

The challenge of engaging hard-to-reach populations in regular sport and physical activity: an examination of an English Premier League Football in the community men's health programme

Authors: Kathryn Dunn, Barry Drust, Rebecca Murphy & Dave Richardson

Institution: Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University

Introduction

Sports management research is an important global resource which provides essential feedback to organisations whose primary service is related to sport or physical activity (DeSensi et al., 1990). However, Frisby (2005) noted that the sports management discipline needs to be broadened in order to serve the interests of more people that could be affected by sport. Therefore, Frisby and Millar (2007) suggest that research concerned with representing the interests of those affected by managerial actions within community sport should be encouraged, for example, through the inclusion of studies examining hard-to-reach (HTR) populations. Hard-to-reach populations are those who are difficult to access due to a specific factor that characterises its members (Faugier et al., 1997). Such factors may include (but are not limited to) language, age, gender, geographic location, income, ethnicity, education, religion, health and accommodation (Moffett et al., 2010). Participation in regular sport and physical activity can improve the overall health and wellbeing of HTR populations (WHO, 2003; Sport England, 2008). However, literature suggests that people from HTR groups often experience difficulty engaging in sport and physical activity for a sustained period of time (WHO, 2003; Frisby and Millar, 2007; Sport England, 2008). In this regard, it seems appropriate to explore strategies that seek to engage and retain HTR populations in sport and physical activity (Frisby, 2005; Frisby and Millar, 2007).

Due to the popularity of the English Premier League (EPL), professional football clubs' community engagement (i.e., Football in the Community) programmes have often been championed as a vehicle to reach and connect with HTR populations (Dunn et al., 2011; Pringle et al., 2011). Nevertheless, sustained engagement with HTR populations can be a complex management challenge (Frisby, 2005). In order to extend our understanding of *why* people from HTR groups experience difficulty engaging in sport and physical activity for a sustained period of time, it is critical to understand the challenges that such populations encounter when attempting to pursue positive health behaviours. Managers of sport and physical activity pursuits and/or programmes should be aware of the challenges that HTR populations encounter. Such knowledge can assist managers in tailoring their approach to their health behaviour programme to reduce the alleged challenges to engagement, ensure more sustained participation and

subsequently ensure successful implementation of sport and physical activity participation programmes (Roby et al., 2008).

This study aims to examine the distinct challenges that HTR populations encounter when attempting to commit to regular and sustained participation in sport and physical activity. Furthermore, this research aims to make sense of the participant experiences and propose guidelines for effective strategies that better engage and sustain HTR populations in positive sport, exercise and health behaviour.

Method

After obtaining ethical approval, HTR populations were recruited for participation in a 12 week Football in the Community (FitC) sport, health and physical activity programme based at an English Premier League Football Club. Initially, two HTR populations were identified; homeless men and men recovering from drug addiction. Two services hosting these particular HTR populations were then contacted. These services included a men's homeless shelter and a drug addiction service within the City of Liverpool, UK. Participants were then recruited over a period of three months using a variety of mechanisms including face-to-face engagement, phone calls, referrals from service staff and word of mouth. The intervention was directed at men 18-35 years of age, although adult men beyond 35 years were eligible to enrol. Enrolment on the programme was voluntary.

Following the recruitment drive, 24 men (mean \pm SD: age 29.05 \pm 9.6 years) who were living in homeless shelters and/or recovering from drug misuse enrolled on the FitC programme. The programme consisted of two 2-hour football sessions each week alongside the dissemination of healthy living messages. Football sessions were conducted by a qualified FitC coach. Typically, each session involved a short informal 'talk' from a health service provider followed by a standardised warm-up, fitness activities, skills practice and concluded with a small sided game.

Research design

Frisby (2005) suggested that novel qualitative methodologies (i.e., those that allow for the voices, experiences and insights of HTR populations to be heard) offer a greater understanding of HTR populations. The practitioner-cum-researcher (i.e., 1 author) adopted the principles of ethnography and observational research (Tedlock, 2003) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the day-to-day realities and challenges of the participants. The practitioner-cum-researcher was immersed in the planning and delivery of the programme from the outset and subsequently engaged in a 4 week period of regular casual conversation and active participation with programme participants in order to develop relationships, trust and rapport. Throughout the following 8 weeks, social issues were discussed with all programme participants through informal client-researcher interactions. Data was collated through logged researcher observations and field notes (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). Records of attendance were also logged and participants who failed to attend a session were contacted. The participants' reason(s) for non-attendance were recorded. This reflective based methodology allowed for

sense-making with the practitioner continually learning from the knowledge gained *in action*. Such an approach encouraged a more meaningful contextual understanding of the participants' real life experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Tedlock, 2003).

