

Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 9¹

Sporting Capital - why it is important to public policy – a strategic perspective

Introduction

This Resource Sheet¹ focuses on the practical matter of how public policy can intervene to build Sporting Capital in the population. It discusses why at the strategic level building Sporting Capital is important if public policy objectives to increase participation are to be achieved. In this context it goes on to explore the relationship between Sporting Capital, external barriers and constraints and participation rates in sport and shows how effective public policy must take a balanced and holistic view that spans all these areas. It concludes by examining the strategic implications for public policy in sport.

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. More information about the nature of Sporting Capital and its important characteristics is provided in [Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 1](#).

Why is Sporting Capital theory important to public policy?

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

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.

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.

This Resource Sheet focuses on the important strategic relationship between Sporting Capital and barrier reduction and its implications for public policy.

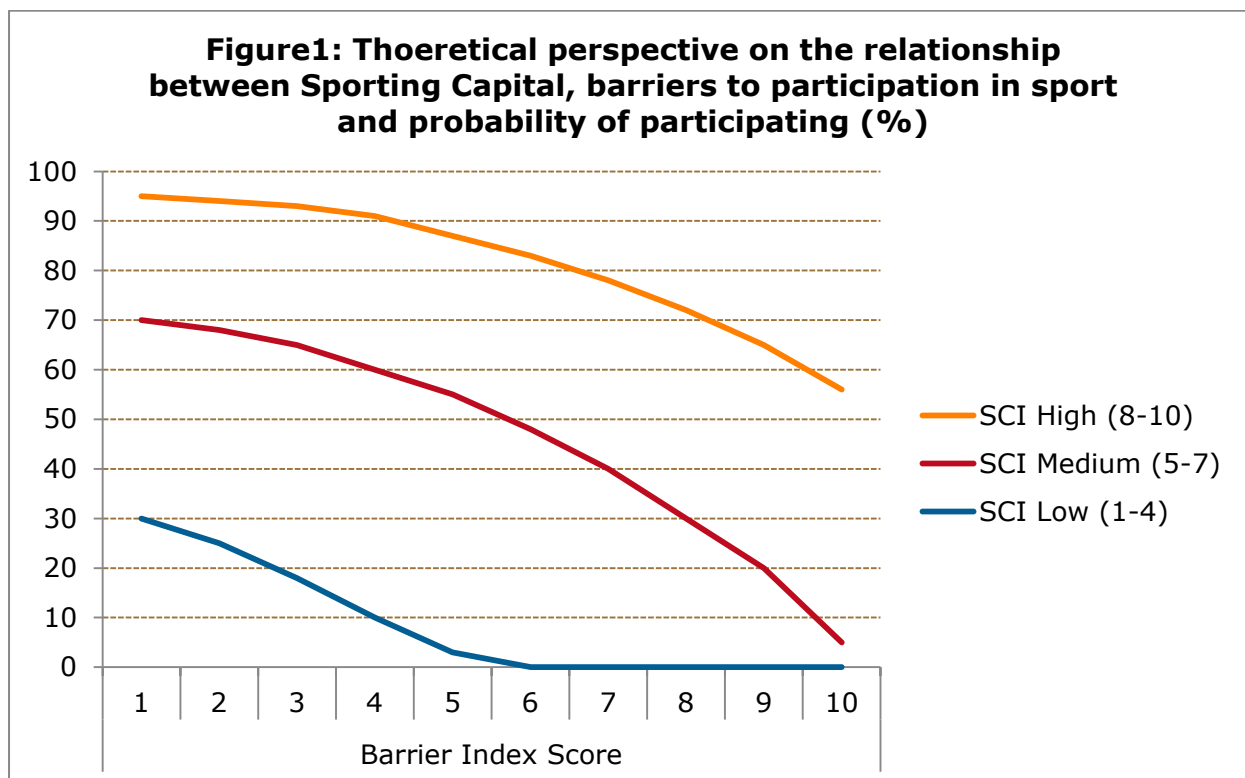
The relationship between Sporting Capital, external barriers and constraints and participation rates in sport

Barriers and constraints on participation are defined here as all those things that are external to the individual that impact on their ability to participate in sport. Opportunities may be thought of as the absence of barriers but may also be conceived in a more positive and proactive way. External barriers may be environmental including things like a lack of suitable places to play near where you live; they may be social including things like the cultural norms that surround some sports that may make them seem threatening or at least out of reach for some or the demands of childcare, work or education; they may be economic in terms of affordability; and they may be informational in terms of a lack of knowledge of where to play and or the procedures for booking or organising sporting opportunities.

There is no doubt that barriers and constraints by definition depress levels of participation in sport. They are not evenly spread either geographically or socially – those in our communities who are more socially disadvantaged face different and often bigger barriers than those who are more affluent and socially advantaged. Barriers operate differently for men and women, for people with a disability and for people from different ethnic minorities.

However, barriers are only one side of the sport participation equation. The other side – Sporting Capital – is the most significant factor and understanding its relationship to barriers is critical to the potential success of public policy intervention in sport. Figure 1 below

provides a ***theoretical perspective***² of this relationship and demonstrates graphically why it is so important to public policy.



