Sporting Capital – transforming sport development policy and practice

Executive Summary

The public policy challenge

For over 40 years public policy in the UK has sought to influence and increase participation rates in sport while reducing the social and economic inequities associated with participation. The levels of investment have been substantial yet participation rates in sport have remained broadly static over this period and the inequalities in participation between for example men and women, people with and without a disability and the highest and lowest socio-economic groups have remained stubbornly difficult to narrow. All of these considerable efforts at public policy intervention can be distilled into one simple but incredibly challenging question - why is it that some people become committed lifelong sport participants while others drop out from sport in their teens never to return to an active lifestyle?

Sporting Capital – a new theoretical framework to guide sports policy and practice

Sporting Capital provides the missing framework of understanding that can create a new impetus for sustained growth in community sport in England. In its component parts there is little that is new about Sporting Capital. But in its totality it opens the door to a completely new and exciting perspective that can create a shared sense of purpose for public policy in sport. The application of the innovative principles of Sporting Capital within programme design provides the prospect of a powerful intervention agenda that can transform the sporting landscape of this country.

What is Sporting Capital?

Sporting Capital is analogous to the theory of human capital and may be defined as:

“The stock of physical, social and psychological attributes and competencies that support and motivate an individual to participate in sport and to sustain that participation over time”.

The underlying factors that determine the likelihood of people participating in sport may be classified into three domains: Social, Psychological and Physiological (physical health and

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1 This research was carried out and written by Nick Rowe who devised the theory of Sporting Capital. It was commissioned by StreetGames. Nick was assisted by Oliver Norden at TNS-BMRB who carried out the statistical modelling and without whose support this research would not have been possible. Support was also provided by Sport England in making available data from the Active People Survey. For a more detailed analysis and reporting of the results refer to the pack of eleven ‘Sporting Capital Resource Sheets’ available at: [http://www.streetgames.org/www/sgplus](http://www.streetgames.org/www/sgplus)
physical competency). Brought together these three domains interact and combine to create an individual’s level of ‘Sporting Capital’.

The model (see Figure 1) suggests a dynamic interaction between physiological, psychological and social factors, all of which play a significant role in determining current and likely future sports participation. It predicts that an individual with positive scores on the three domains will have a high probability of current and future sustained participation while someone with scores that locate them at the outer edges of the triangle will have a very low probability of current or future participation in sport.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physiological Domain</th>
<th>Psychological Domain</th>
<th>Social Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health</td>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>Social connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical competency/literacy</td>
<td>Self efficacy</td>
<td>Family/Friends/Colleagues play sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Sporting Capital</td>
<td>Likely to be non participant or high risk of long term drop out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Sporting Capital</td>
<td>Potential for lapsing but high probability of returning to sports participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Sporting Capital</td>
<td>High probability of lifelong participation in sport</td>
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</table>

Like human capital, Sporting Capital is acquired by education and experience. It is influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms set by the family, peers, teachers, coaches, leaders (influential others) the media, marketing and promotion and through consumption.

**What is it about Sporting Capital theory that can make a real difference to public policy and practice in sports development?**

There are a number of important characteristics that we would expect to be associated with Sporting Capital that could transform the way we look at and implement public policy for sport:

- Although Sporting Capital can appreciate and depreciate – it is by its nature more durable than participation which is characterised by high levels of flux.
- People with high levels of Sporting Capital are more resilient to the potential negative impact on participation of external barriers associated with changes in life circumstances and, should they drop out, are more likely to return to sport at a later date when better opportunities arise.
• Increased Sporting Capital leads to more frequent and diverse participation in sport and, in turn, more frequent and sustained participation impacts positively to build and reinforce Sporting Capital – a virtuous feedback loop.

• High quality sporting experiences are likely to have a more positive impact on Sporting Capital than mediocre ones while poor quality experiences can have a negative impact leading to depreciation in the levels of Sporting Capital and, over time, to drop out and sedentary behaviours.

• Significant aspects of Sporting Capital (such as physical competency and self-efficacy) are developed at a very young age, involve a socialisation process (with boys much more likely to build Sporting Capital than girls and the more socio-economically advantaged having higher levels than those from lower socio-economic groups) and can depreciate (or less likely build) over time and with age.

Testing the theory – developing an empirical model of Sporting Capital and its relationship to sports participation

The theory of Sporting Capital has been empirically tested using population level data collected through the Active People Survey (APS)\(^2\). The Sporting Capital Index (SCI) is a composite measure of an individual’s Sporting Capital based on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being low and 10 being high. The Index is constructed from answers to question items across the three sporting capital domains; the Physical, Psychological and Social Domains.

Results

The evidence from the Active People Survey provides empirical support for the relationship between levels of Sporting Capital and rates of participation in sport. The higher the level of Sporting Capital the higher the probability that someone will participate regularly in sport and the lower the level the higher the probability of sedentary behaviours and drop out. Figure 2 shows changes in the probability of participating in sport with changes in the Sporting Capital Index score. The relationship is not a linear one with the most significant change between a SCI score of 6 and 7 where the probability of participating jumps from 30% to 50%.

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\(^2\) Data was used from Sport England’s Active People Survey. The analysis in this report is carried out on the household survey sample collected in APS6 (October 2011 to October 2012) of the APS6 survey period. The sample size used in this analysis was 4,527 cases. For more information about the Active People Survey see: http://www.sportengland.org/research/active_people_survey.aspx
What are the levels of Sporting Capital in England?

Figure 3 shows the current (data from October 2011 to October 2012) distribution of Sporting Capital Index scores across the English adult population (16 plus years). The mean score for Sporting Capital in the adult population in England is 5.7. The pattern takes the form of a normal distribution curve but is slightly skewed towards a more positive profile.

