deepest concerns. They were also keen to know how many in the group had shared their experience, benefitting from hearing the communalities in their day-to-day concerns. This issue of how survivors survive emerged as a key issue of interest to the participants. While the research had been predicated on the opposite (financial vulnerability), with further synthesis and re-reading of transcripts, the importance of survival sharpened. Had the focus group participants been interviewed individually, it is unlikely that the range of experiences which were of the deepest concern to them would have emerged. Two examples are safety at grounds, and succession issues.

Morgan and Spanish (1984) note that the strength of focus groups is their ability to gain access to the attitudes and experiences of the participants. Further, they describe focus groups as a strong compromise; although they do not allow for individual probing (as in an interview), nor for in-depth naturalistic observation of interaction. Hence, in this study, the research was enhanced by direct contact with the points of view of the participants; or as Calder (1977, p. 360) puts it, “experiencing their experiences”, as offered in the analysis as follows.

4 Analysis and findings

The findings are presented here as five cameo descriptions. Each of these five scenarios are cases of crisis which yielded an identifiable ‘turnaround point’ when actions taken to move the club away from crisis reversed the ‘failing fortunes’ of the club. These cameos focus on the processes of rebuilding to gain future resilience. This data reveals cases where either an individual or a leadership group were committed to the long term survival of their own club,

and recognized the need to provide leadership. As shown in the analysis below, the first three cases (Tables 2 – 4) are all characteristic of a ‘team’ leadership model for survival. Tables 5 and 6 are indicative of ‘Inspired leadership’ (a singular charismatic character).

Insert Tables 2 -6: about here

5 Discussion

From these phoenix-type clubs, what learnings can be gained from their narratives of survival? First, the turnaround point occurred as the financial impacts of events created an urgent need to respond to imminent failure. Respondents experienced this as a ‘kick in the arse’. One interviewee noted: “I mean, our debt, it was over fifty thousand dollars. And for an amateur bunch of people, yes, it was a kick in the arse”. Blunt, and yet meaningful to the participants, and a sharp illustration of the extent to which the realities for these people may be differentiated from those of the researchers (Llewellyn, 2007).

Loss and depletion of the different forms of capital is a dynamic process within the clubs analysed above, due in part because theirs is an inherently social field (Thomson, 2012). As can be seen from these narratives, losses of capital triggered a downward spiral, wherein these phoenix-like clubs responded to reverse the spiral. Nevertheless, different kinds of capital may be needed to transform the organization and enable it to survive constraints they face. This may have positive or negative effects as members have the opportunity to: “work to change the exchange rate between various species of capital, through strategies aimed at discrediting the form of capital upon which the force of their opponents rests... and to valorize the species of capital they preferentially possess” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 99)

While prior literature developed models to forecast economic loss (for example, Cordery *et al*, 2013; Hager, 2002; Trussel, 2002; Tuckman and Chang, 1991), it is clear that it was not only economic capital loss that was instrumental in club decline. In the scenario in Table 4, the theft of funds and in scenarios in Tables 5 and 6, the decline of funds and lack of will by the treasurer to continue, triggered ‘alarm bells’ and clubs responded by attempting to put their finances in order. Nevertheless, the scenario in Table 2 shows poor management of a team that ‘was charging away on its own’ and this is also reflected in Table 6 (the ‘*annus horribilis*’) where the President had treated the premier league team as part of his personal ‘fiefdom’ in order to select the most favoured (‘best’) players for his northern league team.

Further, this team benefited from a rather unique source of economic capital as the President reputedly funded much of it himself.

In these examples, declining social capital was more likely to be noticed only after economic decline. Hence, they share similarities to the scenario in Table 3 where social capital was lost as members had been taking more from the club than they were willing to put in. These narratives provide evidence of clubs transferring, or interchanging different forms of capital, to execute a successful turnaround and survive.

