FROM VICARIOUS RELIGION TO VICARIOUS SOCIAL CAPITAL?
INFORMATION AND PASSIVE PARTICIPATION IN
VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a theory of passive involvement in voluntary associations admitting passive and active members. The theory draws on key principles of Davie’s (2008) concept of vicarious religion, which accounts for contrasting behaviors of the active (in that case, those who believe in God and belong to a church) and the passive (who may believe yet do not belong). It is suggested that, through understanding and approving of active members’ participation, passive members share in and possibly also experience the benefits of stocks of social capital generated/embedded within the association. Despite a tendency on the part of theorists to trivialize association newsletters, the Vicarious Social Capital Model ascribes a pivotal role to information in the social process: By compensating for an absence of activity, information is predicted to be the mechanism through which passive members are empowered to contribute to an extent greater than researchers have hitherto recognized.

Keywords: information, passive participation, social capital, vicariousness, voluntary associations

Although early social capital research focused on formal voluntary associations because this was convenient from a methodological point of view (Newton, 1999; Putnam & Goss, 2002), much scholarly attention continues to be given to the study of voluntary associations, as generators or, at the very least, repositories of social capital. The interest in voluntary associations stems in large part directly from Putnam’s early work (1993, 1995a). Indeed, the level of associational membership has now become “a standard litmus test for the health of a society’s social capital” (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005, p. 152; see also Holmes & Slater, 2007; Maloney, van Deth, & Rossteutscher, 2008).

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Nevertheless, the significance of voluntary associations for social capital has been contested (Li, Pickles, & Savage, 2005). Researchers risk presenting an incomplete or even distorted account of social capital (Li et al., 2005) because studies tend to count the number of memberships in specific voluntary associations as an index of the stocks of social capital in a community, region, or country at a given time (Hall, 1999; Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 1995a). For instance, indicators which focus exclusively on formal acts of participation may overlook women, who traditionally prefer more informal connectedness and participation (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005), and also disadvantaged social groups, who can be deterred from entry to civic associations that require formal application for membership, the payment of fees, and knowledge about how to behave within the organization (Li et al., 2005). Yet, it is hard to underestimate the importance of voluntary associations when, for example, empirical research leads to claims that “associational affiliations are more central to respondents’ lives than their neighbours, work, or politics” and come a very close second to family and friends (Maloney et al., 2008, p. 284).

The focus of this article is the capacity of formal voluntary associations to generate social capital, or perhaps merely embed it, through passive membership. The main aim is to use ideas from religious affiliation to construct a model that will advance theory in relation to passive involvement where the passive and the active co-exist within the membership. First, existing literature on the hallmarks of voluntary associations and on the role of passive participants is reviewed. Next, it is argued that key principles of Davie’s (2008) vicarious religion construct have wider applicability. There are two main contentions. The first is that through understanding and approving of active members’ participation, the passive may share in and possibly also experience the benefits of stocks of social capital; the second is that information is the mechanism through which this is achieved. There has been a tendency for theorists to downplay and/or trivialize the role of information in the social process within voluntary associations (see, for example, Putnam, 1995a; Wuthnow, 2002). In reality, communication may compensate for an absence of activity, but precisely how it functions as an integrative mechanism has been unclear (Knoke, 1981).

The study of religion arguably benefits from engagement with ideas generated from non-religious or quasi-religion organizations, so the mechanism discussed in the article can deepen understanding of Davie’s concept. Furthermore, the mechanism may also elaborate the concept in