

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 1¹

Sporting Capital – what is it and why is it important to sports policy and practice?

Introduction

This Resource Sheet¹ introduces a new theory of Sporting Capital and its relevance to sports policy and practice. It shows how Sporting Capital is similar to the economic theory of 'Human Capital' and explores its relationship to other forms of capital - cultural and social. The constituent 'building blocks' or 'domains' of Sporting Capital are explained and the important characteristics associated with it are outlined. It is proposed that Sporting Capital theory provides a framework of understanding that can create a new impetus for public policy focused on achieving sustained growth in community sport participation in England.

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."

It is a theory that can help us to better understand and explain sporting behaviour across individuals, communities and populations.

The distinctions made between the different types of 'capital' (human, cultural and social) are important to understand and help in turn to define and clarify what is meant by 'Sporting Capital'. The important points to take away are that:

- ❖ Sporting Capital is related to human, cultural and social capital in subtle and different ways but it is not the same as these concepts. Importantly as a theoretical construct it can stand alone in its specificity and relevance to sport development policy and practice.
- ❖ Sporting Capital is most analogous to human capital – and incorporates many of the same characteristics and qualities.
- ❖ Sporting Capital has the potential to be transferred into and to build human, social and cultural capital and, in turn, increases in some aspects of these other

¹ This Resource Sheet was prepared by Nick Rowe with analytical support from Oliver Norden at TNS-BMRB. It was commissioned by StreetGames and published in April 2013.

'capitals' can enhance and support increases in Sporting Capital;

- ❖ Social capital when defined in a narrow sense of an individual's 'social connections and networks in sport' is embedded as an integral part of the construction of Sporting Capital. In this context social capital is primarily seen as an input to – one of the determinant factors - rather than an outcome from sport participation.

Sporting Capital theory proposes that the underlying factors that determine the likelihood of people participating in sport can be classified into three domains: social, psychological and physiological (physical health and physical competency). Brought together these three domains interact and combine to create an individual's level of 'Sporting Capital'.

It is proposed that levels of 'Sporting Capital' **not only determine the likelihood of current participation but also impact on the probability that it will be sustained into later life. People with high levels of Sporting Capital are much more likely to engage in lifelong participation than their peers with low levels of Sporting Capital.**

Consequently, the theory suggests that profiling an individual's Sporting Capital will provide a much better predictor of *sustained participation* in sport than measuring current prevalence of behaviour (sport participation) alone.

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. The model predicts that an individual with positive scores on the three domains (a scoring that would locate someone at the centre of the triangle) 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 both current and future participation in sport.