It is also clear in this analysis that when the clubs are fast-losing economic capital, this may be replaced through fundraising (the raffling event in Table 2 for example), members' loans (Tables 4 and 6) and through utilizing volunteers instead of paid staff (Table 2). All such efforts in these grass-roots amateur clubs reflect a dynamic within collectively-owned social capital, which opens up new avenues for clubs to re-build economic capital. As sports clubs compete for members from other activities and demands on people's lives (Cordery *et al*, 2013), it is argued that this important social capital is more difficult to replace. Despite the presence of different capitals, the most valuable capitals appear to be those which are not transmutable to, or interchangeable with, economic capital. This suggests there is a hierarchy of capital for amateur sports clubs, with the oft-irreplaceable social capital at the top, as further summarized in the conclusion of this paper.

From this discussion of clubs regaining cross-capital equilibrium after a crisis brought about by changes in habitus or capital, the paper now turns to the analysis of leadership. From this analysis, two leadership models are apparent; noting this discussion draws on material in addition to that pertaining to the five clubs in Tables 2 - 6.

5.5 The Team Model

This model was evident from the three clubs that followed a common pattern of descending into crisis and then, following a turnaround point, rising again (phoenix-like) as a result of the joint effort of a team of committed individuals (see Tables 2-4). There was, in some cases, a loss of economic capital: "I went to the Executive and said: you are now insolvent, you are trading insolvent, you are, and we are in the crap". As clubs were unable to pay for coach support and other 'perks', some of the good players: "scattered to the wind and went looking for other clubs [where] they could attain that status" (see Table 2).

But in other cases the loss of economic capital was secondary to a loss in social capital. In all the cases in the Team Model, the governance committee (Executive, Board) realigned habitus, and accumulated capital through competent management. For example, an interviewee retold the story of a club where “a group of businessmen at the club got together and went for the board themselves ... Having the right people in the right positions made all the difference”. While this tactic assisted this club, McGovern (2014) (who undertook a study of small voluntary organisations in the UK) warns that the promotion of leadership from professional people who have been external to the club may side-line and be opposed by long-standing (sometimes) less-skilled core volunteer members. This warning highlights the importance of drawing on the collectively-owned social capital when re-aligning habitus and instituting a new governance structure from internal resources, to pull the club ‘back from the brink’; as can be observed in Tables 2 and 4 (where social capital resulted in members being prepared to lend economic capital to the club).

In these clubs, habitus was most often realigned through implementing a strategic plan, and/or instituting new tight controls over spending. The socialisation of the changes was an important part of realigning various individual habitus. One example is:

“And all that time, the club body didn’t suffer as a whole, we kept a good atmosphere in the clubrooms by keeping the beer prices down” (see Table 2).

In order to limit future damage, in some (larger) clubs, AGM approval was gained for revising the constitution following a crisis. In these and other cases experienced members developed new policies and procedures to limit fraud and error, reestablishing previously weakened boundaries of authority.

5.6 Inspired Leadership

In this model, the trajectory is similar to the clubs in the Team Model, but the change agent was a committed visionary (see Tables 5 and 6), a sole-operator, sometimes popular and sometimes not. While in each of these two particular narratives, it was clear some members were upset at the stance of the leader (e.g. “And I upset a lot of people because I insisted that I would sign every cheque and approve every expenditure and that we would have to do without things” – see Table 5), these leaders nevertheless exhibited some sensitivities to cultural, social capital and habitus through commitment, undertaking multiple tasks with their committed vision of a way to survive.

Leadership of many groups such as sports clubs may usually be observed to act to reproduce the existing social structure to preserve their own advantage (and their own leadership roles). However, during times of financial crises the importance of maintaining the ‘old order’ or the *status quo* slips away as disintegration threatens, and the crisis acts as a driver for the ‘change at the top’.

To summarise, of the five examples, in two cases the survival was largely due to a committed and inspired visionary. In the other cases the combined power of a small group of committed board members had a similar effect. Analysis of these narratives, and others which were briefer or less illustrative, suggests that while a visionary leader, a rabble-rouser, can effect significant change, it is equally likely that a few committed and competent volunteers working jointly together within the club will bring them back from the brink, with other committed and competent volunteer members who work to grow the capital, and realign habitus.

