

# **Football and Social Inclusion: Evaluating Social Policy**

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## **Introduction**

There is a widespread belief that sport, particularly football, can be used to promote social inclusion (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 2001; Collins et al., 1999; Football Task Force, 1999). UK government policy-makers oriented specifically towards combating social exclusion have frequently made this assertion. According to the DCMS, ‘the powerful impact which sport can have on social exclusion factors is increasingly recognised by all involved in regeneration and inclusion’ (2001, p. 8). However, despite the prevalence of this view, there is little ‘hard’ evidence to substantiate it (Long and Sanderson, 2001). This is particularly significant given the recent espousal of evidence based policy-making by UK government ministers (Walker, 2001). In a major speech to the Economic and Social Research Council in 2000, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, declared, ‘Social science should be at the heart of policymaking. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective’ (Blunkett, 2000). Consequently there is an urgent need to evaluate sport-based social inclusion projects so that their outcomes and effects can be measured and understood, and so that future policy initiatives can be better designed.

This paper addresses the need for evaluation, focusing specifically on football-based projects. Section one examines the context surrounding the provision of football-based social inclusion projects. It describes how rigorous evaluation is crucial, not only for informing social policy, but also for helping football clubs<sup>1</sup> to meet their community objectives. Section two looks at the current state of project

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘football club’ applies to clubs of all sizes: large, fully professional clubs with global fan bases as well as smaller, more localised clubs.

evaluation, identifies some of the difficulties, and outlines recent developments in evaluation research. Section three focuses on one of these developments – realist evaluation – and highlights its relevance for football-based social inclusion projects. Section four extends this analysis by providing basic methodological guidelines for the evaluation of individual projects. The final section draws a number of conclusions on how realist evaluation could make a positive contribution to both social policy and the design of specific projects.

The arguments advanced in this paper for more rigorous evaluation are not specific to football-based social inclusion projects. They are relevant throughout the leisure sector, where demonstrating the sporting and social outcomes of various policies and programmes is of increasing importance (Coalter et al., 2000). In fact, many policy areas beyond sport and leisure would benefit from the development of evaluation methods that could provide robust and useful evidence to feed back into policy making and project design. As described later, academics and practitioners working in fields such as nursing and social work are highlighting the importance of evaluation and promoting more relevant methodologies. The focus here on football and social inclusion is particularly important, though, for a number of reasons that will be outlined below.

### **Football-Based Social Inclusion Projects in Context**

Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, interest in the instrumental value of sport, particularly football, has increased. Many community-based projects now aim to use sport to accomplish various social objectives. These projects use sport in a variety of ways, for example, to divert young people from crime or anti-social behaviour, to engage young people in formal and informal

education, to promote healthy behaviour, or to encourage social cohesion. However, there is, to date, little evaluation evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of these types of sport-based projects.

The need for evidence has been highlighted on many previous occasions. Discussions have focused on the reasons for the lack of evaluation, including the absence of a clear rationale for such projects (Nichols, 1997), uncritical perceptions of sport (Smith and Waddington, 2004), methodological difficulties (Coalter, 2001a; Taylor et al., 2000) and other factors surrounding project delivery. These issues are examined more closely later in the paper, but first it is necessary to address the question of why such evidence is important. For those involved in the delivery of sport-based community projects, it is clearly essential to know whether or not a project is successful and how it can be designed to meet the needs of current and future participants. On a broader level, it is crucial for policy makers to be able to draw on evaluation evidence in order to plan and deliver suitable policies. Related to this is the need to publicly justify such projects (Taylor et al., 2000), particularly against criticism, for example, that they merely reward young offenders. As Nichols (1997) points out, evaluation evidence would take this debate beyond positions supported merely by value judgements. The early part of this paper builds on these arguments by looking at the specific context surrounding social inclusion projects based at football clubs and suggests that there are further situational factors that make evaluation of these projects critical.

### *Sport and Social Inclusion: Theoretical Development*

The term 'social exclusion' originated in the social policy of the French socialist governments of the 1980s, where those on the margins of society,

particularly those without access to social insurance, were referred to as 'les exclus' (Room, 1995; Silver, 1994). Yet when the term began to be used in a European context, it was more closely related to the European Union objective of achieving social and economic cohesion (Percy-Smith, 2000). In Britain, social exclusion was given a high political profile following the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit by the government in 1997. The interdepartmental Social Exclusion Unit has had a strategic role in developing integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad schools (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Yet despite its significance to the current UK policy agenda, social exclusion remains the locus of fierce debates, particularly at a theoretical level.

Social exclusion has been defined in a number of different ways, for example, in terms of disadvantage relative to norms of social, economic or political activity, particular spatial areas, processes that lead to disadvantage, or the outcomes for individuals, groups, or communities (Percy-Smith, 2000). The Social Exclusion Unit defines social exclusion as what happens 'when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). However, certain commentators have criticised this kind of definition for being too narrowly concerned with outcomes and not sufficiently focused on the processes involved. For example, Castells (2000) argued that social exclusion could be better understood as a process, not as a condition, and Micklewright (2002) argued that focusing on specific characteristics creates a definition of circumstances that may lead to exclusion, without defining exclusion itself.

