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Community Sport Programmes and Social Inclusion: What Role for Positive Psychological Capital?

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Abstract

(Re-)Engagement with education and employment is a common objective within interventions designed to enhance social inclusion through sport participation. Consequently, the acquisition of capital to expedite the (re)engagement process has become a familiar theme. Literature has examined how various forms of capital may be accumulated through participation in sport. However, competing literature has explored how participation may enable positive psychological capital—which comprises personal qualities such as resilience, hope, optimism, and self-efficacy—to be developed. This paper adds to this work, by providing insights from a sports-based project which aimed to develop social inclusion among marginalised youth in three regions of the United Kingdom. Utilising data from semi-structured and focus group interviews, we highlight how participation enabled young people to enhance components of positive psychological capital, and offer a further theoretical vantage point from which to understand and debate the relationship between participation in sport and social inclusion.

Introduction

(Re-)Engagement with education and employment is a common objective within interventions designed to enhance social inclusion through sport participation. When framed in this manner, the acquisition of resources—or capital—which expedite the (re)engagement process has become a familiar theme, and is often identified as a key ingredient to facilitating social change. For marginalised youth populations, the rhetoric surrounding the acquisition of capital has become more intense, and is often cited as a ‘gateway’ to enhanced life chances and a means to facilitate their sense of social inclusion (Kelly, 2011, Nols et al., 2017).

Increasingly, participation in sport has been seen as a credible device through which to engage young people from excluded groups and to promote the acquisition of capital (Collins and Haudenhuyse, 2015; Morgan and Bush, 2016). However, the focus of existing research has largely concerned the connections between participation in sport and the acquisition of human and social

capital¹ as the primary means to enhance social inclusion (Coalter, 2007; Kelly, 2011; Nicholson and Hoye, 2008; Sherry et al., 2015). Arguably, such focus is unsurprising, given existing conceptual and policy understandings of social inclusion which heavily accent employment as a primary marker (Levitas, 2005; Spaaij et al., 2013) and the abundance of literature which affirms the acquisition of human and social capital as critical factors to obtaining gainful employment (e.g. Becker, 2006; Granovetter, 2005).

Nevertheless, competing literature (e.g. Brown et al., 2011; Phillips, 2010) has proposed that personal qualities (and capital), which are not reliant upon the knowledge and competencies gained through education, nor via an individual's social network, are equally important elements to attaining success within the contemporary employment market. More specifically, personal qualities such as resilience, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism have been identified as equally important attributes to optimise employability (Nudzor, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Seddon et al., 2013). Such thinking aligns cogently with the work of Luthans et al. (2007) who conceptualise these identified personal qualities as 'positive psychological capital'.

Until recently, only a limited number of studies (e.g. Morgan, 2017; Souto-Otero, 2016) have examined the potential for sport participation to facilitate the acquisition of positive psychological capital.² The present discussion seeks to add to this nascent area of academic inquiry by presenting data collected from one sports-based intervention that was implemented in three UK cities. In all of the cases under consideration, the purpose of the intervention was to use sport as a means to engage young people who were identified as marginalised from mainstream society in some way or another, as well as those deemed 'vulnerable' because of their exclusion, or who were categorised as being 'at risk' of further exclusion. Specifically, we aim to provide insight into how aspects of programme delivery impacted participants' sense of social inclusion, in particular, with respect to the development of attributes aligned with conceptualisations of positive psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007).

Marginalised youth and social inclusion

¹ Within this article, we refer to human capital as the knowledge, information and skills that an individual develops (Becker, 2006), while social capital is conceptualised as the resources which are accrued through a network of institutionalised relationships (Bourdieu, 1986).

² It should be noted that the concept of positive psychological capital closely equates to broader notions of 'life skills' or 'individual skill development', which numerous studies have examined in connection with participation in sport (see, for example, Meek and Lewis, 2012; Meek, 2013). However, few of these studies have explicitly utilised the concept of positive psychological capital to frame their analyses.

