

## (SP) IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AUSTRALIAN SPORT

*Dwight H. Zakus, James Skinner & Allan Edwards*  
Griffith University, AUSTRALIA

### **Introduction**

In his 2006 NASSM Dr Earle F. Ziegler Lecture and subsequent publication in the *Journal of Sport Management* Laurence Chalip (2006) identified a number of unique sport management research agendas. Of these, he mentions an agenda around sport's role in community building through the generation of positive social capital. In the United Kingdom much research output already seeks to understand the broader parameters of both the positive and negative elements of sport in community development.

As a currently popular, widely embraced, and wide-ranging concept, social capital defies a set definition and method of measurement (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). That is, there are several different definitions of the concept, varying to some degree (see the Social Capital Gateway at <http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/>). Likewise, scholars from disparate fields of study (policy, religion, urban studies, economics, community development and sport studies, etc.) appropriate elements of social capital, as required, to focus their research.

In attempting to bring together the understandings of social capital from these fields of study, this paper reports on an ongoing collaborative research project with the Queensland Rugby Union (QRU). In particular, the project seeks to identify and measure the direct contribution sport makes to the generation of social capital using a community rugby club as the focal point. Further, the research aims to understand the way sport clubs integrate into their local communities and how they might better expand and enhance community development.

### **Methods**

This project employed a multiple-method approach. It followed the critical realist methodology as described by Downward (2005), while drawing on Sayer's (1982) discussion of realism. The method most widely used to study social capital is a (positivistic) survey, this study goes beyond this by following Denzin's (1989) "between methods triangulation", and both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. These approaches move away from a purely positivist approach common to most social capital research.

The project had three main phases. The first phase involved a comprehensive profiling of the community in which the rugby club exists. Stage two involved reviewing the literature on social capital to glean both theoretical and methodological foci to assist in the construction of surveys. From these two surveys instruments will be developed to allow the researchers to (1) measure the general level of social capital in the overall community identified; and to specifically (2) measure the contribution of sport-social capital to community life.

The second phase involved two main methods. First, a focus group was held to gather information to advance the building of the aforementioned surveys on sport social capital. The second method, involving the delivery of both surveys and the final phase of specific focus groups with members of the rugby club under study; other

service and community agencies; other sport clubs; and youth in the area are not reported in this paper.

## **Results**

This research is in progress. Therefore, the discussion that follows reports the outcomes of the literature review on social capital, critiques of current surveys employed to measure social capital, and the results of the first focus group.

While there are common themes emerging in the various studies, none provide enough substance for an understanding of sport social capital generation and community building. Anecdotally, sport is viewed as contributing positive social capital, which ignores the negative aspects of this contribution. Also, sport is seen as a panacea for wider social ills as it can be used to alleviate those ills. In this context and to date there is limited empirical evidence for this place and use of sport in social capital development. Initial results of the first focus group and the literature review provide some evidence for sport generating social capital, but to date this is not conclusive.

While common themes of social capital research such as social networks and support structures, empowerment and community participation, civic and political involvement, trust in people and social institutions, tolerance and diversity, and altruism and philosophy, relate to understanding the place and role of sport in communities, they are too broad. Likewise, most other common definitions of social capital “generally referred to as the set of trust, institutions, social norms, social networks, and organizations that shape the interactions of actors within a society and are an asset for the individual and collective production of well-being” (Downloaded from the Social/Capital/Gateway, 2 June 2006 from <http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org>), are too ambiguous to focus on the sport and social capital community building relationship.

From the first focus group, the following items derived: elements of social networks, social connections, and support structures, civic involvement, and altruism were evident. The first survey, not yet implemented, seeks to measure sport as an element of social capital development. As such it embraces elements from psychological literature (neighbourhood sense of community scale, leisure identity salience, social networks) and government-based studies (sense of community, participation in community, and desire for future community engagement) where a more focused set of variables are measured. What the variables included in the survey seek to identify is how sport brings positive outcomes and contributes to the formation of social capital in communities.

## **Discussion**

Much of the literature notes that sport is widely recognised as a way to build positive social capital. In particular, studies have found that sport at the grassroots level has the potential to motivate, inspire, and forge a community spirit in face of social ills as reported by Cairnduff (2001). A report by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC, 2004) on the impact of sport in the community also note that:

Studies have identified how social controls within the community contribute towards counterbalancing criminal activities. Social controls are found in traditional and modern social structures, and participatory activities, such as sport, give people a sense of community identity and purpose, and help prevent them from engaging in antisocial activities. Sport may provide a means of

encouraging a “sense of community identity” and thereby help reduce antisocial behaviour. (p. 20)

In a review of the Australian Government’s involvement in sport and recreation in Australia, it was found the Commonwealth government generates a good return on its investment in sport and recreation. The review identified a number of benefits from the government’s investment in sport, which includes: the building of national identity and national pride; community development and integration; crime prevention; health; education; and economics benefits (ASC, 2004, p. 17). As noted above, however, these outcomes demand further empirical investigation and support.

There is one overriding concern and cautionary note in researching social capital. Ben Fine (2001) argues that social capital is an attempt to bring a social element into neo-liberal market economics. He cautions that economists are co-opting and colonising the social sciences through their inclusion of a social capital agenda. Fine advocates a return to a political economy analysis that allows for the inclusion and deeper understanding of cultural elements in the way communities are structured and operate. The methodology and multiple-methods approach used in this research attempted to deal with Fine’s critique when formulating a greater understanding of the composition and amount of social capital derived from sport.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2000). Measuring social capital: Current collections and future directions. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110122.NSF> on 25 October 2005.
- Australian Sports Commission. (2004). *Pacific Sporting Needs Assessment*. ASC: Canberra.
- Cairnduff, S. (2001). *Sport and Recreation for Indigenous Youth in the Northern Territory*. ASC: Canberra.
- Chalip, L. (2006). Toward a distinctive sport management discipline, *Journal of Sport Management*, 20, 1-21.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Downward, P. (2005). Critical (realist) reflection on policy and management research in sport, tourism, and sports tourism. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 5(3), 303-320.
- Fine, B. (2001). *Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sayer, A. (1982). *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. London: Routledge.

**E-mail:** [d.zakus@griffith.gu.edu.au](mailto:d.zakus@griffith.gu.edu.au)