A more comprehensive definition by the European Commission includes the

following: 'social exclusion refers to the multiple and changing factors resulting in people being excluded from the normal exchanges, practices and rights of modern society. Poverty is one of the most obvious factors, but social exclusion also refers to inadequate rights in housing, education, health and access to services. It affects individuals and groups, particularly in urban and rural areas, who are in some way subject to discrimination or segregation; and it emphasises the weaknesses in the social infrastructure and the risk of allowing a two-tier society to become established by default' (Commission of the European Communities, 1993, p. 1). This definition covers a number of perspectives and suggests that exclusion can be caused not only by systemic deficiencies, such as a lack of access to resources, but also by community attitudes and underlying social structures. Moreover, it is not always clear whether exclusion is voluntary or self-imposed (Burchardt et al., 1999). Giddens (1998), for example, discussed the issue of self-exclusion, pointing to the voluntary exclusion evident at the higher levels of society.

Social inclusion developed conceptually alongside social exclusion. Certain commentators (e.g. Donnelly and Coakley, 2002) argued that social inclusion should not be seen simply as a response to social exclusion, but as having a value on its own as both a process and a goal. However, in the context of UK government policy, the term social inclusion signifies the reversal of those factors considered responsible for social exclusion, such as unemployment, poor housing and high crime (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2002).

So how does sport fit into conceptual discussions of social exclusion and inclusion? Theoretical examination of the benefits of sport and leisure began in earnest with the review in the United States by Driver et al. (1991). They identified diverse benefits, such as the development of primary group relationships,

improvements in physical health and the opportunity to acquire leadership skills. Witt and Crompton (1996) developed this theoretical perspective, but noted the lack of evaluation evidence available to substantiate it. Bovaird et al. (1997) posited links between time spent in sports and increased identity with local community, increased work productivity and reductions in anti-social behaviour. However, evidence of these beneficial linkages is scarce (Long and Sanderson, 2001). Theoretical discussions such as these have made sport relevant in the analysis of social inclusion, since many of the perceived benefits of sport can be considered social inclusion objectives. Recently, Coalter (2001a) reviewed both theory and evidence for the effect of sport on health, crime, education, employment, regeneration, community development and the environment. He found strong theoretical claims and anecdotal evidence, but concluded that more robust evidence was urgently needed.

#### *Sport and Social Inclusion: Policy Development*

Assumptions made about sport's potential benefits have been accompanied by a shift in political rhetoric and sport policy (Coalter and Allison, 1996). In the UK during the 1980s and 1990s, when economic concerns dominated, sport was considered almost exclusively in terms of its regenerative impact, i.e. how it could increase income and jobs. Yet in contemporary politics, sport is now also analysed in terms of its potential to promote tolerance, improve health and develop social skills, as well as to combat poverty, unemployment and social exclusion (Committee for the Development of Sport, 1998). Furthermore, it was noted that the impact of sport, particularly football, extends to spheres that are hard to reach through more traditional political activities (Football Task Force, 1999).

It can be argued that the coherence of theories concerning sport's social

benefits often obscures the lack of ‘hard evidence’ to support them (Coalter, 2001a; Long and Sanderson, 2001). Policy makers, relying on the credibility of these theoretical arguments, have so far posited a strong relationship between sport and social inclusion. Indeed Smith and Waddington (2004, p. 281) argued that support for sport-based social inclusion projects among policy makers and practitioners is ‘based on an uncritical perception of sport as an unambiguously wholesome and healthy activity in both a physical and moral sense’. In a policy context, therefore, the potentially damaging aspects of sport participation, such as its possible association with ritualised acts of violence, confrontation and alcohol consumption (Crabbe, 2000), tend to be marginalised. Yet the increasing significance of evidence-based policy may require policy makers to make a clearer assessment of the relationship between sport and social inclusion and gain a more fine-grained understanding of how sport can affect the lives of young people. Evaluating football-based social inclusion projects is crucial in this context. Such evaluations could provide robust evidence to assess claims made about sport’s beneficial outcomes and, in turn, indicate its value in broader programmes for community development.

### *Football Clubs and Communities*

In the same way that social exclusion is central to public policy, so too is the notion of ‘community’. Indeed the promotion of football in a public policy context is based largely on the contribution it could make to community regeneration. Recent regulatory measures in the football industry are also concerned with community issues, including customer relations (Independent Football Commission, 2004) and supporter representation (Football Task Force, 1999; Supporters Direct, 2005). Similarly, developments in club governance centre on mutual ownership and



community involvement (Football Governance Research Centre, 2005). Yet, although there is now 'widespread adoption of the word 'community' in the official discourse of the football world' (Wagg, 2004, p. 20), there is little formal evaluation of the relationship between football clubs and their communities (Brown et al., 2006).

Until recently, most football clubs had a poor record of doing any sort of community work (Power, 2000). This situation was altered somewhat by the development, in 1986, of Football in the Community schemes. These schemes proliferated and expanded and now operate at all Premier League, Football League and some Football Conference clubs. The Leyton Orient Community Sports Programme (LOCSP), for example, is well known for its pioneering work with socially excluded groups in the local community (Brown et al., 2006; Crabbe and Slaughter, 2004). Perkins (2000) argued that Football in the Community represents the most appropriate point of contact between clubs, local authorities and surrounding communities. He concluded that these relationships will become increasingly significant, since 'global' clubs will anchor themselves to their immediate communities as they expand their support overseas, while smaller clubs will attempt to strengthen local partnerships to ensure their day-to-day existence.