The horizontal axis in Figure 1 is a **hypothetical scale** of the barriers to participation with 1 being very low barriers and 10 being very high. Imagine this scale to be a synthesis of all the barriers an individual might face at any given time. The vertical axis is the probability of participating in sport. The plotted lines are three different levels of Sporting Capital, low (an index score of 1-4), medium (a score of 5-7) and high (a score of 8-10).

The figure shows in theory how external barriers interact with a person’s Sporting Capital levels to moderate their probability of participating. A person with high levels of Sporting Capital will be more likely to overcome the same barriers faced by someone with low levels of Sporting Capital and hence for any given barrier level will have a higher probability of participating in sport. The consequences for public policy from the theoretical relationship show in Figure 1 are profound and include the following:

- ❖ Barrier reduction will have a relatively very small impact on the probability of participating amongst those with the lowest level of Sporting Capital. Reducing barriers from 10 to 6 for this group will make no difference at all on their participation. Although a reduction in the barriers from 6 to 1 will increase their probability of participating it will be a relatively small increase providing little marginal gain in the

² The plot of the relationship presented in Figure 1 is a hypothetical one. To be tested empirically would require the creation of a ‘barrier index’ which although not impossible would be difficult to achieve.

probability of participating. The maximum probability of participating for this group is 30% where barriers have been reduced to the lowest (and unrealistic) level. Put another way, 70% of those on the lowest levels of Sporting Capital will not participate in sport no matter how many resources are thrown at reducing barriers for them. **The only way to substantially increase participation amongst the lowest Sporting Capital group is by increasing their level of Sporting Capital. For this group relatively small increases in Sporting Capital will make a very big difference to their probability of participating.**

- ❖ The relationship between barriers and the probability of participating for those on medium levels of Sporting Capital is very different to the one we see for those on low levels. The probability of participating is considerably higher at all barrier levels. At the lowest level the probability it touches 70% but as barriers increase the probability decreases and at an increasing rate as barriers reach the mid range level of 5 and 6. The shape of this curve would theoretically point towards barrier reduction having a greater success for this the middle range Sporting Capital group than it would for those on low levels of Sporting Capital. For this group the greatest return will be achieved by driving down barriers at the highest level i.e. from 10 to 6 rather than from 5 to 1. **However, even for this group barrier reduction alone will be limited in what it can achieve. The potential gains to be achieved from increasing Sporting Capital levels in this group still look relatively attractive with the possibility of substantial participation gains at all barrier levels.**
- ❖ Those with the highest Sporting Capital scores have a relatively high probability of participating for all barrier levels. As barriers increase from the lowest levels there is a slow decrease in the probability of participating. From a barrier level of 5 onwards there is a steeper decline in participation but less than we would see for the middle range Sporting Capital Group. This highest Sporting Capital group has the lowest potential gains to participation from increasing levels of Sporting Capital. **For this group barrier reduction will make the biggest difference to participation – particularly at the upper end where a small decrease in barriers can have a relatively large impact on the probability of participating.**

The implications for public policy

This Resource Sheet steps back from the detailed analysis of Sporting Capital levels and their distribution across the population to provide a strategic insight into the role of Sporting

Capital in strategic public policy making. It demonstrates – **using a theoretical model**³– how public policy must take a more sophisticated strategic approach to how it balances the allocation of its limited resources between reducing the external barriers to participation and investing in building Sporting Capital. The model suggests that for the minority of the population who have very high levels of Sporting Capital a focus on barrier reduction will provide the best value for money investment. However, for those with middle range levels of Sporting Capital the picture is more complex. Barrier reduction –particularly a reduction from very high to moderate levels – will provide good participation returns for public investment – but these returns will be limited. For many even bigger returns would be achieved from an investment that could deliver relatively small gains in Sporting Capital. For those with the lowest levels of Sporting Capital a public policy focus on barrier reduction is unlikely to pay dividends and for many it would be a complete waste of resources. For those on the lowest levels of Sporting Capital achieving a substantial increase in their probability of participating is dependent on increasing their levels of Sporting Capital.

The earlier Resource Sheets in this series have shown how Sporting Capital is not evenly spread across the population – that it is socially structured for example by age, gender and social class. This finding taken together with the theoretical perspective discussed above has implications for how public policy prioritises its investment across these different social groups to maximum effect. To optimise impact and value for money policy makers must ensure that public investment is sensitive to the differences in people’s relationship to sport and the local circumstances in which they find themselves and strike the right balance between investment in barrier reduction and building Sporting Capital.

Finally, it has to be said that building Sporting Capital is only a good value for money option if it is possible to intervene in effective ways to achieve this – and at relatively low cost.

Resource Sheet 9 taking the example of StreetGames Doorstep Sport explores how a focus on Sporting Capital can influence project design to impact positively on young people’s relationship to sport in some of our most disadvantaged communities.

ⁱ This Sheet is the ninth 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.

³ The theoretical model proposed requires empirical testing to substantiate in practice the relationships suggested between Sporting Capital, barriers and participation rates in sport.

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.

