

Bowling even more alone: trends towards individualistic participation in sport

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Synopsis:

This paper examines the shift in sports participation in England from formal-structured sports participation to informal-unstructured participation. It also considers the reasons for this change and the implications for community sport policy.

Abstract:

1. Aim of abstract/paper

Community sport policy in England is primarily concerned with increasing mass sports participation. Between 2012 and 2017 a total of £1 billion of public money will be invested in formal structures such as National Governing Bodies of sport and County Sport Partnerships for the purpose of getting more people to play sport more often (or at least for one 30 minute period per week).

Despite this significant investment, the data for community sport policy (the Active People dataset) highlights the continued steady growth in informal-individual sports participation and, at the same time, a steady decline in formal-structured sports participation. This trend of 'individual, flexible, fitness and lifestyle-oriented activities' is not new. Coalter first identified this 'new trend' in his analysis of General Household Survey data from the 1980s and 1990s (1999, p.26). This paper will build on Coalter's earlier analysis in three specific ways: (i) by providing a detailed analysis of the AP data to show the more recent decline in formal sports participation and the continued growth in informal sports participation, (ii) by examining various explanations for these changes in sport participation, and (iii) by discussing the implications for the community sport policy in England.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical background consists of contextual information regarding the community sport policy process as well as various explanations for the change from formal to informal sports participation. First, the shift towards individual participation might reflect the trend identified by Putnam's highly influential work

Bowling Alone (2000). Here, a trend away from bowling in groups was taken as being representative of a general fragmentation of collective activity, leading to a diminished stock of social capital, defined by Putnam as connections within individuals' social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Thus, the growth in informal-individual sports participation is not so much a reflection of sport alone but a reflection of societal change which carries significant implications for both sport and society. Second, the shift in distribution of time spent at paid work, unpaid work and leisure may directly affect the possibility of shared leisure time. Not only has a long-term trend towards leisure and away from work, paid or unpaid, been reversed (Gershuny, 2011, p.3) but paid work is more evenly distributed over time. An increase in paid female employment combined with a slight gender redistribution of unpaid work in the household means that women are less likely to be supporting their male partners' leisure through their own unpaid work. Therefore, the decline in dominant male team sports (football, rugby, cricket) might be a result of greater difficulty in coordinating the leisure time of enough individuals (usually men) to comprise two teams, over a considerable period of time. Alongside these broader socio-cultural issues is a third explanation—the increasing commercialisation of leisure. This has produced a diverse and fiercely competitive field of opportunities where the time given to certain experiences is selectively apportioned through simplified cost (time/price) benefit (outputs) analyses. Simultaneously, Roberts (2010) notes that young people are increasingly inclined to adopt sporting preferences that express their individuality. The individualization of sport merely reinforces the slow evolutionary change in the balance of the social habitus of a person from the we-identity towards the I-identity, where greater emphasis is placed on 'the I-identity of the individual person and the detachment of that person from the traditional groupings of people' (Elias, 2001, p. 179).

3. Methodology, research design and data analysis

The paper focuses on a secondary analysis of the Active People (AP) dataset from AP1 (2005/6) to AP6 (2011/2). The AP survey is undertaken annually with a sample of around 177,000 people per year (based on 500 people in each of the 354 local authorities across England). The data were analysed using analysis of variance tests (ANOVA) to identify significant differences participation at different frequencies (several times a week, once a week, and at all) in formally structured team sports as compared to informal/non-structured individual activities. Participation in formally structured team sports is defined as (i) participation in team sports (e.g. football, cricket, rugby, etc.) and (ii) participation in a structured context such as a sports club, a coaching or instructional environment and/or involvement in competition. In contrast, informal, individual activities are defined as (i) activities that can be undertaken alone (e.g. aerobics, gym, jogging, recreational cycling, swimming) and (ii) outside formal structures such as those previously listed. Further technical information about the AP survey can be found at:

https://www.sportengland.org/media/312344/Active-People-Survey-6_Technical-Report_final.pdf

4. Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The findings highlight the overall change in sports participation and the differences between formal-structured participation and informal-individual

participation. In particular, the results demonstrate the ongoing trend of growth in informal-individual sport and, at the same time, decline in formal-structured sport, although the results are more striking in the cases of some activities than in others. Various explanations for these findings will be discussed alongside the need for further empirical work. The implications for community sport policy will also be discussed against the realities of the current policy system whereby the majority of funding for community sport policy is allocated to formal-structured sport, primarily through National Governing Bodies of Sport.

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