Discussion of Football in the Community has, until now, focused predominantly on the 'ownership' and operation of individual schemes, i.e. whether or not the schemes should be closely integrated with the clubs (Taylor, 2004; Watson, 2000; Perkins, 2000). While these issues are significant, the importance of project evaluation as a basis for understanding football's role in the community has too often been overlooked. Evaluation may point out the ways in which football has an impact on social issues and the ways in which it has little or no effect. Perkins (2000, p. 113) alluded to this when he pointed out that 'local authorities often need convincing about

what might actually be possible by seeing or hearing about something actually working positively in a similar location in another part of the country'. However, the need for rigorous evaluation has rarely been made explicit.

There is some evidence that this is changing. The Independent Football Commission (IFC), from its first report in 2002, has consistently recommended that 'the introduction of formal evaluation of football in the community should be explored' (IFC, 2003, p. 45). Indeed, the IFC refers to a number of initiatives that have taken up this recommendation, including a review of Football in the Community conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University (McGuire and Fenoglio, 2004) and research into *Football and its Communities*, commissioned by the Football Foundation.<sup>2</sup> This paper argues that rigorous evaluation of social inclusion projects is also vital for football clubs as they attempt to clarify their role in the community.

### *Football Clubs and the Regulatory Environment*

The commercialisation of football in the UK is a subject that has been covered extensively in the last decade (e.g. Conn, 2004, 1999; Hamil et al., 1999; Fynn and Guest, 1994). Discussions have focused on how investors have begun to view football clubs as commercial, profit-making entities, and how televised football has become increasingly significant in pay-TV and related-media industries. Hamil (1999) recently argued that the influence of market forces is now felt critically throughout the football industry.

These commercial forces have exacerbated the basic tension between the sporting and economic objectives of football clubs. This is an issue that has been discussed at length in the economics literature around sport. In the context of English

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<sup>2</sup> The final report of this research has now been published: *Football and its Communities: Final Report* (Brown et al., 2006).

football, for example, Sloane (1971) challenged Neale's (1964) assumption that professional sports teams act as profit-maximisers. Sloane (1971) argued that, historically, profit-making football clubs were very much the exception; it may be more descriptively accurate to view the objective of the football club as one of utility maximisation subject to the constraint of financial solvency. Utility, in this case, may mean some or any of the following: security; playing success; attendance; health of the league; or providing a focus for communities. However, Conn (1999) argued that the incorporation of football clubs into the leisure and media sectors has now diminished the importance of sporting and community objectives and has shifted the focus of football clubs towards profit-maximisation.<sup>3</sup>

This debate over the objectives of football clubs has also come to the attention of European policy-makers (Caiger and Gardiner, 2000). In February 1999, the Competition Policy Directorate published a paper in which a distinction was made between purely sporting situations, and wholly commercial situations to which Treaty provisions would apply (Parrish, 2000). The Nice Declaration, a document that noted the specific characteristics of sport and its social function, followed in 2000. More recently, the Independent European Sport Review (Arnaut, 2006, p. 129) concluded 'there is an urgent need to have a formal structure for the relationship between the EU institutions and the European governing body for football'. As professional football becomes more commercialised, clubs are more open to legal challenge over practices considered standard within football, but anti-competitive in conventional business. For example, the European Commission's objections to the joint selling of media rights by the Premier League focused on whether or not it was anti-competitive

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<sup>3</sup> Developments like these are not particular to English football clubs, and are common in professional sport in many countries. However, the rapid commercialisation of football within England and the long-standing traditions of many English football clubs mean that this tension is perhaps felt more acutely than in other countries.

(Michie and Oughton, 2003).

In order to protect themselves from further legal challenges, then, it will be important for football clubs to firmly establish a cultural justification for their activities (Weatherill, 2000). Understanding the contribution that football clubs can make to society by evaluating football-based social inclusion projects is one way of achieving this. Robust evidence from evaluation studies that can isolate the effect of football on particular social exclusion processes would be particularly valuable to football clubs in the current, and future, regulatory environment.

## **Evaluation**

Long et al. (2002) identify three levels of project evaluation: milestones, outputs and outcomes. Milestones refer to requirements of funding agents, such as consultation meetings, that are designed to ensure proper project management. Outputs are short-term products, for example numbers of participants or numbers of clubs formed. Outcomes refer to longer-term changes in the lives of participants and in communities, such as employment opportunities. Other writers also talk about the effects of social interventions, for example improved participation, or reduction in healthcare costs (Sanderson, 2000). While milestones and outputs are easier to measure than outcomes and effects, it is the latter that actually indicate the impact a project can have on social inclusion processes.

