

Reflections on participation: Social or sporting capital?

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ConnectSport Research Director, Dr Dan Parnell, of the Business School at Manchester Metropolitan University, and Louise Morby, Senior Lecturer in Sport Development at Leeds Beckett University and Equity Lead at the UK Sport Development and Research Network (UKSDN), provide some reflections on a recent conference focused on participation in sport and physical activity.

It is the end of the academic year and both Dan and Louise were at last free from teaching, marking and admin in general. The immediate items on their agenda were graduation, research and planning for next year (as well as some much-needed annual leave!) so it begs the question why are they attending conferences?

Dan said: "It's really important that we take time out to focus on the purpose of our research and what it can achieve for society. Attending conferences offers me a chance to stop and think about what I have been doing, and think ahead to what I am going to do and with who.

"As such, when the opportunity to listen and discuss sport participation and social capital with Professor Fred Coalter (Visiting professor at Leeds Beckett University and the Free University of Brussels) and Nick Rowe (Visiting research fellow, Leeds Beckett University and former Head of Strategy and Research at Sport England) appeared, it was a no-brainer.

"As part of the UKSDN's 'Conversations with a Purpose' seminar series, the event offered extensive insight from a leading researcher and expert with 20-plus years' experience, and commissioner research within the industry. It clearly had a purpose – and I wanted in."

Louise, who combines her academic work with her role as Equity Lead at the UKSDN, provided some more background on the Network.

She said: "Although a new name to most, the UKSDN has existed since 2008, but was formally known as the European Sport Development Network.

"As Dan has said, the most important thing to some researchers is that their work is valuable to those within industry. In response to this, the Network was established in 2008, to build bridges between academia and sports industry practitioners. We are

quietly proud that the Network has organised several successful conferences, published extensively in academic and professional journals and engaged in a variety of networking, advocacy and influencing work relating to sport development policy and practice in the UK.

“The Network is dynamic, flexible, inclusive – and growing. Whilst we have distinctive leads (my role is focused on equity) and extensive links, we encourage practitioners, managers and researchers to reach out and get involved. You can read more about the Network and our forthcoming conference [here](#).”

THE CONFERENCE

Nick Rowe kicked off the conference by presenting his work on ‘sporting capital’. Nick offered insights based on his recent research and experience working within the industry. He proposed that in order to increase participation in sport and physical activity, policy-makers and implementers need to have an understanding of the theory around sporting capital.

Nick defines sporting capital 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 presentation stemmed from Nick’s research recently published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics. The article, entitled ‘Sporting capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis of sport participation determinants and its application to sports development policy and practice’, [can be found here](#).

Nick stated that there are three factors which determine how likely someone is to participate in sport: social, psychological and physiological (which includes physical health and physical competency). These three ‘domains’ interact and create someone’s level of sporting capital.

Nick outlined that the higher the scores within the three domains, the higher their sporting capital and therefore how much more likely they will be to sustain participation. It goes without saying that in contrast, a person with lower scores within the three domains are very unlikely to participate in sport, never mind sustain sporting participation. The model can be seen below:

The hypothesis that Nick presented was “increasing sporting capital within participants should lead to sustained participation”, which made us think that the model of sporting capital could be compared to previous tried and tested models of behaviour change, for example Dahlgreen and Whitehead’s 1991 ‘Social Model of Health’ or ‘Rainbow Model’. This model acknowledges that an individual’s health is

determined by multiple influences and it goes wider than the three domains outlined in the model of sporting capital.

Dahlgreen and Whitehead's model has been recently used to influence local health and wellbeing strategies. So the concept of applying theoretical models relating to behaviour change is not a new concept, but it is a topic which is currently very popular amongst policy-makers within the world of sport. Thanks to the efforts of organisations and bodies from other sectors who have previously invested heavily in this concept, there is a body of evidence to support the idea that such models are fundamental to sustained changes within an individual's behaviour.

This leads us to ask if sporting capital is just another 'model of behaviour change' which looks to solve the problem of 'not enough people are participating in sport', rather than explore the root causes which lead to an individual not participating in sport.

At this point, it would be really useful to draw upon work carried out in another topic area, community development, in particular the work of Margaret Ledwith. Ledwith (2005) draws upon Hope and Timmel's 1994 'six stages of questioning' as a model for helping to get to the root cause as to why a particular issue within a community exists.

