Social Capital and County Identity in Ireland

by

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Introduction
The island of Ireland is divided into 32 counties, 26 of which are in the Republic of Ireland (referred to in this paper as Ireland). In Ireland, the county has traditionally been an important badge of identity and, despite the enormous social changes being experienced over the past decade or so, still has currency as a legitimate identification point. There are still strong associations between counties and family names (Joyce 1910, Dolan 1998) and accents can still be quite local or peculiar to counties. Identification with one’s county, therefore, provides a basis for a sense of similarity and shared norms.

According to the literature, social capital involves networks and relationships which are based on trust, shared norms and values. As such, social capital includes some sense of belonging to an ‘imagined community’, as Anderson (1991) described nationalism. In this paper, we explore the concept of county identity as one route to belonging to an ‘imagined community’. We take as our focus voluntary organisations, which are resource dependent organisations reliant on both their internal and external constituencies for their survival and sustainability. As such, the need to build relationships is key to attracting resources. In other words, voluntary organisations need to generate social capital and build strong relationships within their immediate environments to secure financial and human resources.

We will suggest that county identity is one means of generating social capital and we explore in this paper the way in which voluntary organisations use county identity to speak to their audiences in order to attract resources. Based on findings from research conducted in Co. Cavan in Ireland, we show how voluntary organisations have facilitated the organisation of voluntary participation on the basis of an over-arching sense of ‘sameness’ and some of the challenges faced by voluntary organisations in the context of enormous changes to the social fabric.

Social Capital
According to Putnam (1995), social capital involves ‘features of social life – networks, norms and trusts – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (Putnam 1995: 665). There are three types of social capital identified in the literature, bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding social capital occurs in families, ethnic or kinship-based groups (Healy and Coté 2001) and involves close ties or thick trust (Leonard and Onyx 2003). Bonding social capital could be said to be based on a given similarity or a shared close identity.

Bridging social capital refers to the links made between different social groups (Healy and Coté 2001). It could be argued, therefore, that bridging social capital is based on creating similarity so that connections can be made across groups such as ethnic groups, political groups and regional groups. The third type of social capital, linking social capital refers to creating links in order to get access to resources and power (Woolcock 1999). As such, linking social capital, unlike the two other forms of social capital, is not based on similarity, necessarily, but on creating vertical links, or relationships, to get access to resources and power.
Social capital, furthermore, is said to be generated at different levels in society ranging from those that are defined by social stratification such as age and gender to others which could be almost seen as ‘incubators’ of social capital such as schools and families. While local communities have been identified as one of these generators of social capital, the next social locale within which such social capital building occurs is identified in the literature as regional (Healy and Coté 2001). Our interest in this study is in the county, which, as a locale for social capital generation, does not appear in the literature, but could be said to lie somewhere between the local and the regional. County identity, we will suggest, is one way in which social capital can be realised.

Social capital, therefore, can be conceptualised as the relationships that are fostered horizontally, vertically and diagonally within communities. Such relationships are the essence of communities if we conceive of such communities, in the way Simmel (1955) does, as a web of interconnections. Putnam and his followers attempt to deconstruct that web and label the different kinds of relationships they identify. We will not, in this paper, enter or engage in the discourse about whether or not Putnam is merely dressing up old concepts in new clothes (see McLean et al (2002) for example) but we will suggest that at county level in Ireland all forms of social capital can be found. Furthermore, if, as Putnam states, social capital is an asset that is leveraged for material gain, we wish to posit that county identity can also be regarded as an asset which is leveraged for material gain. We will now look at county identity in greater detail.

County Identity

In Ireland, a very important identifier is the county and as mentioned above there are 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland. Not only are accents still quite local or peculiar to counties, but there is a strong link between family names and specific counties (Joyce 1910, Dolan 1998). County identity refers to an association with a specific county that contributes to a sense of what an individual is or feels she or he is. For the individual, county identity can shape personal identity as there is a perceived similarity which is based on coming from the same place. The personal identity of an individual, therefore, is shaped by where that individual is from.

Giddens (1984) stresses the mutual dependency of human agency and social structure. The structural properties of social systems provide the means through which people act and are also the outcome of those actions. For our purposes in this research, the interaction between an individual and a county’s social structures and systems generates meaning. In other words, an individual, through interaction with social structures and systems, derives meaning from such interaction while, at the same time, the interaction itself generates meaning. An individual’s personal identity is shaped by the environment’s social structure - in the case of our research, the county - which, in turn, is influenced, too, by that individual. A shared sense of place can also create conditions for network generation and forming. It can also facilitate the organisation of voluntary participation across different social groups within a county on the basis of an over-arching sense of similarity.