Collins et al. (1999, p. 4) conducted an extensive literature review of sport and social exclusion as part of the Policy Action Team (PAT) 10 research report to the DCMS and found only 11 studies that looked at outcomes 'with anything approaching rigorous evaluations'. The schemes themselves were diverse, employing many different outcome measures and methodologies. For example, Roberts and Brodie's

(1992) study of inner city sport used life-history analysis to examine participation behaviour over a 10-20 year period. Others, such as the Active Lifestyles Sports Council National Demonstration Project (Sports Council, 1989) and Collins and Buller's (1999) examination of the Nottinghamshire Sport Training Scheme, used questionnaires to examine, respectively, post-school intentions regarding sport participation, and the impact of 'taster' and 'improver' courses. Nichols and Taylor's (1996) evaluation of the West Yorkshire Sports Counselling project employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, comparing the reconviction rate of participants and a control group over two years and examining the processes by which reduced offending was achieved. However, apart from these and a few similar examples, the general picture of sport-based social inclusion projects drawn by Collins et al. (1999) was one where either no evaluation was carried out, or monitoring took the form of recording outputs. These findings echo those of previous reviews (e.g. Robbins, 1990; Coalter, 1988) that also found information about outcomes lacking.

Long and Sanderson (2001) investigated assumptions made about the community benefits of sport through a postal survey of directors of leisure services and interviews with sport development officers and leisure centre managers. While respondents were able to substantiate social inclusion outcomes with multiple examples, they were unwilling to press the claim of a clear link between sport and community development. This reflects the gap between anecdotal evidence and more comprehensive, long-term evaluation.

### *The Factors Affecting Evaluation*

Following their review of sport-based social inclusion projects, Collins et al. (1999, p. 26) concluded: 'evaluation is tentative, indicative and anecdotal, because

insufficient (human and financial) resources are given to it, and insufficient intellectual attention in most cases is expended to identify outcomes and gather the necessary evidence to demonstrate them'. Indeed, there are many inter-related factors that contribute to this lack of evaluation.

At a methodological level, Nichols (1997) has argued that the absence of a clear rationale for such projects has hindered evaluation. Since outcomes are rarely specified when projects are set up, there are often no reference points against which later measures can be compared. Furthermore, outcome measures are often difficult to obtain. For example, attempting to determine the extent to which young people re-offend may be complicated by the frequency with which they move between jobs and residences (Collins et al., 1999). Also, as Taylor et al. (2000) pointed out, attempting to measure outcomes through administering questionnaires can interfere with the sensitive nature of project delivery. Moreover, effects may occur beyond the duration of the project and in different contexts, for example in schools, or workplaces. In fact, these difficulties apply just as much to the assessment of sporting outcomes as they do to social inclusion outcomes. There is limited knowledge of the type or frequency of sports participation resulting from particular projects, or indeed participation rates among traditionally excluded groups, such as ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities (Coalter, 2002).

The situation is made even more complex by contentions over the relative importance of specific measures, such as self-esteem. For example, Emler (2001) reviewed research in the UK and the US and found no evidence that low self-esteem caused anti-social behaviour. One could conclude from this that social programmes aimed at reducing youth crime or combating anti-social behaviour by raising self-esteem will be unsuccessful, although Emler (2001) does admit that the design of

most published research makes establishing causal influences on behaviour patterns almost impossible. Such disputes highlight the difficulties associated with operationalising and measuring such concepts. Moreover, even where it is possible to observe and measure outcomes and effects, it may be difficult to attribute such changes specifically to the project (Long et al., 2002; Nichols, 1997).

At a broader level, evaluation is also affected by funding in several ways. Sponsors often do not fund projects long enough for their outcomes and effects to emerge, or do not provide sufficient, if indeed any, resources for sustained evaluation (Collins et al., 1999). In addition, funding bodies are situated within the shifting political environment. Consequently direct pressure is often applied to project workers to demonstrate that specific funding objectives have been fulfilled (Long et al., 2002). A focus on milestones and outputs, therefore, often takes the place of observing and evaluating long-term outcomes and effects. Furthermore, funding processes can hinder project development, due to the often disproportionate time and expertise needed to submit funding applications (Wagg, 2004). The impact of funding specifications has also led to the majority of sport-based social inclusion projects lasting only three years (Collins et al., 1999). As such, any evaluation that does take place is unable to examine the long-term benefits that may take several years to emerge. Also, as Collins et al. (1999) pointed out, in the final year of a project, staff are often more concerned with looking for another job than with evaluating the project they are working on. The authors recommended, therefore, that new programmes in the area of sport and social inclusion should run for at least five years (Collins et al., 1999).

Walker (2001) also discussed the difficulty of evaluating broad policies over a sustained period due to the short duration of government ministers' terms. Long-term

research may be commissioned in accordance with current political priorities, yet these priorities may have altered significantly by the time the evaluation yields results. Consequently the pressure of public accountability has resulted in a growing number of studies describing short-term outputs in anecdotal form, or claiming success by quoting numbers of participants (Collins et al., 1999).

Recent reports have also recognised how different components of community work demand different skills (IFC, 2003). Qualified sports coaches may have little experience of fund-raising; professionals with social work backgrounds may not have expertise in planning and delivering football-based activities. Similarly, officers working in Football in the Community schemes often have little or no training in evaluation practice, and it is clear that a culture of evaluation is not apparent at most schemes (McGuire and Fenoglio, 2004).

