

Do sports clubs generate social capital?

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Introduction

In just a few years, social capital has become a huge area of interest to academics, governments and international agencies like the World Bank (1998; Woolcock, 2001), OECD and the World Health Organisation. Originating in different concepts by Bourdieu and Coleman, the idea became popularised by Putnam (2000) in *Bowling Alone*, arguing that under privatised lifestyles, long distance commuting, and TV-dominated home culture, civic solidarity, in the forms of mutual trust and associational life, was crumbling. Benefits are claimed for more profitable companies, lifelong learning, more cohesive and safer communities, less suicide and drug abuse, better health and longer of better quality, and more sustained economic development. The British government invited Putnam, has taken an interest (PIU, 2001) and standardised questions for surveys across government departments.

Method

Literature review and discussion

Results and Discussion

With special reference to sport and sports clubs, the paper will debate:

- a) is there any evidence as to whether Europe is following the trends claimed for the USA (Hall, 1999, Rothstein, 2001)?
- b) does sport generate the valued links bridging to other social spheres, or only the bonding links with other people 'like us', that make for close, if not introverted groups (Stolle, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996) ?
- c) is social capital in sport distributed equally by region or by social class, arguments being put that it is weaker in lower social groups (Casey, 2002; Collins, 2003) ?
- d) what research agenda should be embarked upon to demonstrate the reality or otherwise of this phenomenon, and how it works? Because if it is a reality, the justification for stronger support for public and not-for-profit sport (and the arts) would be much stronger. This part will draw on a series of seminars organised by Collins and colleagues in 2003-4, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

Conclusion

Is the social capital movement, for such it has become, a new important phase of social science, despite the fuzziness of the concept, the lack of agreement as yet about measurement, and its incredibly wide range of applications? Or is it, as claimed by Fine (2002) a bad reworking of network theory, dependent on aggregate data (Warde et al, 2003) bereft of social and political context, and liable to mislead gullible sports researchers?

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