6. Conclusion

This study has illustrated the benefit of further investigating new research questions which emerged during data collection. The focus groups themselves revealed an important researchable issue, to which we offer both theoretical and practical outcomes. The analysis by means of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice highlights commonalities in capital transfers in the five narratives of crisis events. More importantly, this highlights that it was not solely financial weakness which caused the crisis, although, in one case, theft by a staff member was instrumental. In otherwise normally functioning clubs, crises were also triggered by a loss of social or cultural capital, which in time was reflected in economic vulnerability and loss of economic capital.

In this research, these amateur sports clubs enabled a specific identification of losses, turnaround points and the subsequent gains to build resilience for future club operations, despite continuing constraints. Despite depletion in various types of capital, at each turnaround point there was also sufficiently visionary leadership. At these times, strong leadership corrals whatever capital is left, may transform some categories of capital to other more pressing needs, and realigns club practices where necessary. These leaders may rebuild up various types of capital. Two commonalities can be drawn between the five groups in this microanalysis.

6.1. Crises disturb habitus

For amateur sports clubs, there is often a propensity to retain the *status quo* – merely because that is what the members want – but when there’s a crisis, habitus is challenged. While leaders of clubs that collapsed completely were not interviewed, it is known that clubs that are not prepared to change the habitus, do collapse. In all of the narratives in this study to a greater or lesser extent, habitus was ‘kicked around’ like a football. The habitus was challenged, through new leadership emerging to take control (maybe being disliked by some for doing that), then most often carry existing committee members along, realising they must force a change in the attitudes of the members as a whole. Interestingly, nostalgia also allows stories of club history and star players to motivate the committee to do whatever it takes to weather the crisis.

6.2. *Social capital appears most difficult to replace if lost*

There is a steady depletion of social capital through normal turnover in amateur clubs (unlike professional football organisations); the club committee cannot prevent geography (members shifting away) or demography resulting in a loss of membership because these clubs are geographically defined, or some teams (or even clubs) are age-defined. Thus, they must actively seek out new members, and are constrained by such externalities. They may do this by linking in with, for example, local schools to attract new children to play or their parents to assist.

It was also found that social capital may be steadily transformed into other forms of capital when it is strong. One component of social capital is the commitment of the volunteers; they are the capital which can’t be replaced once lost. Because such personal commitment is not recognised by accounting in financial reports, volunteers’ efforts remain largely invisible for those researchers who concentrate on economic capital. This study also highlights the contribution of volunteers to building the all-important social capital (as in Cordery *et al*, 2011; Cordery *et al*, 2013). By utilizing volunteer resources, this group of amateur sports organisations have harnessed both habitus and forms of capital to not only weather a crisis for survival, but also to build resilience for future operations.

This analysis unbundled the functioning of habitus and the uses of different forms of capital (in particular social capital) during crisis management. It is clearly apparent that clubs themselves must be open to change, recognise the impact of the loss of social capital, and are spurred to change habitus. The turnaround point has been observed to be a point at which members with valuable capital, previously withheld, agree to contribute and rebuild the club.

Such members may not normally agree to commit to serve on the governing committee during period of equilibrium, but will respond when the needs are dire. The analysis resulted in two different leadership models clearly apparent from clubs in crisis. Once the habitus has been reenergized it appears to allow the transformation of social capital into economic capital, and the club is back on the path back to sustainability with reinvigoration.

To discover such a research questions, and answers, through focus groups, also re-energized the authors' own research agenda, and sustained further interrogation of the data from valuable focus groups. Research into other aspects of amateur and professional sports organisation at all levels of sporting activities may similarly show unexpected outcomes, rewarding careful listening by qualitatively-oriented researchers.

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ⁱ A search and examination of articles in Management and Accounting Journals using ‘Bourdieu’ showed well over 200 such studies; and that is not the primary purpose of this study, with its focus on data collection rather than theory.

ⁱⁱ Football’s Regional Sports Organisations and/or clubs receive funding and other resources from both Territorial Local Authorities and the relevant Regional Sports Trust.

