

Does Corruption in Sport Corrode Social Capital?

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Aim

Supported by a wealth of research, current UK government policy emphasises the important role of sport in delivering social outcomes. Participating and experiencing live sport is considered to be a priority, since ‘the evidence for sport’s impact on building social capital [...] is well-established’, while the intention ‘to drive the commercialisation of sports’ forward in order for engagement with sport to increase is also highlighted in the Sporting Future policy (HM Government, 2015:72). What is not considered in the current policy are the logically plausible adverse effects that would follow when sport is shown to be corrupt and lack integrity. If sport is considered to be an instrument for building social capital and teaching morality, then does corruption in sport corrode social capital? This research aims to answer this question by investigating the effects of sport corruption in social capital in the UK.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In discussions of public policy, corruption is considered to be the cause of political instability, economic underdevelopment, low administrative efficiency and poor governance world-wide (Ko & Samajdar, 2010). At the same time, corruption is not only an economic phenomenon, but a societal and moral one that can have significant sociological and psychological effects (Judge et al., 2011). As Gächter and Schulz (2016) argue, corruption can in fact compromise individual intrinsic honesty that is crucial for the smooth functioning of society. As such corruption is increasingly analysed in sport (Maennig, 2005). From individual club corruption (e.g. match-fixing scandal in Greece, Italy, Turkey, etc), to federation-wide corruption (e.g. scandals in the IOC and FIFA), the integrity of sport in general is often brought into question (Maennig, 2005). However, the effects these incidents might have on social capital, and thus people’s trust and propensity to volunteer or participate in sport have yet to be explored.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Taking into consideration that perceptions of corruption differ depending on their perceived severity (Heidenheimer, 2002), three recent cases of corruption in UK sport of varying severity (or greyness according to Heidenheimer, 2002) were selected to be used as instrumental case studies for this research, following a pilot testing of how they are perceived. An experimental design was designed and tested through pilot focus groups, which allowed for the identification of any effects from exposure to corruption on participants’ feelings of trust and propensity to volunteer and be involved in sport. The questions asked during the focus groups incorporated noted determinants of social capital in the literature, and measures of social capital suggested by the Office of National Statistics. After the participants were questioned on social capital, they were presented with the case studies selected, and finally were asked the same social capital questions again in order for any changes in their answers to be identified. 18 focus groups were conducted (six for each case study) with English nationals (using a criterion sampling method) with an average of six participants per group, in order for in-depth discussions to be conducted on the sport corruption incidents and their effects. The focus groups took place between February and April 2018. Upon completion, all focus group recordings were transcribed in order for the thematic analysis to begin.

Results and Discussion

Manual thematic analysis of the data has begun and is expected to be completed by the end of May. Initial themes have been already identified, suggesting that while people's involvement in sport, through active participation or spectatorship, does not change, both their trust towards sport and inclination to volunteer is altered after their exposure to a case of corruption in sport. In particular, their trust towards not only a particular sport, but sport in general decreases significantly, depending on the perceived severity of the case of corruption presented. Interestingly, the opposite applies on their propensity to volunteer, with more individuals being inclined to volunteer following their exposure to a case of corruption in sport.

Conclusions and Implications

While the implications and contributions of this research will become clearer after the data analysis has been completed, the effects of sport corruption in people's trust appear to be significant. Exposure to corruption seems to result in a change of sentiment towards sport, from being perceived as a vehicle for positive social change to being indicative of a broader corrupt society. An interesting initial result also suggests that whilst feelings of trust towards others decrease, this stimulates some individuals to raise their expression of wishing to volunteer in order to protect the sport and its participants.

References

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