Scholarly articulations of social inclusion have invariably made reference to enabling access to mainstream activity and the generation of opportunities within society, (Rankin, 2005), most notably those that are inextricably linked with the pursuit of paid employment (Lister, 2000; Spaaij et al., 2013)³. Such thinking is perhaps best captured by Levitas (2005) who highlights the social integrationist discourse (SID) as one of three over-lapping dialogues related to the categorisation of socially excluded populations, whereby the role of paid employment acts as the fundamental metric of social inclusion. Within youth populations, this connection has become even more pronounced, where employment (and its policy associates, education and training) have become key markers of social inclusion (Rose et al., 2012). Indeed, young people who are *not* in education, employment or training (NEET) are typically categorised as socially marginalised and often labelled feckless, or as social ‘drop-outs’ (Rose et al., 2012; Spaaij et al., 2013; Yates et al., 2010). We acknowledge that the term ‘social inclusion’ has come to be used as something of a catch-all in recent years and that there is a tendency for it to be conflated and confused with social integrationist perspectives. Our own positioning is in line with the former.

The obsession with paid employment as a marker of social inclusion holds obvious attraction given the simplicity and accessibility of (un)employment statistics as a policy metric (Rankin, 2005). As Spaaij et al. (2013) note, within both EU and UK social inclusion policy a focus on addressing youth unemployment has been conspicuous within the ambit of its flagship activities. Underpinning the rationale of the social inclusion-employment nexus is the notion that paid employment offers the financial rewards and status which “promote choice in living one’s desired life ... and involvement in all potential elements of social life” (Spandler, 2007, p. 7). Such rhetoric aligns coherently with the organising logic and regulating practices of neoliberalism, where, through the double movement of responsibilisation and autonomisation (Rose, 2000), individuals are obliged to establish and realise their own destiny, whilst becoming personally accountable for enhancing their capabilities (Dean, 2010; Paton et al., 2012; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Thus, the connection between social inclusion and paid employment has deep resonance with the philosophies of modern governance, the messages which are communicated to young people, and the strategies that are employed to enhance social inclusion.

³ We acknowledge that, in an analytical sense, our emphasis on ‘positive psychological capital’ in this paper (and more specifically, the clear link between this term and employability), allies itself to a relatively conservative conception of social inclusion and one which, in light of DeLuca’s helpful typology of social inclusion, might be seen as ‘normative or ‘integrative’ (see De Luca, 2013).

According to Strathdee (2013), the logic which typically accompanies strategic approaches to resolving youth unemployment often concentrates attention upon the acquisition of human and social capital. The development of human capital—or the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are valued for “their economically productive potential” (Baptiste, 2001, p. 185) is prominent within the design of much government policy, with priority afforded to the cultivation of skills which meet the needs of the labour market. Similarly, other interventions focus on repairing deficits in social capital by providing schemes which act as “conduits between employers and job-seekers” (Strathdee, 2013, p.41). An increasing number of studies have highlighted how sport-based interventions hold potential as a vehicle where existing strategic approaches may flourish (Spaaij et al., 2013). Nevertheless, and to echo Nicholson and Hoye (2008), the multifarious nature of sport participation will mediate the extent to which human and social capital can be developed and maintained, reinforcing Green’s (2008) assertion that sport-based programmes vary dramatically in the function and social outcomes that they deliver.

Despite the abundance of interventions which concentrate attention on enhancing human and social capital, recent academic consideration has observed how the simple accumulation of these forms of capital may, in themselves, be insufficient in acquiring employment, and with it social inclusion. For example, the shifting nature of contemporary skill requirements as a result of advancing technological developments (Becker, 2006), the global economy (Brown, 2006), and the changing nature of the labour force (Brown et al., 2011; Winlow and Hall, 2013), have all been cited as mediating factors in support of this view. For Brown (2006), such factors bring into question the centrality of human and social capital as the primary credentials of employability. Conversely, emphasis has transferred onto the development of ‘softer skills’, such as “personal drive, self-reliance and interpersonal skills” (Brown, 2006, p. 391), as qualities that are highly valued by employers.