Sporting Capital – a socially structured phenomenon

Measurement of sports participation behaviours has demonstrated that it is highly socially structured and we would expect the same to apply to Sporting Capital levels. Figure 4 shows that unlike participation rates in sport the mean Sporting Capital scores do not decline with age until we reach the 55 plus which demonstrates the durability of Sporting Capital over the life course and the ‘locked in potential’ for participating in sport.
Figure 5 shows how mean levels of Sporting Capital vary by gender and by social class. On average men have a Sporting Capital level that is almost one point higher than that found for women. Similar differences are found between the upper and lower social class groups. These differences may not seem to be significant – but as we have seen earlier the difference in the probability of participating between those on a score of 5 and those on a score of 6 is considerable – from 15.7% to 30% respectively.

Sporting Capital – making a difference - applying the theory to practice

Public policy intervention can build Sporting Capital if delivered in the right way to the right people at the right time. A focus on building Sporting Capital is more likely to be effective in achieving public policy goals of increased sustained participation in sport than a focus on participation per se.

Doorstep Sport provides an excellent example – from which the learning could be applied more widely - of the potential benefits that may be derived from applying and testing the theory of Sporting Capital in programme design and application.
There are a number of areas where viewing the Doorstep Sport Club programme and its development through the Sporting Capital lens will potentially pay dividends (with the same principles applying to other programmes).

In particular, the targeting and recruitment process it will be important to identify and understand the differences between young people who come to Doorstep Sport Clubs with very low levels of Sporting Capital, those who come with modest levels and those who come with high levels as the intervention approach will need to be very different for each of these groups. For example:

- **Building Sporting Capital in this low Sporting Capital group** will be a slow process and they will be at high risk of an early drop out from the programme. Therefore, young People with **low Sporting Capital (1 to 3)** will need:
  - A focus that promotes and builds self-efficacy, self-confidence and potentially improves basic movement skills.
  - An emphasis on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational factors and on reinforcing social networks. Psychological factors related to lack of confidence, self-efficacy and negative body image will feature prominently in this group.
  - An empathetic environment and leadership style to help address psychological factors.
  - They would benefit from mentoring from people who they see as like themselves and ideally, would receive one-to-one support and attention in the early stages.

- **Young People who come to the programme with moderate levels of Sporting Capital (4 to 7)** may be participating at low levels because of negative external factors such as a lack of opportunity with few facilities or accessible clubs in their neighbourhood. They may face barriers relating to finance and cost – and this will be the case for many living in areas of multiple deprivation. These young people on moderate levels of Sporting Capital will benefit from:
  - The opportunity being made available to take part at a price they can afford.
  - More structured environments – but ones that they are empowered to influence – and that look different from the more authoritarian social contexts which make them feel uncomfortable and where they find it difficult to conform to expected behaviours.
  - Competitive opportunities and the camaraderie of playing in teams can help to sustain and further build their Sporting Capital. These young people bring with them an aptitude for sport and may respond positively to the increased status that participation in sport can confer.
  - They are candidates for using sport as the hook to engage them in more pro-social and educational activity and to develop their human capital through the transferable skills associated with voluntary involvement in sport.
  - Young girls with moderate levels of Sporting Capital will be particularly susceptible to peer group influence and therefore, building an alternative ‘sport friendly’ social network will be important for the retention and continued building of Sporting
Capital amongst this group.

- Individuals with **high levels of Sporting Capital (8-10)** are already very sporty. They have a high probability of participating regularly in sport and to come back to sport following a short term drop out.
  - The focus for this group is on ‘participation maintenance’.
  - Continued quality experiences will help reinforce their already positive attitudes towards sport.
  - They will respond positively to barrier reduction such as low cost opportunities and increased access or improved quality of facilities.
  - They are often looking for improved opportunities to take part in competitive sport and in leagues and tournaments. If they are not already members of clubs they will be potential recruits.
  - Young people with high levels of Sporting Capital are potential volunteers and should be targeted for volunteer recruitment. And it is amongst this group that Olympic champions of the future are most likely to be identified.

- Some projects may go for a mix of recruits with varying levels of Sporting Capital — but in so doing they need to take great care on how these groups interact and are provided for — the wrong mix can be counterproductive — the right mix can create empowered and positively reinforcing environments.

- Participation is invariably temporary while Sporting Capital is durable and associated with longer term engagement in sport (‘participation in sport is temporary while Sporting Capital is for life’). The focus of Doorstep Sport Clubs needs to be on building Sporting Capital and not on increasing participation per se. This shifts the emphasis from judging success purely by attendance (which is a necessary condition) to **judging success by the quality of the experience and the increase in Sporting Capital that accompanies it** (i.e. sufficient conditions).

- Many young people in disadvantaged areas do not get the positive socialisation process that builds Sporting Capital in their early formative years. They may come to Doorstep Sport with what might be considered a ‘Sporting Capital deficit’. **The training and quality of sports leaders, mentors and coaches will be vital to the success of the programme to help overcome this deficit.**

- Some leaders and coaches may be better suited to work with young people with high levels of Sporting Capital while others may be better suited to engaging with young people with low levels — it is important not to assume that one type of leader or coach fits all.
Conclusion

Sporting Capital as a theory is in its infancy. The research carried out so far provides promising results but if Sporting Capital is to fulfil its potential as a guiding and influential framework for public policy further research is required. Much of this research could be incorporated into existing commitments for programme evaluations. However, other major new areas are needed including large scale survey methods with longitudinal panels and experimental research designs. These come at some cost – but the potential prize of a sound well tested theory that can underpin public policy to ‘shift the curve’ of participation in sport is a big one that could more than justify the significant investment required.