

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND SPORTS PARTICIPATION: AN ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The promotion of mass participation in sport, as a form of physical activity, is now firmly on the public policy agenda in the UK and elsewhere. The health and well being of citizens forms part of popular discourse, evidenced by repeated references to ‘obesity’ epidemics in the media and indicated by the establishment of new policies, policy agents or a refocusing of previous efforts to address this issue. For example in the UK a new central government minister for Public Health has been established to work in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Transport, the Department for Education and Skills and sports delivery bodies to raise participation. The legacy effects of increased mass participation were also championed in the recent successful 2012 London Olympic bid. This is indicative of a more general pattern in most economies where government departments formulate policy which is then implemented by sports policy agencies working alongside the various stakeholders in sport, such as governing bodies, sports clubs and volunteer bodies etcetera (see, for example, Houlihan, 1997; Green and Houlihan, 2005; Downward et al forthcoming).

In England the implementation of sports participation policy is being shaped by Sport England, the relevant sports policy agency. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to discussion of such policy initiatives, by an explicit focus upon economic theory and subsequent empirical investigation. The paper provides a brief resume of the policy context in the UK is provided; it reviews the main elements of the theoretical and empirical literature on sports participation. There is a particular focus upon ‘lifestyle’ factors and the spillover effects of interdependent sports demands. It is shown, using an elementary model based on Becker (1974), how investment in personal consumption capital, and social capital, through social interactions, can conceptually account for lifestyle and complementary consumption in sports.

METHODS

The paper uses a two-fold quantitative approach based on the analysis of 14,819 cases in the General Household Survey (2002) in the UK. An exploratory cluster analysis of all variables in the sample is employed first, to identify lifestyle, that is social capital, subsamples in the data. In the latter case, membership of these clusters is then employed as a variable in a Heckman regression model, alongside the original variables, including proxies for personal consumption-capital accumulation, to examine the choice to participate in sport and the frequency of this participation.

RESULTS

Broadly speaking the results indicate that for sports participation in any activity, that is an aggregate measure of sports participation, the choice to participate and allocate time to participate in activities are dependent. Moreover, investment in personal-consumption capital and social capital can increase the chance of cases participating in sport, as well as their frequency of participation. However, work related income-time constraints can mitigate against more frequent participation.

In disaggregated analysis the choice to participate in sport and its frequency are shown to be independent decisions and distinct patterns of behaviour can be identified for leisure, recreational and sports activities.

DISCUSSION

Based on a model of social interactions, which synthesises predictions from a broad literature, it is argued that investment in personal-consumption and social capital will be integral to understanding sports participation. Along with specific individual factors that affect participation, such as age and gender, it is argued that these results are broadly consistent with the current analysis of sports policy bodies in the UK. It is also argued that current changes in the organisation of sports policy in the UK, and its overseeing through a broader central governmental Minister are appropriate innovations in policy in as much that policy activism should focus upon broad sets of activities and also shape choices as well as eliminate constraints, for example, through education. However, it is argued that this may raise policy tensions between calls for mass participation and elite sports development.

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