Such thinking aligns closely with the concept of positive psychological capital (Luthans and Youssef, 2004; Luthans, et al., 2007), which has been noted as essential to actualising human potential for employability within the contemporary job market (Luthans et al., 2007). Indeed, Luthans et al. (2007) argue, that the simple accumulation of more of the traditional forms of capital once considered vital for organisational success is insufficient to accomplish sustainable sources of competitive advantage that the knowledge economy now demands.

Positive Psychological Capital

The four main conceptual components of positive psychological capital are self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans and Youssef, 2004; Luthans et al., 2007), all of which have been noted as critical attributes to providing a sustained competitive advantage within the employment domain (Luthans et al., 2007). While the acquisition and development of these four attributes feature heavily within formal modes of education (such as school curricula), more informal ‘educational’ pathways, such as those which promote opportunities for participation in sport, have also been posited as locales to develop such qualities (see Brown et al., 2011; Lauder et al., 2006; Morgan, 2017). A detailed exposition of these four conceptual components within the sport participation context has been provided by Morgan (2017) and, in the interests of continuity we briefly rehearse this discussion below.

The first component of positive psychological capital—self-efficacy—generally refers to a level of confidence or conviction in one’s abilities to successfully execute a specific or challenging task within a particular context by mobilising the appropriate effort, resources or courses of action to achieve that task (Bandura, 2001; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). Central to this is the pursuit of challenging objectives and the ability to persevere (Luthans and Youssef, 2004; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans et al., 2007). More specifically, Luthans et al. (2007) note that self-efficacious individuals exhibit five key characteristics which enhance the attributes of employability. These comprise: i) the setting of high or difficult goals; ii) embracing or thriving in challenging circumstances; iii) high self-motivation; iv) the investment of time and effort into the accomplishment of goals; and v) perseverance when faced with obstacles (Luthans et al., 2007). While it should be noted that self-efficacy is domain specific (Bandura, 2001), and may not be transferable between social contexts, a nuanced understanding of how participation in sport may influence the development of these five characteristics may be of merit in appreciating the broader contribution of sport to the accumulation of positive psychological capital.

The concept of hope—the second component of positive psychological capital—relates to the capability of an individual to develop the means to accomplish their goals, but more importantly, to demonstrate the agency and perseverance to remain committed to those goals by constructing alternative ways to achieve them (Luthans et al., 2007; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans and Youssef, 2004). Support for this element of positive psychological capital is offered by Phillips (2010), whose findings reveal that a sense of agency provides young people on the margins of society with an inner resource which enables them to generate coping mechanisms to manage their existing

circumstances and/or develop strategies to move forward. On a similar note, Snyder (2002) observes how possessing hope requires an individual to envisage clear pathways towards intended goals, and display the necessary motivation to achieve these goals through self-directed determination. Therefore, being hopeful is a combination of ‘willpower’ (agency) and ‘waypower’ (pathways) (Luthans et al., 2007; Snyder, 2002). Existing studies (e.g. Morgan and Bush, 2016; Morgan, 2017) have highlighted the potential for sport-based interventions to act as a form of informal education and to generate stores of willpower and waypower to demonstrate the transformative potential of sport participation in terms of enhanced perceptions of hope. Nevertheless, further studies are required to better understand how participation in sport may contribute to an enhanced sense of hope.

Third and closely related to hope, is the concept of optimism, which equates to how an individual’s explanatory style for positive events and outcomes is attributed “to internal, permanent, and pervasive causes, and negative events to external temporary and situation-specific ones” (Luthans and Youssef, 2004, p. 153). According to Luthans et al. (2007), optimism is the most pivotal of the four aspects of positive psychological capital, and perhaps offers a promising point of departure in terms of the potential of sport-based programmes in this area. That said, enhanced levels of optimism should not expose individuals to unnecessary or higher risks on the basis of over-optimistic or reckless decision making (Luthans et al., 2007). Instead, as Schneider (2001) cautions, individuals should develop a ‘realistic optimism’ based upon careful appraisal of situational factors, self-discipline, and analysis of past events to inform their thought processes. Consequently, an understanding as to how sport-based interventions may enable ‘realistic optimism’ (Schneider, 2001) and develop an ability for participants to be rational in making attributional decisions provides conceptual direction for analysis.