Data analysis

Following the intervention, data was analysed through deductive and inductive reasoning in order to extrapolate a meaningful understanding of the participants' behaviour and voices (Polkinghorne, 1988). Deductive analysis followed by inductive analysis ensured that relevant theoretical and contextual themes and categories emerged from the data. Data is represented in this paper through a series of themed narrative extracts that capture pertinent 'moments' from applied observations within the field. The voice of the participants are represented through a series of direct quotations and evidenced as *italics* within the text. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Results

Despite the apparent ambition of the HTR participants to regularly participate in the Football in the Community programme, adherence to the programme was poor. Through the adoption of ethnographic methods in this research, a period of 'down time' was established within the physical activity programme (generally prior to activity commencing and between activities) and this period became particularly useful for building practitioner-participant relationships and consequently for identifying a number of challenges experienced by the HTR participants.

Reasons given for irregular and/or non attendance commonly alluded to the fact that regular engagement and adherence posed a real challenge for the participants. Three dominant themes emerged which explained this irregular and/or non attendance, namely; 'economic', 'environmental' and 'social' challenges.

Economic Challenges: Budgetary restraints are a significant barrier for participating in sports activities for people of low income (Steenhuis et al., 2009). Similarly, it became increasingly evident that financial constraints were a significant challenge for our HTR participants (who were generally not in employment) when attempting to engage in the FitC programme. Although there was no direct cost for participation in the FitC programme, the indirect cost of transport to and from the sporting venue arose as a significant challenge for the majority of participants throughout the programme. This finding was epitomised by Gary, 31, a recovering drug user, when he exclaimed, "*I can't afford the bus fare. I want to come like, but just can't always get up there*". Similarly, Ben, 27, an enthusiastic participant who was living in a homeless shelter, stated "*Sorry that I didn't turn up Kath. I've got no money to get there. Sorry*".

Environmental Challenges: The influence of the environment on sports participation has been described as 'any aspect of the physical (natural) environment or the urban or constructed (built) environment that subconsciously or consciously relates to an individual and their sport and physical activity behaviour' (NICE, 2008). The location of

the recreational facilities (built environment) which were used for our FitC programme emerged as a dominant theme preventing our HTR participants from sustained participation in the programme. This finding is illustrated by James, a 26 year old participant who was living in a homeless shelter who exclaimed, "*It's [the venue] just too far away from where I live. I can't be arsed! It takes me ages to get up there*" James, 26.

Social Challenges: The influence of social factors as a determinant of physical activity engagement is widely recognized (Haughton McNeill et al., 2006). Social challenges to participation which emerged from the data in this study were largely related to the participants' primary priorities (i.e., for survival in their day-to-day existence). For example, the HTR participants in this study were living in homeless shelters and/or recovering from drug misuse and so were commonly assigned to 'community support workers' who were helping them to rebuild their lives. As a result of this however, attendance at the FitC programme was often prohibited due to participants having obligatory meetings with their community support workers. Rob, 23, stated "*I've messed up again. Now I have to see my officer [support worker] every Tuesday*". Similarly, Andrew, 25, said "*I've gotta meet me support worker today so can't make it*". Furthermore, participants commonly stated that they had other situational obligations to attend to during the time that they hoped to attend the FitC programme, for example, Daniel, a 34 year old unemployed, homeless participant explained, "*I've got to sign on [job seekers allowance] on Tuesday afternoons Kath so I won't be able to make it here half the time*".

Discussion

This study has identified three dominant challenges that HTR populations encounter when attempting to commit to regular participation in sport and physical activity. At a basic level, the challenges which have been outlined are not dissimilar from findings of previous studies that engaged more generic populations, namely 'economic', 'environmental' and 'social' challenges (Haughton McNeill et al., 2006). However, the specific findings that have emerged in this study under these three themes allude to somewhat more 'severe' challenges that are on a more 'extreme' level to those faced by generic populations. It is likely that these differences are due to the complex lives and extenuating circumstances of the HTR participants. Therefore, it can be argued that in order to facilitate sustained engagement, a deeper level of understanding and due diligence is required by sports managers who engage and/or are considering engaging HTR populations prior to the conception and development of such community programmes. Specifically, it would appear that in order to achieve regular engagement, managers of future programmes engaging HTR participants should immerse themselves in a period of direct contact and focused interaction with their participants prior to the programme design in order to gain a greater understanding of the day-to-day existence and recognise the economic, environmental and social challenges associated with the population whom they are engaging. During this period of due diligence, sports managers should seek to understand

