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Social Glue? The contribution of involvement in sport and other community organisations to community wellbeing

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Introduction

Wellbeing has become an important concept within policy making and academic research, particularly since Putnam (1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000) popularised social capital and the idea that individuals and communities can be better or worse off as a result of their social connections and networks. The notion of community wellbeing is framed by an acknowledgement that the characteristics of the collective, rather than the individual, are important health determinants (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). In other words, the way in which communities connect through social networks and relationships is essential to their wellbeing.

Membership of voluntary organisations is assumed to be a significant factor in the building of social capital, including social cohesion, levels of trust, norms of reciprocity, civic participation and engagement, and therefore an important aspect of community wellbeing (Putnam, 2000). However, there is a distinct lack of clarity about whether particular voluntary associations contribute to social capital more or less than others, and a lack of micro-level knowledge about the ways in which these associations contribute to making their members more (or less) trusting, more (or less) prepared to engage in civic participation or more (or less) socially connected (Stolle, 1998).

Some commonly claimed community benefits from sport and active recreation participation include community capacity building, reducing crime and youth delinquency, empowering disadvantaged groups, improving confidence and self-esteem and increasing social integration and co-operation (Long & Sanderson, 2001). However, there is scant evidence for these specific claims and the general notion that sport is a vital factor in the cohesion of local communities, that it is social glue. The studies reported in this paper are part of a larger project that seeks to establish whether involvement in sport and active recreation contributes to community wellbeing and under what conditions the contribution is more or less significant than other forms of civic participation.

Literature Review

As one of the social networks capable of generating, developing and maintaining social capital, and thus contributing to the wellbeing of communities, voluntary organisations have become a significant focus of public policy (Jochum, Pratten & Wilding, 2005; OECD, 2001; Policy Research Initiative, 2005; Productivity Commission, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Saguaro Seminar, 2000). Furthermore, as one of the most visible types of voluntary organisations with significant cultural and political currency, community sport organisations have been viewed as ideal vehicles for the development of social inclusion and connectedness within Australia and internationally (see, for example, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001a; Sport Canada, 2002; Sport England, 2004).

A variety of research has demonstrated that the existence of social networks and the social inclusion and connectedness they foster has an impact on a range of social and economic factors, among them health, mortality and mental health (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Berkman & Syme, 1979; Fratiglioni, 2000; Kawachi, et al, 1996; Kawachi et al, 1997; Kawachi et al, 1999; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Seeman, 1996); crime (Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997); and employment, income, labour markets and the economy (Boxman, De Graaf & Flap, 1991; Finneran & Kelly, 2003; Kawachi et al, 1997; Putnam, 1993). In essence, social networks have value (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; 2005), an idea contextualised by Putnam's (1995a, p.67) notion that 'life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital', because social networks foster reciprocity and trust, facilitate communication, amplify reputations and 'allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved'. In each case the social network is not the outcome, but rather the conduit for a range of other outcomes (such as increased trust), which in turn might lead to further outcomes (such as emotional physical or financial support during a time of need).

The social capital concept has become an increasingly important way of conceptualising the way in which social relations generate positive outcomes for individuals, organisations, groups, communities and nations (cf. Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). The underlying premise of social capital is that relations between people have the capacity to facilitate action and outcomes, through the generation of goodwill, trust and reciprocity. Compared to physical and human capital, social capital is the least tangible (Coleman, 1988). A key point of agreement within the social capital literature is that 'the people who do better are somehow better connected' (Burt, 2000: p.3) or even more colloquially that 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000: p.225).