Table 1: Four types of Bourdieusian capital

<p>Economic capital</p> <p>Common to nearly all sports entities, being mostly cash and assets (for amateur football clubs: rooms, astro-turfs, playing gear, changing rooms). Even when economic capital is diminished for a time, clubs can ‘make do’ by deferring maintenance and continuing to use old kit until capital is re-built or the club folds</p>	<p>Symbolic capital</p> <p>This enhances perception of status or exclusivity. Symbolic capital may be any other type of capital that happens to either promote legitimation or prestige (Couldry, 2003). In this particular field, this would include: the club status, ranking, being an ‘original club’ of players in the national team. Amateur sports clubs may use symbolic capital to strengthen lobbying power to local councils, and thus use this capital to gain economic capital (assets)</p>
<p>Cultural capital</p> <p>The skills (fitness and ball skills of players), knowledge of the rules, commitment of coaches and team managers in an amateur club, or expertise of members (e.g. Board members, Treasurer).</p> <p>Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others (e.g. a love of football) creates a sense of collective identity and group position i.e. social capital (“people like us”). This might not be the distinguishing feature of amateur clubs as it is in professional clubs: in the latter there is a “specific form of cultural capital which enable clubs to reach the top of the field” (Cooper & Johnston, 2012 p. 614)</p>	<p>Social capital</p> <p>We argue this is the most important key capital for amateur sports clubs: it is the actual or potential resources linked to a network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a local club. This provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’. For sports clubs, this network of connections is the product of continuous effort, but necessary in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure economic or symbolic gains and status; an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges by which recognition in (and membership of) the local club is affirmed and reaffirmed.</p> <p>Social capital also aligns to family, kin groups, churches, educational organisations wherever there is a sense of belonging; a ‘band of brothers’</p>

Table 2: For this football club – keeping the beer prices down

Trajectory	Quote from participant
The wrong type of leadership/habitus (inappropriate expenditure)	That did happen to us a good fifteen years ago. And we faced some tough decisions that the club made as a whole... once you know that you've got a problem, you start identifying sort of how to withdraw from that pattern of debt.
As noted below, habitus had included paying coaches	
Economic capital depletion	Our debt, it was over fifty thousand dollars.
Social capital decline (disassociation of a team from the club members)	We had to withdraw from the Super Club back then... [we were] funding a team that was playing in the elite leagues of New Zealand at the time, and we realised it was either continue to fund this horse that was charging away on its own and leaving the club in a trail of debt or withdraw from that.
Symbolic capital depletion (Club status declines as no longer in elite league)	We were attracting some of the best players in the South Island to our club, because they were able to play at this elite level. Once we withdrew from there (the Super Club), a small percentage of them just scattered to the wind and went looking for other clubs that could maybe attain that status.
Turnaround point	
Slow turnaround gaining economic capital	It was about nine years of just tailing it back, tailing it back, doing no expenditure on the clubrooms, paying no coaches' wages, maintaining strips ⁱⁱ as long as you could, the kits that people were playing in.
Gain in economic capital balanced with growing social capital	And all that time, the club body didn't suffer as a whole, we kept a good atmosphere in the clubrooms by keeping the beer prices down.
New club habitus (saving expenditure)	[To get] funding ... in place was a slow and gradual thing, and it was about not paying for coaches' services, which got a bit rampant for a while there.
Gain of economic capital through social capital (drawing on members and volunteers)	So that once again we just looked internally, we sort of saw there were club men available to do the coaching at zero cost.
Gain of economic capital through social capital (drawing on relationships – part of social capital)	There was fundraising, as far as raffling [on] Friday nights at the pub. A slow and steady process

Table 3: For this Football club – An eye opener to see the actual costs

Trajectory	Quotes from Participant
Strain on economic capital	There was a period of time where financially it was tough.
Loss of social capital (membership decline)	We didn't have very big numbers, it had dropped down quite substantially.
As inferred below, membership fees had been kept low/bad debts were high. That is, members did not pay enough to play.	
Turnaround point	
Challenging habitus	And it was an eye opener to a club man to see, if we were to charge, away from donations and bar takings, if we were to charge everybody a sub to recoup all our costs involved in running [the club] we'd be charging people something like three hundred and eighty dollars.
Challenging habitus to retain some economic capital	Then last season, we said, "Right, if you haven't paid by this date, we can't pay our bills... [and you cannot play]."
Injection of cultural capital: taking control , planning	We just did quite similar to what M (Table 2) was saying over there:... we just had to tail some things back and look over a five year plan, which we did, and we brought ourselves out of it.
Gain of economic capital through social capital (using volunteers)	We've got some extraordinary people that can go out and fundraise for us.
Field constraints	We're dipping into the same pond that the rest of the clubs around [our town] will be dipping into. It's a hard game.