simple but critical logistics such as location, cost and timing. Wherever possible, managers should also make direct contact with the participants' community support workers in order to minimise the chance of obligatory meetings being scheduled during the same time as the programme. This 'bottom up' programme design and management strategy is therefore likely to reduce the challenges facing HTR participants when attempting to engage in sport and physical activity programmes and result in greater adherence and thus, positive outcomes.

Conclusions and future directions

Sport England (2008) stated that projects targeting HTR populations need to spend time listening to their participants in order to be successful. By adopting this approach and including the voices of HTR populations who were impacted by sport management practice, ideas for promoting change and inclusion have been generated. It can be argued that the findings and recommendations of this study puts managers in a better position to tailor their programmes so that they work for those who are classified as HTR, and thus offers a new role for community sport and physical activity programme managers as facilitators and enablers.

The current study contributes to an underserved area within sport management literature however there are limitations that should be addressed in future research. Mainly, this work has solely concentrated on men who are classified as 'homeless' and/or 'recovering from drug misuse'. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to explore the experiences of other groups classified as HTR (e.g., females, older age groups and/or ethnic minorities) in order to deepen our understanding of the issues encountered amongst similarly challenging populations. Furthermore, longitudinal research studies which adopt immersed researcher techniques with HTR participants should be encouraged in order to probe more thoroughly into the challenges which cause lack of engagement. This data could be used to inform and implement successful sport and physical activity programmes with HTR populations.

References:

- Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (1994) Ethnography and participant observation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.) *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. London: Sage, 111–136.
- Burgess, R. (1984) *In the field: an introduction of field research*. London: Routledge.
- DeSensi, J., Kelly, D., Blanton, M. and Beitel, P (1990) Sport management curricular evaluation and needs assessment: A multifaceted approach. *Journal of Sport Management*, 4(1), 31-58.
- Dunn, K., Drust, B., Flower, D., and Richardson, D. Kicking the habit: a biopsychosocial account of engaging men recovering from drug misuse in regular recreational football. *Journal of Men's Health*, 2011; 8(3), 233.
- Faugier, J. and Sargeant, M. (1997) Sampling hard to reach populations. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26, 790–797.
- Frisby, W. (2005). The good, the bad and the ugly: Critical sport management research. *Journal of Sport Management*, 19(1), 1-12.
- Frisby, W. and Millar, S. (2007) The actualities of doing community development to promote the inclusion of low income populations in local sport and recreation. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 2(3), 209-233.
- Haughton McNeill, L., Kreuter, M. W., Subramanian, S. V. (2006). Social Environment and Physical activity: A review of concepts and evidence. *Social Science and Medicine* 63, 1011–1022.
- Steenhuis, I., Nooy, S., Moes, M. and Schuit, A. (2009). Financial Barriers and Pricing Strategies Related to Participation in Sports Activities: The Perceptions of People of Low Income. *Journal of Physical Activity & Health*, 6(6), 716-721
- Moffett, L. (2010) *Community Engagement and Visible Manifestations of Conflict Programme*. Extending our reach. Available at <http://northeastpeace.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Programme-6a-Report-Extending-Our-Reach-February-2010.doc> (accessed on 21/05/12)
- National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2008) *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*. London: NICE.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1988) *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press, Albany, USA.
- Pringle, A., Zwolinsky, S., Smith, A., Robertson, S., McKenna, J. and White, A. (2011) The pre-adoption demographic and health profiles of men participating in a programme of men's health delivered in English Premier League football clubs. *Public Health*, 125 (7): 411-6.
- Roby, D., Kominski, G. and Pourat, N. (2008) Assessing the Barriers to Engaging Challenging Populations in Disease Management Programs. The Medicaid Experience. *Disease Management and Health Outcomes*, 16 (6): 421-428.
- Sport England (2008) *Engaging hard to reach groups. Lessons from the Active England programme*. Sport England, London.
- Tedlock, B. (2003) Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (p.165-214). Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- World Health Organization (2003) *Health and Development through Physical Activity and Sport*. Available at: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2003/WHO_NMH_NPH_PA_H_03.2.pdf (accessed on 21/05/2012).