Although county councils, which are the administrative agencies of counties, only date back to 1898, counties themselves are much older entities. Local historians and historical geographers point to the roots of their boundaries lying in lands associated
with the old Gaelic lordships. While the basis of the organisation of lordships was not the land, as inheritance was not based on property but on tanistry,\(^1\) strong associations between lands and lordships were evident and, furthermore, can still be seen in modern Ireland where many family names still have strong associations with particular counties, as already noted above. Lordship or clan identity used to be the basis for organisation until the imposition of English inheritance laws, attempted through Surrender and Regrant in the mid-16\(^{th}\) century and then more thoroughly after the annihilation of O’Neill and O’Donnell at the Battle of Kinsale and the subsequent Flight of the Earls in the early 17\(^{th}\) century. County identity became more important from that time on as counties became social identifiers rather than the older place names associated with the Gaelic lords (Cunningham 2004).

County identity can be regarded, therefore as a resource and, furthermore, can be utilised as a resource. It can be conceptualised in social capital terms as one way in which social capital can be generated. This can most readily be seen in the concepts of both bonding and bridging social capital. For the former, kin group and county are in many cases associated in Ireland so county identity can strengthen bonding social capital. County identity can also be a factor in bridging social capital because a shared sense of identity, based on coming from the same place, can provide the rationale for association. Perhaps the most obvious example of this can be seen among the Irish diaspora where county associations are created as means of bringing together individuals now based in countries and cities outside of Ireland. We can see this too in the names of voluntary groups such as Clarepeople in Cavan who advertise their annual get-together in the local Cavan newspaper, the *Anglo Celt*. County identity can also be used to generate linking social capital where access to power or resources at county level are important, for example in seeking funding from an institution of local government – organised on county or even regional lines – or from local politicians.

**Co. Cavan – a Cursory Look**

Co. Cavan comprises a major part of the ancient lands of Breifne which stretched north-west from the Pale\(^2\) to the shores of Donegal Bay. Cavan, itself, means ‘hollow’ and the county name comes from the name of Cavan Town, which was named as such because it is located in a hollow between drumlins\(^3\). Much of the present-day county, however, used to be known as East Breifne or Breifne O’Reilly, when in the 10\(^{th}\) century Breifne was divided into two regions, East (most of modern-day Cavan: Breifne O’Reilly) and West (modern-day Leitrim: Breifne O’Rourke) (Smith 1938). The chiefs of East Breifne were the Uí Raghallaigh (O’Reilly) which is the most common surname in Cavan today. Other septs prominent in Breifne and still found in present-day Cavan are Brady, Smith, Sheridan and Farrelly.

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\(^1\) Tanistry refers to a system where an appointed second-in-command, or Tánaiste, would succeed a leader on his or her death. The term Tánaiste is still used to refer to the equivalent of the Vice Prime Minister or second-in-command in the Irish parliament or Dáil.

\(^2\) The Pale, which had Dublin City at its centre, comprised the county of Dublin and parts of the counties of Kildare, Wicklow, Meath and Louth, and was the administrative centre of British rule in Ireland. The term ‘beyond the Pale’ comes from a reference to the ‘wild’ and ‘untamed’ Irish who lived outside of this area which was regarded, by the British, as synonymous with order and civilisation.

\(^3\) At all times in this paper ‘Cavan’ refers to the county. Any references to the county town use ‘Cavan Town’.
The present-day boundaries of the county, much of which date from the 10th century, were more formalised from its founding as a county in 1579 and particularly so once the shiring of Ulster began after the Flight of the Earls in 1607 (Connolly 1998, Cunningham 2004), which paved the way for the Plantation of Ulster. Prior to this, the north-west of the county had not been part of East Breifne and, as more remote and topographically different from the rest of the county, had a different identity, which can still be seen to the present day. The Plantation, itself, was delayed until Sir Josias Bodley had mapped the country, estimated its acreage and distinguished the temporal from the spiritual lands. The 1609 orders and conditions provided the framework for Plantation, and 28 baronies were established in Ulster, eight of which were assigned to English landlords, eight to Scottish landlords and 12 to a mix of servitors (Crown military and civil servants in Ireland) and natives. The administrative boundaries of Cavan were subsequently reinforced by the mapping of

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4 After the Flight of the Earls in 1607, the way was paved for the ‘full’ colonisation of Ireland, a process which had begun in the 1170s. The Plantation of Ulster involved the ‘planting’ of lands with British people or those who were loyal to the British crown.
county boundaries in the mid 1800s, and again in the late 19th century upon the establishment of Cavan County Council.