### *Recent Studies*

A close examination of the literature suggests that, in the last five years, there have been noticeable attempts to address these issues and to align evaluation with procedures recommended in the PAT 10 Report (1999). The DCMS adopted a research strategy that commissioned longer-term research designed to assess the impact on individuals of participation in culture and leisure activities over at least 5-7 years (DCMS, 2001).

These changes can be seen in the project evaluations themselves. For example, the DfES *Playing for Success* project, which addresses the needs of underachieving young people by using ‘the medium and environment of sport to support work in literacy, numeracy and ICT’ (Sharp et al., 2003, p. 5), underwent four successive years of evaluation. Baseline data were collected, followed later by tests



and self-report checklists that were used to assess educational outcomes. A control group was also evaluated in the second and third year by pre- and post-project tests. In addition, questionnaires, administered to pupils, parents and centre-managers, and direct observation were used to measure outcomes in pupil satisfaction and attitudes.

*Positive Futures*, the national sports based social inclusion programme (set up in 2003 and managed within the Home Office Drug Strategy Directorate) is also monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. The programme aims to have a positive influence on the lives of young people and involves projects that steer young people towards education, training and employment. Surveys of lead agencies and partner agencies are supplemented by case study research, project snapshots, reports from participants and literature searches. These tools are used to collect quantitative and qualitative outcome data, measuring short-term impact and assessing long-term developments (Drugs Strategy Directorate, 2005).

Research for the DCMS was undertaken by Leeds Metropolitan University's Centre for Leisure and Sport Research (Long et al., 2002). The authors analysed 14 cultural projects in the context of social inclusion, examined monitoring and evaluation criteria and gathered evidence of best practice. A manual for sport and community development, recently published by sportscotland, also presented some evidence of best practice in sport-based community programmes (Coalter, 2002). This manual discussed the importance of outcome-based evaluation and provided guidelines for collecting data and reporting the findings. In addition, it focused on the approaches used in three ongoing evaluations, all of which sought to examine sporting and social inclusion outcomes.

*Developments in Evaluation Research*

The studies described above provide examples of more rigorous evaluation and demonstrate a shift from output measurement to evaluation of outcomes. However, even where more rigorous evaluation has been carried out, methodological debate has centred on the applicability of different models of evaluation. *Playing for Success*, for example, used control groups and systematic data analysis to measure the project's success, demonstrating an adherence to experimental or quasi-experimental models. Yet Lightfoot (1994) argued that pseudo-scientific models of evaluation may be inappropriate for such projects, given the complexity of the processes involved. Long et al. (2002) recognised this in their own study, but found no straightforward answer. 'The feeling that ideas of confidence, esteem, community cohesion, etc. are not amenable to quantitative measurement may be perfectly correct, but the challenge then has to be to identify what does constitute 'evidence'' (Long et al., 2002, pp. 28-29).

Such methodological debate is not specific to sport-based social inclusion projects, but is relevant in many areas of evaluation research. Schorr (1997) examined the limitations of traditional methods of evaluation. She argued that attempts to replicate the biomedical model (random assignment to control and experimental groups to identify causal relationships) have limited the 'knowledge base'. Indeed, two recent Cochrane reviews found no randomised or quasi-randomised controlled studies, nor any controlled before and after studies to demonstrate the effect of sport-based policy interventions on increasing participation or promoting healthy behaviour change (Jackson et al., 2005a; 2005b). Schorr (1997) argued that the complex nature of specific interventions, and the multifaceted processes that are associated with them, make evaluation by the biomedical model inappropriate. Instead, she advocated new approaches that are built on strong

theoretical and conceptual bases, emphasise shared interests, employ multiple methods and perspectives and are carried out with rigour and relevance. One such approach, realist evaluation, is starting to be used in social work and health work and could provide a suitable methodology for evaluating football-based social inclusion projects. The remainder of this paper focuses on realist evaluation and its relevance to the issues discussed so far.

### **Realist Evaluation**

Building on the principles of scientific realism, Pawson and Tilley (1997) developed and articulated an approach to evaluation that they term 'realistic evaluation', now termed realist evaluation (Kazi, 2003). The methodology uses individual project evaluations to refine theory and to make improvements in both policy and practice. The explanation of the realist approach by Pawson and Tilley (1997) included a critique of the experimental method of evaluation. The authors insisted that when attempting to explain the success or failure of a particular social programme, it is essential to consider the specific mechanisms involved and how and why they work for certain groups in specific contexts. They argued that, 'by its very logic, experimental evaluation either ignores these underlying processes or treats them incorrectly as inputs, outputs or confounding variables, or deals with them in a post hoc and thus arbitrary fashion' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 54).

Pawson and Tilley (1997) identified realist evaluation as an adaptation of the 'wheel of science' (Wallace, 1971) that illustrates the various stages of the traditional research process (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1

They explained how the ‘realist evaluation cycle’ differs (see Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Theories take the form of propositions about how mechanisms are ‘fired’ in contexts to produce outcomes. Hypothesis making involves identifying in programmes what might provide change and which individuals might benefit. In the observation stage, data are collected, using pluralist methods that are tailored to the form of hypothesis. The next stage does not involve generalisation, but looks for ‘specification’ of what works for whom in what circumstances.