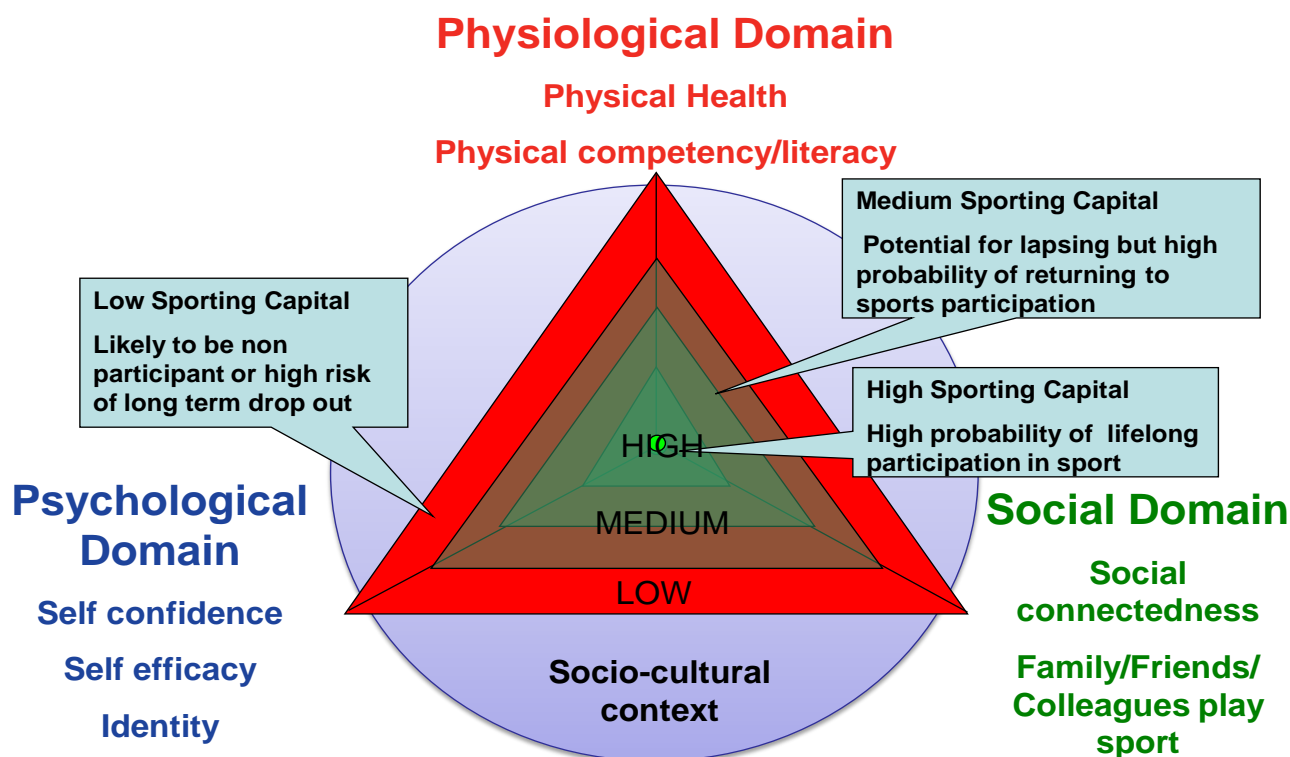
An individual's level of Sporting Capital is framed and shaped by the socio-cultural context in which they live. The level of Sporting Capital a person achieves and maintains in life is primarily a consequence of a socialisation process and the environment they live in. This would suggest that Sporting Capital is not evenly distributed either geographically (across local communities, regions and nations) or amongst different sub groups in the population – and the empirical evidence in later Resource Sheets supports this contention.

Although Sporting Capital is a crucial determinant of participation it is not the sole one. Higher levels of Sporting Capital will increase the likelihood of participating by increasing the level of motivation – the desire to participate - and the increased potential it provides for a

positive experience associated with taking part i.e. a positive feedback loop. However, for any given individual the decision to participate will be moderated by the opportunities available and the barriers and constraints that impact on those opportunities whether personal e.g. in the family, social e.g. in the community, environmental e.g. in terms of suitable places to play or economic in terms of affordability. Everything else being equal in terms of the opportunities available and the constraints and barriers faced - a person with a Sporting Capital score of 6 will have the same probability of participating as another person with a Sporting Capital score of 6. However, differences in personal and local circumstances can change that probability.

The important point to remember is that with increasing levels of Sporting Capital comes increasing levels of resilience to the external constraints and barriers to participation. It is also important to note that at low levels of Sporting Capital changes in the external opportunities will make little if any difference to the probability of participating. The same is likely to apply at the very highest levels. The relationship between levels of Sporting Capital, constraints and barriers and participation are explored more fully in **Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 9: Sporting Capital - why it is important to public policy – a strategic perspective**

Figure 1: theoretical model of ‘Sporting Capital’



Why is Sporting Capital theory important to sports policy makers and practitioners?

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 - in the billions rather than millions of pounds - in both the built infrastructure and in the people that support and develop sporting opportunities. There have been multiple government programmes - and considerable commitment to the cause - not least from those who operate at the sharp end of delivery in our local communities and neighbourhoods - both paid professionals and unpaid volunteers. Yet even the most optimistic observer would have to conclude that the results - when viewed in aggregate at least - have been disappointing. Participation rates in sport - although they have fluctuated - 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.

So where have we been going wrong - or to put it more positively - how could we do better? The central premise of this paper is that having a more coherent and robust theoretical foundation to underpin sports development policy and practice is a fundamental pre-requisite for effective public policy and practice - and Sporting Capital provides that missing theoretical foundation. In its component parts there is little that is new about Sporting Capital theory. 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.