There are eight baronies in the county, 36 civil parishes, of which four cross the county boundaries (two with Meath, one with Monaghan, one with Fermanagh) and 2,053 townlands. There are four electoral districts in the county and Cavan is part of the Cavan-Meath constituency, a five-seater which returned two Fianna Fáil TDs (Brendan Smith, Rory O’Hanlon), one Fine Gael (Seymour Crawford), one Sinn Féin (Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, who topped the poll), and one independent (Paudge Connolly). Only one of those TDs, Brendan Smith, is from Cavan.

In the administration of present-day health services, Cavan is part of the newly-established HSE North-Eastern Region (or the former North-Eastern Health Board) which comprises three other counties Louth, Meath and Monaghan. Of the four counties in this administrative area, Cavan and Monaghan are the most similar as they have lower populations than the other two counties and their rate of population increase between 1996 and 2002 was also lower than the other two. Cavan’s population (at 56,416 in 2002) only increased by six per cent between those two

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5 Civil and religious parishes are almost identical in Co. Cavan and date back to medieval times (Duffy 2004).
census dates although this increase was more noticeable in the south of the county and has probably been further augmented since the 2002. The county is not densely populated but is characterised by small towns where only 16 per cent of the population live in towns of 1,500 or more inhabitants; although there are demographic differences between the south and the northwest of the county.

Co. Cavan, therefore, has the potential for a strong identity, given the congruence of county boundaries with the old region of East Breifne and the emphasis and re-emphasis of those boundaries through modern administrative structures. Furthermore, historical work suggests a strong county identity (Duffy 2004, Parker 2004).

Methodology of Study
For the purposes of the research in question we wanted to a) focus on voluntary organisations and b) embed those voluntary organisations in their county context which, of course, is multi-layered and faceted. We posit, therefore, that the county is a locale for social capital generation because it provides one means through which relationships and networks are formed and out of which its identity can be strengthened. While there are a number of levels at which that works and which we are exploring in our current research, this paper will examine just one facet of county identity, that is personal identity, and we will explore briefly here how and whether voluntary organisations use county identity as an organisational resource.

Six organisations were selected for participation in this study. Using the sampling frame which had been assembled, as part of the larger project in which the Centre for Nonprofit Management is involved, to map the nonprofit sector in Ireland (www.cnm.tcd.ie/mapping), we drew up a number of criteria for the selection of Cavan-based organisations.

<table>
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<th>Table 1: Voluntary Organisations Participating in the Study</th>
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<td><strong>GAA</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Enable Ireland</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development Co-Operative</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Cavan Ploughing Association</strong></td>
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<td><strong>McNeen Women’s Group</strong></td>
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In each organisation, the CEO or equivalent was interviewed (in-depth, semi-structured interview), a focus group interview was held with volunteers and an organisational case study conducted. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The interviews explored the concept of county identity, organisational
identification with the county or immediate environment, social capital generation and personal identification with the organisation.

Cavan’s Identity

The historical literature indicates that East Breifne occupied an interesting geopolitical position. As a buffer zone between the Pale and the country of O’Neill to the north-west, the O’Reilly were antagonists and allies of both the Dublin government and O’Neill (Cunningham 2004) in jostling for power. Regarded as ‘wild’, that is, beyond the Pale, by the Dublin government but necessary to keep sweet for the purposes of social order and to help bring the remaining wild Irish under control, the O’Reilly occupied an interesting position which was used as much as possible but not always to greatest effect. In addition, geo-politically, East Breifne had also traditionally been part of the province of Connacht, followed by an association with the province of Ulster through various alliances with O’Neill, for example, which led at one stage to the Dublin government planning to include East Breifne as part of the province of Meath to control O’Reilly’s unpredictability.6

Features arising from the history of Cavan could be seen threaded through the interviews with participants of the study. First of all, when we explored what the identity of Cavan was a number of interesting observations were made. For example, Cavan people were regarded as independent, which was attributed to the county’s poverty and isolation.