Realist evaluation aims for the continual betterment of social policy and project design through a process of context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configuration focusing (Morén and Blom, 2003). ‘Each evaluation within a problem area is seen as a case study, and the function of the case is to refine our understanding of CMOs which seem to have application in that domain’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 125). In this sense, realist evaluation shares some elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in which data relating to a certain area are collected and analysed, and the findings are used to generate or modify theory. Similar approaches are advocated in terms of building theory from case-study research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### *The Advantages of Realist Evaluation*

A key problem for quantitative evaluation is the neglect of essentially qualitative effects that cannot be captured adequately through measurement

(Sanderson, 1998). Realist evaluation, however, proceeds from theory to data collection, with a focus on explanation. This provides a sound basis for the use of mixed method designs. Scriven (1994) discussed traditional approaches to evaluation as 'black box' strategies, where evaluators concentrate on the outcomes and effects of a programme, but make no attempt to analyse its contents. Realist evaluation, according to Kazi (2003, p. 804), 'attempts Scriven's 'white box' evaluation, which not only addresses the effects, but also the inner workings and operations of the components of a programme and how they are connected'. It is well known that the outcomes and effects of complex social interventions are difficult to capture, and realist evaluation provides no quick solution to this problem. However, by avoiding a reliance on purely quantitative methods, realist evaluation allows for the possibility of capturing some outcomes and effects quantitatively and some qualitatively. For example, as Sanderson (2000) pointed out, one potentially important aspect of social exclusion that is difficult to measure is the degree of support provided by family, friends and local communities. Realist evaluation may be better able to assess and explain these types of effects through its focus on the various contexts within which programmes operate.

Even when experimental and quasi-experimental approaches are able to demonstrate that there have been beneficial changes for participants in a programme, as compared with non-participants, it is often difficult to distinguish between correlation and causation. Realist evaluation attempts to deal with this problem by concentrating on explanation and by its process of context-mechanism-outcome configuration focusing. In this way, evaluation is not limited to measuring a series of variables, but is concerned with understanding how the mechanisms involved in a programme can produce outcomes in particular contexts.

Moreover, this focus on context and trying to identify what works for whom in what circumstances helps in the difficult task of attributing outcomes and effects to the programmes themselves. In the context of poverty and social exclusion, for example, Walker (1995) emphasised the need to identify how causal mechanisms are influenced by context. He pointed out that while the events that trigger poverty are widespread, the incidence of poverty is comparatively rare. Evaluation of related programmes must, therefore, seek to ‘disentangle the effects of personal and structural factors, and [construct] theories that span micro and macro explanations’ (Walker, 1995, p. 121). The fundamental problem with the experimental approach to evaluation is that it abstracts the programme evaluation from the social and institutional context that is essential to explaining its effectiveness (Schmid et al., 1996). As Sanderson (2000, p. 229) put it, ‘programmes ‘work’ when they provide appropriate forms of help which address the needs and circumstances of individuals in the particular prevailing contextual conditions’. Realist evaluation explicitly seeks to identify these contextual conditions and which programme mechanisms work for whom in which conditions. As such, it provides an explanatory framework within which researchers can discuss whether outcomes and effects occur as a result of particular programme mechanisms, or whether they are the result of changes in contextual conditions.

The limits of realist evaluation also need to be taken into consideration. Pawson and Tilley (1997) recognised that social programmes are embedded within a wider set of macro and micro forces, and, as described above, these cannot always be captured in a particular programme evaluation. Julnes et al. (1998) also argued that the utility of quasi-experimental methods of evaluation is ignored by Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) approach to realist evaluation. Consequently, a more balanced

account of quasi-experimental designs and the ways in which they can be adapted to contribute to a realist evaluation approach may be necessary. Statistical analysis cannot stand alone as a formal representation of a mechanism, but it can be used to provide descriptions at the empirical level (Ron, 2002).

### *Realist Evaluation and Football-Based Social Inclusion Projects*

Recent prescriptions for project evaluation in sport and leisure have, in fact, recognised the importance of realist principles, although such recognition is implicit. For example, Patriksson (1995, p. 128) stated, ‘sport, like most activities, is not a priori good or bad, but has the potential of producing both positive and negative outcomes. *Questions like ‘what conditions are necessary for sport to have beneficial outcomes?’ must be asked more often*’ (emphasis added). The implication is that the contexts in which outcomes are produced need to be examined. More recently, Coalter (2001b, 4.2) concluded, ‘any monitoring and evaluation of intermediate or strategic outcomes must include *an analysis of the associated processes and experiences which underpin successful initiatives*’ (emphasis added). Thus he advocated an approach to evaluation that examines the underlying mechanisms that produce these outcomes.