Table 4: A large club had a lost money through a staff member’s fraudulent actions

Trajectory	Quotes from Participant
Social and structural capital (members and size)	We have about fifteen hundred playing members.
Economic capital lost	The club had a loss of money through a staff member. So I came in, I started in April 2005. By November 2005 I went to the Executive and said, “You are now insolvent, you are trading insolvent, you are, we are in the crap.”
Turnaround point	
Challenge to club habitus (challenge inappropriate expenditure)	It was the same as what [the club in Table 5] did, just saying, “You can’t have that, we can’t do that, we can do without that.”
New club habitus	Then we just cut back on everything, restricted everything, and it took us four years to get out of it.
Gain of economic capital and symbolic capital (members have faith in the club’s future status)	We approached our club members and we got some members loans; so we restructured, using members loans to pay back creditors that we were using to keep us afloat ... Myself ... I’ve used personal [funds] to keep us going.
Further increases of economic capital and social capital (members support)	Honestly without those member loans, we wouldn’t be here today. And that’s where we are now. A lot stronger.
Symbolic and economic capital assured	We are now out of debt, totally, paid back our members loans with interest, and got money in the bank.

Table 5: A very large football club with a visionary: should every child get a medal, or buy balls?

Trajectory	Quotes from Participant
Reserves of social capital and symbolic capital (club status lost)	[This club] has approximately seventeen hundred playing members, so it's one of the larger clubs around. And we have playing members aged five to sixty five, a good mix of both women and men. So, on the surface, quite a solid club.
Loss of economic capital (lack of control over expenses) Wrong type of leadership/habitus	They spent more money than they earned, which is possibly the main reason that any business or organisation ever collapses.
Turnaround point	
Challenge to club habitus	The classic example to me of that was with the junior club, who insisted that every child got a medal and every child, and there were three cups for every team. We were spending sixteen thousand dollars on cups and medals. And I really said, "Well, what do you want to spend sixteen thousand dollars, on cups and medals, or balls? You've got a choice, now, make it now." So those are the sorts of things I had to do.
Injection of economic capital (reducing expenses)	All I did was just put some very strict financial controls in place.
New club habitus: control, and sacrificing some symbolic capital	And I upset a lot of people, because I insisted that I would sign every cheque and approve every expenditure, and that we would have to do without things.

Table 6: “2008 was our annus horribilis” – a Visionary who had to multi-task

Trajectory	Quotes from Participant
Loss of cultural (knowledge) capital and economic capital	2007 the treasurer at the time said, “That’s it, I’ve had enough, I’m out of here,” because there was no money.
The wrong type of leadership/habitus (but some economic capital input)	The President at the time was using the club as his own personal fiefdom, and basically funding his northern league team with the proceeds of his house.
Loss of social capital (members and networks)	2008 we lost a women’s team, two senior men’s teams; We were down to our northern league team and two other senior men’s teams, and no juniors.
Loss of economic capital	We were practically trading insolvent. That was our annus horribilis
Turnaround point	
Injection of cultural capital (knowledge)	As project manager, I said, “Well I’ll be a treasurer until you find somebody,” in 2008. Basically I said that they’re not going to find anybody, I’ll do it.
New club habitus (control on expenditure)	I set some rules and said, “These are the rules you follow.”
Gain of economic capital and symbolic capital (members have faith in the future)	A number of us loaned the club money ‘cause we were thirty five thousand in debt.
Gain of economic capital and symbolic capital (Community support)	In 2010 we finally got plans and the council gave us six hundred thousand dollars’ worth of money towards the clubrooms.
Gain of economic capital and symbolic capital (Community support)	The Parks [Dept.] gave us six hundred thousand dollars for the changing rooms.