The importance of sport as a social, economic and political institution, however, has not resulted in extensive research in the area, despite Jarvie's (2003) contention that if social capital is related to a broader participation in society then sport at both an ideological and normative level has a role to play. The relationship between social capital and sport has only recently begun to attract sustained academic interest (Dyreson 2001; Collins 2003, 2004; Jarvie 2003; Sharpe 2003, 2006; Blackshaw and Long 2005; Tonts 2005; Brown 2006; Seippel 2006; Coalter 2007; Harvey et al. 2007; Nicholson and Hoye 2008). Much of this research has focused on conceptualizing the potential linkages between social capital and sport, an appropriate endeavour given that Putnam (2000) implicitly tied the two together through his analysis of the decline in bowling leagues. Some of the most recent research into the sport and social capital relationship has been empirical (see, for example, Bradbury and Kay 2008; Brown 2008; Hylton 2008; Long 2008). However, the key question of whether participation in sport organisations contributes to social capital in the form of social inclusion, social connectedness and wellbeing remains largely unanswered.

Participation trends can be useful proxies within analyses where one of the primary goals is to generalise at the macro level, particularly if multiple sources and a diverse range of evidence are utilised (Putnam, 2000: p.26; Van Deth, 2003). However, participation trends are inadequate for analysing the substance of social capital, or in other words, the ways in which it is used or created by individuals, groups and communities. Membership of a club, group or association is unlikely to be an accurate reflection of engagement within an organisation or within broader community activities (Putnam, 2000). Membership of voluntary organisations in particular is often devoid of specific responsibilities or performance expectations, a situation which is exacerbated if the membership is simply a sense of belonging which is not formalised through the payment of fees or dues. Therefore, the assumption that increasing the number of participants or members of an organisation will have a direct relationship to the level or quality of social capital is tenuous. Indeed, Putnam (2000: p.58) noted that 'what really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership'. Social capital, therefore, is not present or reflected in the membership per se, but the ways in which the membership is used to secure benefit for the individual or the group. The approach adopted within this project is innovative because rather than use participation trends as

a proxy for the existence of social capital and therefore community wellbeing or strength (DVC, 2005; Putnam, 2000; VCIP, 2006) it addresses the central question of how sport enables individuals to develop social connections and thus contribute to the wellbeing of those individuals and their communities.

Method

This paper focuses on reporting selected results from two separate cross-sectional random sample surveys administered in the State of Victoria, Australia in 2008 and 2009.

Study 1 (2008)

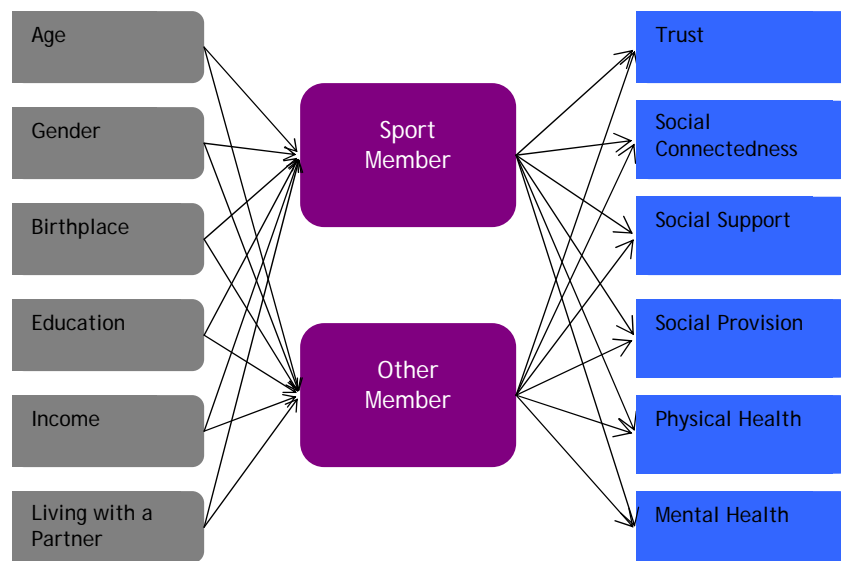
In Study 1, a list of 5655 residents in the State of Victoria was randomly generated from the Victorian *White Pages* telephone directories and surveyed via direct mail with two reminders as per the standard procedures recommended by Dillman (2001). Data were collected on levels of involvement in community sport and other third sector organisations together with a measure of social provisions using the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona, 1984, 1986), as well as selected demographic variables. A response rate of over 32% generated a sample of 1826 respondents.