This paper argues that realist evaluation can accomplish these objectives. Its methodology provides a framework in which the evaluation of individual projects can contribute to both theory development and improvements in social programmes. Long and Sanderson (2001) noted that one of the impediments to evaluation is the feeling that small-scale evaluations cannot provide robust evidence to support a causal link between sport and social inclusion. Yet realist evaluation explicitly relies on the aggregation of individual evaluations for its process of ‘context-mechanism-outcome’

configuration focusing (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This is particularly appropriate for sport-based projects, given the multiple outcomes and effects that sport is presumed to have. Bovaird et al. (1997) provided a theoretical model that demonstrated the inter-relationships between various outcomes resulting from sport. For example, if participation in sport is found to improve physical and mental well-being, this will also have a positive economic effect by reducing healthcare costs and work absenteeism. Realist evaluation can contribute to this kind of theory development by building up a series of 'context-mechanism-outcome' configurations around sport. For example, if one evaluation study determined that in certain contextual conditions sports participation led to increased school attendance, researchers could then seek to measure this in the evaluation of other sport-based projects not necessarily designed to affect truancy rates. As Bonner (2003, p. 85) pointed out, 'this [realist] approach to evaluation and theory-building, in which the results from individual evaluations can contribute to the evaluation of other similar projects, is particularly well-suited to the evaluation of complex initiatives, where a number of projects share a similar goal to be achieved through a range of activities in different settings'.

#### *Football-Based Social Inclusion Projects, Social Work and Health Work*

Recent academic articles have argued that realist evaluation should be employed in social work practice (Kazi, 2003; Kazi and Rostila, 2002; Morén and Blom, 2003) and health work (Bonner, 2003). While making a similar case for the use of realist evaluation in assessing football-based projects, this article also argues that the links between these different fields should be made more explicit.

One of the central aims of social work, according to the reflexive-therapeutic perspective, is to help individuals or groups achieve self-fulfilment (Payne, 1997), a



principle that also underlies many football-based social inclusion projects. The objectives of football-based projects, such as promotion of tolerance, reduction of youth offending, avoidance of drugs and alcohol, also coincide with those of specific social work and health work interventions. Moreover, clear links between the different fields exist in the referral to football-based projects of young people by social workers and health practitioners (Drugs Strategy Directorate, 2003). When referring to nursing practice, McEvoy and Richards (2003, p. 417) argued that the identification of mechanisms and contexts is 'highly relevant to frontline services, since the influence of contextual factors needs to be properly understood if evidence-based interventions are to be effectively translated into practice'. Likewise, knowing what works for whom in what circumstances is crucial when designing and delivering football-based social inclusion projects.

Resources available for evaluating football-based projects are, however, limited in comparison to those available for social work and health work interventions. This might be partly explained by the absence of a culture of evaluation among staff on football-based projects. As Nichols and Crow (2004) pointed out, sport-based social programmes are usually initiated on an ad hoc, intuitive basis, and practitioners usually have leisure expertise, rather than the scientific grounding that might encourage more rigorous evaluation. Coalter (2001a, p. 1) argued that 'to address the current 'information deficit' will require the development of a culture in which output and outcome definition, monitoring and evaluation are regarded as central components of planning, management and service delivery'. Cross-fertilisation between sport-based projects, social work and nursing, through information sharing, staffing and skills development could help to achieve this. Widespread adoption of realist evaluation would reinforce these links, create

more inter-disciplinary research and improve the design and delivery of social inclusion projects.

### **Realist Evaluation in Practice**

Since realist evaluation is an emergent methodology, there is little evidence of it in practice. The next part of this paper looks at some of the studies in which realist evaluation was used either implicitly or explicitly in order to draw out aspects relevant to football-based social inclusion projects.

#### *The Priority Estates Project*

Pawson and Tilley (1997) examined the realist framework within which the crime prevention effectiveness of a housing management programme was evaluated (Hope and Foster, 1992; Foster and Hope, 1993). Although this study predated the articulation of realist evaluation, certain aspects of the methodology reveal realist principles. The researchers began the evaluation by discerning and reconstructing a realist theory of the programme context, mechanisms and expected crime-related outcome patterns. Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques, they observed the programme and crime experience changes with only a rudimentary theory, but alert to other possibilities. They identified five separate areas on the estate and assessed crime pattern outcomes through before-and-after surveys. Outcomes differed by area, with some areas experiencing reduced burglary prevalence rates and incidence rates, some experiencing stable rates and some, increased rates. The researchers explained these changes through examination of the various contexts, including factors such as occupation by elderly residents and lack of tenant involvement in estate management, and various mechanisms introduced by the

programme, such as improvements in housing, involvement in estate management and collective responsibility. The researchers then used their observations to redevelop their original theory, reflecting their implicit use of the realist evaluation cycle.

The nature of this programme mirrors football-based social inclusion projects in certain ways. For example, the specific concern was not with crime prevention per se, but with measures that might reduce crime. Moreover the programme was not designed with evaluation in mind. Consequently, the evaluation team was not in a position to manipulate the programme in an experimental fashion (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This reflects the ad hoc way in which many football-based social inclusion projects are initiated.

#### *Developing Realist Social Inclusion Models*

Kazi and Spurling (2000) discussed the specific methods employed in developing realist social inclusion models for the drug-using community. Contexts, mechanisms and outcomes were identified through interviews and participant observation. However, as might be the case with many football-based projects, systematic recording of data was particularly difficult; participants did not always have sustained contact with the project, nor were interviews always possible. Furthermore, Kazi and Spurling (2000) recognised the problem of deviating from the ethos of the service. Identifying ‘context-mechanism-outcome’ configurations required interviews that focused specifically on drug taking, yet the project was explicitly based on articulating and offering alternative, i.e. non drug-taking, lifestyles.