The model helps us to avoid superficial analysis and could help policy-makers and implementers meaningfully analyse why there is an issue in sports participation. The first step of the model encourages us to clearly frame the issue is which needs addressing – to be clear before any further analysis takes place. The second step suggests we then analyse why the issue exists in the first place. The third step deals with analysing where the issue tends to exist, is it geographical for example? The fourth step suggests that *all* problems related to this issue are further analysed; in other words, what are the consequences of the main issue existing? Which then leads to step five; what is the root cause of the issue? What is the main cause of 'not enough people participating in sport'. Last but not least, this is bookended by step six, which is putting an action plan into place to tackle the issue.

Still with us? Well, what we propose is that models such as sporting capital may not be addressing the correct issue in the first place, so it is therefore impossible to get to the 'root cause' of the issue which such models are aiming to eradicate.

If we follow Hope and Timmel's model, it could be argued that the issue up for analysis isn't 'not enough people are participating in sport', but instead 'why don't some people want to participate in sport?' which, in turn, may lead to step five and the root cause being 'inequalities in society'. Consequently, the actions that lead on from here need to be around addressing these inequalities and the effect they have on sports participation.

However, let us be clear; we are not arguing that models like sporting capital do not have an important role to play in policy and programme formulation; indeed, we think they have a significant role to play. What we are proposing is that more attention needs to be given to addressing the preceding inequalities in society, which lead to low participation rates and ‘low sporting capital’. We are really interested in what has been done around why someone may score low in the three domains and how this can be addressed.

We think sporting capital could be an important consideration for sporting organisations, or organisations using sport to increase the impact of their projects, and for those aiming to get more people participating in sport. For an example of where sporting capital has been applied to programme design, check out Nick’s work with [StreetGames](#).

HALF-TIME

Following Nick, Professor Coalter entered the discussion. It has always been a pleasure to gain insight into Fred’s expertise – in particular, check out [A Wider Social Role for Sport: Who’s Keeping the Score?](#)

Fred’s presentation at the conference used material from [The Spirit Level](#) (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, The Spirit Level: why equal societies almost always do better. London: Allen Lane). This is a book which explores the challenges of inequality and class across different social groups and countries.

This echoes Fred’s research which challenged the UK Government sport policy GamePlan’s use of certain Scandinavian countries as comparators and as a basis for setting aspirational targets for sporting participation. It illustrated the robust and consistent relationship between sporting participation and social class in the UK ([Coalter, 2013](#)).

Fred argues in this research that there are different levels of participation across a number of countries and that these countries are substantially different to the UK in terms of distribution of wealth, income inequality, general inequality, educational access and social mobility and gender. Fred asked how these countries can be true comparators to the UK?

He highlighted that the economic and social features in these countries, which may help to explain their higher sporting participation rates, are well beyond the control of sports policy. This left us challenging whether sport policy does, and could make a difference.

Much of this echoed other prominent discussions by [Dorling \(2014\)](#) and [Standing \(2014\)](#), who provide an analysis and insight into inequality and class. In a time of growing inequality in the UK, with Brexit on the horizon and within an age of ‘[super-austerity](#)’, this raises serious concerns for those in sport.

Conclusions

1 Sporting capital could offer a new way to understand sporting participation and help to get more people active.

2 The influence of sport policy on sporting participation may be a hostage to levels of inequality in our country.

Our final thoughts

As researchers we feel that the area of sport, class and inequality is under-researched. Further, there is a need for more research on the impact of the economic recession on sporting participation. For those seeking to contribute to the latter, [please see this call for papers](#).

We also wish to highlight the [seventh annual UKSDN conference on September 16, 2016](#). This conference aims to build on other events we have attended. Importantly, it aims to bring together academics, researchers, students and practitioners in the area of sports development. Get involved and please reach out to us if you have any questions.

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Relevant research:

Coalter, F. (2013). Game Plan and The Spirit Level: the class ceiling and the limits of sports policy? *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 5, 1: 3-19. [Found here](#).

Rowe, N. (2015). Sporting capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis of sport participation determinants and its application to sports development policy and practice. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7, 1: 43-61. [Found here](#).