Study 2 (2009)

In Study 2, a second list of 5655 residents in the State of Victoria was randomly generated from the Victorian *White Pages* telephone directories and surveyed via direct mail as per Study 1. Data were collected on levels of involvement in community sport and other third sector organisations together with measures of social connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998, 2000; Lee, Keogh & Sexton, 2002), perceived social support (using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988), generalized trust, and self-reported health (SF-12v2), as well as selected demographic variables. A response rate of over 32% generated a sample of 1834 respondents.

A diagrammatic representation of the relationships that were examined within the two studies is presented below in Figure 1. For the purposes of this paper we are examining the membership of sport organisations and membership of 'other' or 'non-sport' organisations; in other words we have aggregated the respondents who were members of non-sport voluntary sector organisations. For the purposes of clarity, arrows representing possible associations between demographic variables and Trust, Social connectedness, Social and provision together with Physical and Mental health have not been shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of research enquiry focus



Summary of key results

All the scales used in both studies were found to be reliable. Regression analyses are presented below for data from both studies; logistic regression in the case of the variable 'Trust' (generalised trust with two categories) and multiple regressions in the remainder (using continuous dependent variables). Due to the word limit constraints for this conference paper, the detailed regression tables are not presented, rather we focus on reporting some of the more interesting results. For each of the following dependent variables we present the predictors in order of strength. All reported associations are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Trust

Involvement in any type of community organisation is significantly associated with higher levels of generalised trust as is higher education achievement, being born in Australia, higher income and increasing age.

Social Connectedness

Involvement in sport makes a unique contribution to predicting higher levels of perceived social connectedness relative to involvement in other types of organizations as does being female, living with a partner, having a higher income, being born in Australia, and older age.

Social support

The strongest predictors of higher scores in perceived social support from friends (a sub-scale of the MSPSS) are being female, being born in Australia, having a higher income, and being involved in any type of community organisation.

Social provision

The strongest predictors of higher scores in self-assessed social support are being female, living with a partner, having a higher income, higher education achievement, being a member of a sport organisation, being born in Australia, and being involved in non-sport community organisations.

Physical health

The strongest predictors of higher scores in self-reported physical health are younger age, higher income, being involved in sport, living with a partner and higher education achievement.

Mental health

The strongest predictors of higher scores self-reported mental health are increasing age being involved in sport, living with a partner, higher income, being born in Australia, and being a member of a non-sport community organisation.

Conclusion

In summary, the results indicate that involvement in any type of community organisation is significantly associated with higher levels of generalised trust. This supports the claims by Putnam (2000) and others that civic participation in community organisations leads to people being more trusting. This study has shown is that involvement in sport organisations is equally as powerful in developing this sense of trusting others as being involved in other types of community organizations.

The study has also shown that involvement in sport makes a unique contribution to predicting higher levels of social connectedness relative to involvement in other types of organizations while holding other demographic predictors constant. While this study has not explored the reasons for this, the finding supports some of the claims made in public policy documents that sport is a useful vehicle for the development of a heightened sense of social connectedness (see, for example, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001a; Sport Canada, 2002; Sport England, 2004).

Finally, the study has found that involvement in sport makes a unique contribution to higher scores in both self-reported physical and mental health relative to involvement in other types of organizations while holding other demographic predictors constant. This is not a surprising result for self-reported physical health due to the physical health benefits that can accrue through involvement in sport and active recreation. What is more surprising perhaps is that being involved in sport is a more powerful predictor of self-reported health than being involved in other types of community organizations. Further analysis will examine both the direct and indirect effects of sport involvement on mental health in order to tease out possible interactions between community involvement, health, trust and social connection.

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