As one of the respondents from the drama group said:

‘Cavan is looked upon, or has been looked upon, as some place that is out there, Outer Mongolia sort of stuff. It is a fact. I mean it was described to me once that if you wanted to go to Cavan, or you wanted to go some place the other side of Cavan, you could go round Cavan! Now you can go through it - which is a big help - but because of that we’ve never got influenced by outside people.’

[Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

As a consequence this respondent said, his organisation was involved in drama that, he thought, reflected what the county was:

‘There is that darkness, there is that Tom MacIntyre type of rural, weary, well not weary but ‘Jaysus did they have to put that on?’ type of thing…The Kings of the Kilburn High Road was one of ours as well and it’s very dark. It tells a story, and that’s what keeps people around here enthralled, it has to tell a story. You can’t go down the Samuel Beckett road, so you have to keep it real but with a little twist…So it would reflect the county definitely – the dark underbelly of Cavan…We wouldn’t have been influenced by what people were going to think of us. But we were worried about our blue-rinse fans in the front row. But they came back

6 There are now four provinces in Ireland, Connacht to the west, Ulster to the north, Leinster in the east and south-east and Munster in the south and south-west. At one stage, however, there were five provinces which included the present-day four and Meath, the fifth. Present-day Meath is now in the province of Leinster.
because we were so good...and the issues we tackle, very controversial. Someone always nearly dies, has died, or is about to be murdered, hopefully. Has to be that. But then, you see, you can come in with the humour, the dark humour coming in underneath...And we would stick to a lot of stuff that would suit border counties, you know. There is that border mentality, you know, that we are neither one nor the other. Great. Because you can be one or the other. You can mix it.’ [Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

We can trace the origins of ‘cute hoor’, a term which is used as to stereotype Cavan people, back to the O’Reilly and his geo-political position. It was also attributed to the plays which the Bailieborough Drama Group performed. Furthermore, ‘cute hoor’ was seen to have socio-historical roots in the poor land of the Cavan and the need to make ends meet. As one volunteer with a rural development organisation stated:

‘You talk about the cute Cavan hoor, you know, and about Cavan people being tight but ’twas of necessity, and they had very little, you know, their farms were small...They had the hunger because they needed it.’ [Focus Group, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

This ‘cute Cavan hoor’ was regarded, therefore, as entrepreneurial rather than stingy.

‘Do you know there would be a very big difference between Cavan and Monaghan and Longford farmers and Westmeath farmers. Longford and Westmeath farmers would be more big land and they wouldn’t have the same amount of diversity and the same drive. They wouldn’t need it...I always felt when I was dealing with the Westmeath and the Longford farmers into the Cavan farmers’ situation, he would starve. And if you put the Cavan farmers or the Monaghan farmers into the Westmeath or the Longford – I am talking about the bigger farms now...they would be millionaires immediately.’ [Focus Group, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

In organisational terms, these respondents cited being successful in some cases with seeking funding at EU or from national structures (what we could term linking social capital). As another volunteer from that rural development organisation said:

‘When you saw the cross-border funds you saw an opportunity there that wasn’t going to be there in a couple of years and it would seem foolish not to look or to do something about it’ [Focus Group, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

The Organisations’ Identification with their Locale
For respondents from five of the organisations in the fieldwork, county or local identity was important for the organisation and the way in which it spoke to the community it served. For many organisations the signalling of an identification with the county or the local region was through the organisation’s name and logo. When
we explored the name of the organisation, we found that, often, geographic references were found in the names of community-based organisations. Such references served to make the link between the immediate external environment and the organisation more explicit. As one respondent said:

‘We would be very conscious of carrying the Bailieborough name, that’s why we named ourselves the Bailieborough Drama Group because there is drama groups going round and they are called the Crooked Cat Drama Group and stuff like this, and we are like ‘where the hell are they from?’’ [Focus Group, Bailieborough Drama Group]

An identification with the immediate external environment was also noted by a respondent from the McNean Women’s Group in north-west Cavan. Based in Blacklion, on the border with Fermanagh (only one kilometre or so from Belcoo) and also very close to Leitrim and Sligo, this area has an interesting identity, which as its history shows, is not as strongly identified with the county of Cavan because of its geographical isolation and topography (and its historical roots in West Breifne7). In choosing a name for the Group, this respondent said:

‘We felt if it was called anything Belcoo, Blacklion or anything that people would think ‘Oh it’s just for those people’. No, we called it McNean which took in a far wider range.’ [Individual Interview, McNean Women’s Group]

In selecting our organisations for exploring county identity, we were conscious of not choosing organisations that seemed similar. Of the six organisations, five demonstrated close links to the county, or local area. For the sixth organisation, a branch of a national service provider, Enable Ireland, however, the absence of a specific county identification was seen as a challenge to the organisation’s ability to fundraise locally. Respondents from that organisation noted that they were having some difficulties with building a profile in their immediate environment because of their lack of a Cavan name and their location on the periphery of Cavan Town:

‘Unfortunately, people wouldn’t know about us unless they came onto the complex. There are only a couple of signs. There is no physical, so there is no identity there for other people. There is no sign as you come in the gate to tell you that Enable Ireland is there…If you say Enable Ireland to most people, they will talk about the shop, that’s really visible…there is a real identity around that. We don’t have that. There is no shop in Cavan.’ [Individual Interview, Enable Ireland Cavan Early Services]

The example of Enable Ireland is interesting because of the challenges that the organisation was facing in attempting to build a profile at local level. As the example illustrates, being part of a national organisation may not be sufficient in fostering relationships or in generating social capital. The Cavan branch of Enable Ireland (EI) is focused on Early Services and is part of the Enable Ireland North East Services

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7 West Breifne comprised the present-day lands of Leitrim, Sligo and this north-west part of Cavan.
which have their administrative offices in Navan. EI Cavan Early Services receives the vast majority of its funding from the statutory regional health agency, the HSE North Eastern region, to cover core service provision. EI Cavan Early Services needs to engage in local fundraising, however, to cover other costs such as the establishment of a sensory room for children. Having been set up as a branch of a larger national organisation, the need to brand itself through a county identity had not been regarded as important on its establishment in Cavan as the main focus of the organisation was the provision of services to children with disabilities:

‘I have never thought about having a county identity…because it’s something that is very new for us and I guess it is something that we’ll develop…because that’s not how we were set up. We weren’t set up that way.’ [Individual Interview, Enable Ireland Cavan Early Services]

This respondent, however, had more recently been seeking ways to establish relationships in the local community so that fund raising could be more successful:

‘[A]s a service generally, we want to increase our profile and increase awareness of disability in the local community, so one of our aims would be to increase awareness of disability within Cavan. The local parent group, we’ve got one particularly active parent who has written to all sorts of organisations in the town about accessible playgrounds. And you know, customer parking spaces. So, she is really good’ [Individual Interview, Enable Ireland Cavan Early Services]

The organisation had several professional relationships which helped to generate resources, most particularly with the HSE, but it had also received funding under the RAPID programme. Yet its development was being hampered somewhat by its lack of local relationships:

‘We feel we really need to prove…[ourselves]…We would see our main contribution could be around disability awareness so I suppose just by what we’ve done, we would have a low level of building awareness around disability…The fact that they built a new playground and there is nothing in it that a child with disabilities could use…and it was all fundraised for, ’cause of our profile no-one came to talk to us. We didn’t know it. We didn’t get to talk to anybody…I think we have a big role to play there but I would imagine that our impact so far has been quite small.’ [Individual Interview, Enable Ireland Cavan Early Services]

In interview, however, this Manager referred to one of the paid staff in the organisation who was from Cavan Town where the organisation is based. This

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8 This is a state-funded programme aimed at development and regeneration in designated areas of disadvantage.
employee, a social worker, was using both her personal as well as professional connections to draw in resources for the organisation:

‘Because she is a Cavan girl, so she would have links all over the place I guess that it’s hard to know. She would do it in a very professional way but it’s hard to know how much of that is personal and how much of that is professional. Just because she has worked in the area for a while and she is from the area.’ [Individual Interview, Enable Ireland Cavan Early Services]

Generating Social Capital

The analysis so far indicates the importance of having a county identity for establishing a place within an identified community. Generating a profile from this activity did not appear to be the only outcome, according to the interviews. At organisational level, the ability to make connections with the immediate environment was very important in helping the organisation survive and develop (which we could refer to as both bridging and linking social capital). As one of the founders of the Bailieborough Drama Group said:

‘There is also the others that are just in drama for the ego and the kicks. Which is great ’cause you don’t want them all in everything else as well…I would say 70:30 – 70 that are totally into drama and then that lovely 30 that will do other things as well. And we need those people as well because they are connected.’ [Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

Connections in the wider community could also serve to attract in financial resources, as respondents from the GAA focus group interview noted. The Cavan county team receives sponsorship from a local high-profile businessman, who was referred to as a ‘great Cavan man’ (Individual Interview, Cavan GAA). At the focus group interview, the interest of this ‘great Cavan man’ in Cavan GAA was regarded as more philanthropic than part of a strategic business move:

‘The money he put into Breifne Park and that, developing Breifne Park, there is not much return. If he was sponsoring Tyrone or something that he would be getting his name and his company…they would get a lot more coverage. As it is, he gets two Sundays a year, basically, over the last five years…I don’t think it’s a good investment…If he wasn’t a great Cavan man he would have picked a good team that he knows will…like if I was investing money for five years in something, it’s almost a shambles as it is, getting hammered…But this is obviously more than a business decision for him and without him we would be in a worse state. I can’t imagine who would want to sponsor Cavan and other small counties like that…and it’s obvious in these counties that it’s people who have a love for them that do it.’ [Focus Group, Cavan Gaels GAA Club]

Connections could also serve to attract people into the organisation as well, as one of the respondents from the Cavan Ploughing Association asserted:
‘All my friends and neighbours, a number of them, would be involved. There would be bonds and friendship bonds.’ [Focus Group, Cavan Ploughing Association]

‘You get sort of drawn in, when you get involved with the people that you came in with and it sort of became easier to go on than to go back…Then you seen the need and then you felt you could do something to help.’ [Focus Group, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

Respondents were also clear, however, about the benefits that voluntary organisations can bring to communities and that such voluntary organisations are also helping to generate social capital and make connections between individuals in a community.

‘In some cases, we are actually doing a social service of keeping people out of pubs because during those dark months because they don’t have any other interests, the pub is their solace. So, there is that. There is genuinely that.’ [Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

‘There is a social dimension to it. People meet – there are meetings every month for maybe 20 or 30 people. They are a social event. And a lot of farmers suffer a lot of physical isolation. It’s the depopulation of rural Ireland. So it brings people into social contact, which is very important…Most of the time it’s social banter and people renewing old friendships.’ [Focus Group, Cavan Ploughing Association]

While county identity is useful in generating different kinds of social capital for the organisation, how important is county identity for the individual volunteer in choosing to be with an organisation? Volunteers who worked with most of the organisations in the study, or were instrumental in their establishment, cited the affinity they had with the organisation because of its place in the community and its ‘Cavanness’. In other words, the organisation was speaking to the volunteers’ sense of personal identity and, therefore, was a legitimate place for them to find themselves in.

‘I think people underestimate what Cavan is, or what it’s like, you know, in Dublin – oh, Cavan the culchies. And they don’t know anything about it and I’d like to project something different about it. Cavan is an interesting place. There is lots in it, you know. Being part of a team there should show people that there is something to their players. So, I am proud of it, yeah. Like, it’s nice to be from somewhere. It’s nice to know where your roots are and know about it. That’s what I like, that stuff, being part of something like that.’ [Focus Group, Cavan Gaels GAA Club]

I am very proud of being involved with Bailieborough Drama Group…I wouldn’t go on the circuit with any drama group other
Future Challenges

Finally, as noted in the beginning of this paper, Cavan is experiencing lots of change, which can be seen in the amount of building work particularly in the south of the county. Cavan is now within Dublin’s commuter belt, despite being more than 80 kilometres from the centre of the city, and there are now quite a number of ex-Dubliners as well as foreign nationals living in the county. Both the changing social fabric of the county and more affluent lifestyles were seen as problems in attracting volunteers. As respondents said about trying to motivate new volunteers:

‘They are not interesting in going out and enjoying themselves when they can get stoned at home. It’s a fact. It’s as simple as that. It’s money. And you always have the best art, best literature, best drama when you are down on your, when you are depressed and depraved.’ [Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

And it’s not just because people are working. I was working all my life…In my experience when people become affluent and rich they don’t become involved with helping others and that’s it in a nutshell.’ [Focus Group, McNean Women’s Group]

Alongside the greater affluence that could be seen in the county, respondents were very vocal about the effects of demographic change arising from new arrivals to the county who were commuting daily to Dublin to work:

‘Country people are very closely knit. Everybody knows everybody. When you have large numbers of people moving in from outside the area buying cheaper accommodation or houses, that’s grand but I can see social problems down the line. I can see them already.’ [Individual Interview, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

One example was by given by this respondent of conflict between the ‘commuters’ and members of the ‘older community’ where the former opposed plans for an enterprise centre in a small town:

‘There is no community centre in Ballyjamesduff. It’s one of the bigger towns in Cavan, why is there no community centre there? When they went to build a community centre, there was 240 names signed a petition not to build it. Well they were all people who had moved from Dublin or moved in. They didn’t want a community centre beside them bit would bring the wrong sort of people around the place. Mullagh, we funded a project there that is a walkway up to the top of Mullagh Hill, a nice scenic area, private land. The owner gave the lease of his land to Killian Parish Trust Community Group and they wanted to put gravel on a right of way and just put a fence around the top and few
benches there – you can see four counties. For a job like that they wouldn’t need planning permission. We didn’t even advise them to check. They went ahead foolishly and started to, just cleaning the clay off the top and…14 submissions went to the Council, 11 of them were from people who had moved in in the last five years.’ [Individual Interview, Cavan-Monaghan Rural Development]

There was some acknowledgement that the problems with the integration of new arrivals lay on both sides:

‘Basically they are not integrated and nor have we adopted proper strategies yet for their integration’ [Focus Group, Cavan Ploughing Association]

‘The town like every other town has grown to ridiculous proportions and there is that problem. We are constantly advertising but we are not getting commuters. What’s happening is there is a void between us and them. And it’s our fault just as much as their fault.’ [Individual Interview, Bailieborough Drama Group]

The challenges that were identified in interview, arising from the demographic changes that are underway in the county, provide one indication of changing identities at county level and that voluntary organisations are not necessarily speaking to all members of their audiences. While an identification with the county might emerge in future generations, at present differences between the sociologically-newer inhabitants of the county and the older inhabitants raise questions for voluntary organisations seeking legitimacy amongst the community as a whole.

Conclusions

Social capital comprises networks and relationships which are based on trust, shared norms and values. As we have suggested in this paper, the county can provide one locale for social capital generation where an identification with the county can provide the means for building relationships or social capital. Shared norms and values, arising from a perception that individuals share a common bond because they are from the same county, contribute to a sense of community. Social capital, therefore, can be generated through a notion of similarity or of belonging to an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991).

As we have seen, county identity has been used by the organisations in our study to facilitate the organisation of voluntary participation in a county on the basis of an over-arching sense of ‘sameness’. Organisations have used this through their choice of name or logo, the personal connections that are made and other relationships that they forge in seeking to obtain resources for their survival. As we have suggested above, county identity can be used to attract participants and volunteers. It can be useful in generating linking social capital, or in building relationships in the external environment which provide access to finances and power. Indeed, it would appear that for organisations to survive, the ability to forge strong connections with the community in which they reside, is very important. County identity, therefore, is a
useful resource for a voluntary organisation in generating social capital and in helping the organisation obtain legitimacy in its external environment.

County identity provides one means through which relationships can be formed on the basis of a shared sense of similarity. As Cavan people, individuals may be attracted to a Cavan-based organisation which serves to bolster the identity of the county, and by extension, the identity of the individual who wishes to get involved in the organisation. This is most pertinently seen in the case of the GAA but the smaller groups, such as Bailieborough Drama Group, also demonstrate the link between the individuals who become involved and the organisation as a whole. The promotion of a certain kind of drama, which was seen as portraying something about Cavan as a border county with a dark sense of humour, was used by the organisation to appeal to various stakeholders in the organisation such as the voluntary actors and stage workers as well as the audiences. Not only is this the way in which Bailieborough Drama Group builds legitimacy for itself but it uses different forms of social capital through its county identity. Furthermore, it uses those forms of social capital (horizontal and vertical relationships at county level) to sustain itself as an organisation.

This study has also demonstrated, however, the vulnerabilities of resource dependent organisations where the social fabric of a community is undergoing change. All of the respondents spoke about the difficulty in attracting newer volunteers. While some acknowledged that the challenge lay with their organisations, it appears that voluntary organisations will need to engage with this more significantly, particularly given the context in Cavan at present where there is a growing number of foreign nationals as well as commuters.

References


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