#### *Crime Reduction Programmes*

While not an evaluation per se, Nichols and Crow's (2004) study offers methodological guidance on the evaluation of crime-reduction programmes. The authors classified programmes according to type and mechanism of intervention. Brantingham and Faust (1976) previously separated programmes by type into *primary* (reducing criminological conditions within targeted communities), *secondary* (targeting 'at risk' youth) and *tertiary* (attempting to prevent known offenders re-offending). Nichols and Crow (2004) combined this typology with their specification of program mechanisms – diversion, deterrence, or pro-social development – to create their classification.

The Kirklees *Splash* project is provided as an example of a Primary/Diversion project. It targeted 8-18 year olds in the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas, primarily through free participation. This project type is closely related to many social inclusion projects run by Football in the Community schemes. To examine contexts, mechanisms and outcomes, Nichols and Crow (2004) suggested interviewing participants, parents, or local police officers, and comparing participation records with local Youth Offending Team records to identify offending patterns.

#### *The Learning Communities Project*

Bonner (2003) examined the realist approach undertaken in the *Learning Communities Project* that was designed to develop the capacity for theory-based evaluation among *Health Action Zone* partners in Plymouth. The framework used was a combination of realist evaluation and theory-based evaluation founded on a theory of change (TOC), a theory of how and why an initiative works (Weiss, 1995). Initially, project workers were asked to identify the main causal mechanisms

underlying the TOCs by which the project hoped to help reduce drug-related harm to young people. Certain problems encountered in this study would also be likely to affect football-based social inclusion projects. The evaluators found that projects did not have clearly stated aims or that the objectives were over-ambitious and unlikely to be reflected in outcome measurement. The wide range of agencies involved also compounded the particular mechanisms contributing to project delivery. Furthermore, the fluctuating contact between the Plymouth projects and young people (which typifies most football-based social inclusion projects) made context and outcome monitoring difficult.

### *Positive Futures*

This national sports-based social inclusion programme, with more than 100 localised projects, has an integrated monitoring and evaluation process that is in its third year. Close reading of both the national strategy that underpins this initiative and the evaluation methodology reveals an adherence to the principles of realist evaluation, although the link is not made explicit. ‘It is only when the quantitative method (used sparingly and effectively) is utilised to support a qualitative approach that we can achieve an evaluation *which communicates the social structures, ‘feelings’ and context in which participants find themselves, and in turn how they themselves respond to such pressures*’ (Crabbe and Slaughter, 2004, pp. 17-18, emphasis added).

Proposed outcomes are discussed, such as personal and social development, improved educational performance and engagement in the labour market. Factors that may help to achieve these outcomes are also mentioned, for example, building trust, using community sports coaches as role-models, and team-working. In realist

evaluation, these factors would be analysed as mechanisms and, along with outcomes and contexts, would form a series of hypotheses. The *Positive Futures* approach to evaluation also includes the notion of using the results of individual evaluations to improve the design of the projects.

### **How to Conduct Realist Evaluations of Football-Based Social Inclusion Projects**

The following table draws on previous studies, including those described above, that have used realist evaluation both implicitly and explicitly. This table can provide the basis for a template to be used to evaluate sport and social inclusion policy at a local level. It looks at each stage of the ‘realist evaluation cycle’ and provides guidance on how projects could be effectively evaluated according to the principles of realist evaluation. The final column contains examples of techniques that were employed in other evaluations. The intention is not to provide an exhaustive list of evaluation procedures. It is to illustrate approaches used elsewhere and to look towards a methodology that could be incorporated widely into football-based social inclusion projects.

INSERT TABLE 1

### **Conclusion**

This paper focused on the need for rigorous evaluation of football-based social inclusion projects. Currently, there are strong theoretical claims, and even stronger political claims, that sport, particularly football, can make a positive contribution to social issues, yet there is little evidence to support these claims. To address this lack of evidence, this paper advocates the use of realist evaluation as a methodology for

evaluating football-based social inclusion projects. Unlike traditional methods of evaluation, realist evaluation seeks to understand the complex processes involved in such projects by identifying the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes through which they function. It provides a framework within which evaluation can contribute to both theory development and the betterment of social programmes. This feedback loop relies on the aggregation of individual evaluations, which is particularly appropriate given the diverse, localised nature of most football-based projects.

The potential benefits of realist evaluation are wide-ranging. Practitioners will be able to use evaluation results to design and deliver more effective projects. Participants, in turn, will benefit from these improvements, since future projects will be designed to meet their specific needs. The evaluation process will also offer valuable guidance for policy-makers concerned with sport and social inclusion. In addition, it will provide a way for football clubs to formally evaluate the contribution they make to community development.

If these goals are to be achieved, it is necessary to develop a workable methodology based on realist evaluation that can be incorporated widely into the delivery of football-based social inclusion projects. This paper represents one stage in this process. It demonstrated the importance of rigorous evaluation for all those involved in sport and social inclusion. It also identified some of the issues currently affecting evaluation and explained the positive contribution that realist evaluation can make. Finally, by analysing the use of realist evaluation in other studies, this paper offers a basic template for small-scale evaluation. Subsequent research can refine this methodology even further so that practitioners can begin to implement it in sport.

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