What is it about Sporting Capital theory that can make a real difference to public policy and practice in sports development? The following sets out some of the important characteristics we would expect theoretically to be associated with Sporting Capital.

- ❖ Although Sporting Capital can appreciate and depreciate - it is by its nature more durable than participation which is characterised by high levels of flux. As a consequence it shifts the focus of public policy from the short term objective of increasing an individual's current participation in sport to one of building the capacity to participate in sport now and over the longer term. In this sense it is a theory that values empowerment.
- ❖ 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 and or their life circumstances make it easier to do so.

- ❖ It is anticipated that 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.
- ❖ It is expected that 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.
- ❖ Evidence suggests that 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.

The practical benefits to public policy and practice flowing from the theory include providing:

- ❖ An holistic and integrated view of the determinants of participation that span the psychological, social and physical characteristics of a persons' identity, lifestyle and relationship to others;
- ❖ A common ground and a common language for all sports development establishing the 'big picture' that sets the guiding principles and agendas for joined up action - whether in schools, colleges, local outreach, local authorities, national governing bodies of sport, national sport development agencies or government departments.
- ❖ The potential to better understand the key influences that shape an individual's relationship to sport, when and how they occur and in what context. In particular it emphasises the early formative years in a young persons' life when Sporting Capital is most likely to be built and the factors that lead to its growth and, for many, what causes depreciation in Sporting Capital and associated drop out through the life course.
- ❖ A better understanding of how the external barriers and constraints that impact on participation and the personal factors that combine to determine an individual's level of Sporting Capital interact to determine the likelihood of participating in sport.
- ❖ The potential to customise interventions to the Sporting Capital profile of an individual – to build those aspects of Capital that are weak, to avoid offering sport in ways that could be counter- productive turning people off rather than on to sport - and to focus on barrier reduction only where appropriate and likely to be effective.

ⁱ This is the first in a series of eleven 'Sporting Capital Resource Sheets'. The Resource Sheets are organised in way that move from the general to the more detailed and specific. The common thread is the theoretical concept of Sporting Capital and its application to public policy and practice.

Each individual Sheet has been designed to be freestanding and to make sense in its own right – the series of Sheets has been designed to provide a logical progression that builds knowledge and understanding about Sporting Capital, its characteristics, the relationship it has to participation in sport, its distribution in the population, its variation across different social groups and its potential to influence and shape future sports policy and practice.

The Sheets have been purposefully designed to be succinct and selective rather than long and comprehensive. Each should leave the reader with an interest to think further about Sporting Capital as an idea and what it may mean for their work in sports development whether at the higher strategic levels of policy making or delivering localised programmes on the ground.

All the analysis in the Sheets draws from empirical data collected by Sport England's Active People Survey (6). The analysis in these Resource Sheets 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 methodology see the full Technical report available from StreetGames.

These Sheets build on earlier thinking and analysis in work carried out for StreetGames and available in the following publications:

Sporting Capital – a new theory of sport participation determinants and its application to 'Doorstep Sport' Nick Rowe, Sport Research Consultant, September 2012, A report commissioned by StreetGames

Part 1. What is Sporting Capital and how can its principles be applied to create a new generation of sustained sports participants?

Part 2. The Sporting Capital Index – exploring the levels of Sporting Capital in the English population and its variation across different social groups.

The following Sheets are available in this series:

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 1: Sporting Capital – what is it and why is it important to sports policy and practice?

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 2: What is the relationship between Sporting Capital and participation in sport and why does it matter?

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 3: Are we a sporting nation – what are the levels of Sporting Capital in England?

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 4: Sporting capital and gender – mind the gap

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 5: Sporting capital and inequality – does social class make a difference?

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 6: To what extent do levels of Sporting Capital impact on the frequency of participation and vary by the type of sport people play?

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 7: Sporting Capital and ethnicity

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 8: Sporting Capital amongst the young – a focus on 16 to 25 year olds

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 9: Sporting Capital - why it is important to public policy – a strategic perspective

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 10: Doorstep Sport - building Sporting Capital to increase participation in sport – applying the theory to practice

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 11: Sporting Capital – testing and applying the theory - future research requirements.