Resilience—or the capacity to respond positively to adversity, uncertainty, failure and/or overwhelming change (Kossek and Perrigino, 2016; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans and Youssef, 2004; Masten and Reed, 2002; Skodol, 2010; Zautra et al., 2010; Zimmerman and Brenner, 2010)—characterises the final element of positive psychological capital. For populations who experience social exclusion, enhancing resilience has emerged as a key factor within initiatives which support the progression of skills necessary for education, employment and training (Meek, 2013; Phillips, 2010). While definitions of resilience vary, Skodol (2010) has offered insight into the psychological traits of the “resilient personality” (p. 113) to identify how individuals may protect against psychological disorders related to adversity, failure or significant change. Skodol (2010) defines the

resilient personality as a combination of: (i) traits related to a strong sense of self, such as self-direction, self-understanding, a positive future orientation, and an ability to control negative emotions; and (ii) strong interpersonal skills, for example sociability, empathy, understanding of others, and altruism. With this specific understanding of resilience at the fore, potential exists to investigate how participation in sport-based interventions may enable elements of the ‘resilient personality’ to develop (Skodol, 2010), and, accordingly, contribute to the enhancement of positive psychological capital.

In contrast to much of the existing literature pertaining to positive psychological capital, which is solely concerned with employability, the present discussion takes a more holistic view and explores how the accumulation of positive psychological capital may add meaning to the lives of marginalised youth and transcend a solitary focus upon employability (Phillips, 2010; Seddon et al., 2013). Indeed, both Phillips (2010) and Seddon et al. (2013) report how the development of positive psychological capital has contributed to the strengthening of peer relationships and/or made the lives of disaffected youth populations more meaningful, structured and routinized. Such assertions are supported by Spaaij et al. (2013), who suggest that the evaluation of initiatives designed to enhance employability should be more receptive to, and move beyond, simplistic measures of job attainment towards more holistic approaches which capture the additional qualities that sport-based interventions can deliver.

Methodology

The empirical findings featured here are drawn from a wider study which sought to investigate the impact of sporting intervention on youth crime and anti-social behaviour. The project, *Sporting Youth*,⁴ was delivered from a number of locations across three UK cities (one in the English West Midlands, one in the South East and one in the South West) and targeted young people aged 13-19 who were considered to be ‘vulnerable’ and/or ‘at risk’. The interventions overseen by *Sporting Youth* consisted of: (i) a boxing-based programme delivered in various locations in the West Midlands that were notorious for violent crime, gang-related activity, and anti-social behaviour; (ii) a multi-sport offering at a young offenders institution (YOI) in the South West; and (iii) a predominantly football-based intervention delivered in partnership with local housing associations within residential estates in the South East. All projects partnered with organisations that offered education and training programmes and/or employment opportunities to the young people (male and female) who engaged with their sport-based delivery.

⁴ In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

The research was driven by a constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology with the aim of eliciting the subjective interpretations of the young people concerned in relation to their experiences of the various interventions which each project hosted (Andrews et al., 2005; Sparkes and Smith, 2013). The empirical findings on display are drawn from 80 one-to-one semi-structured and 20 focus group interviews with participants, project/club leaders, coaches, and members of related partner and community groups.⁵ Respondents were selected on the basis that collectively they provided a cross-section of the individuals involved either in intervention delivery or as participants, and in line with access and availability. These respondents were self-selecting as participants on the projects in question. Six focus group interviews took place (two per project location) with project participants (n=50) in order to explore young people's personalised experiences of engaging with the *Sporting Youth* initiative and its associated projects. Discussion topics varied with participants talking about their entry route into the various projects, their awareness of overarching project aims and objectives, and positive and negative 'critical' moments. The research team encouraged participants to explore testimonies where the initiative had successfully and effectively removed young people from damaging social circumstances associated with crime and antisocial behaviour, and facilitated their re/integration within localised communities. In addition, five focus groups were conducted with programme leaders across all projects and project sites. Here discussion focused on uncovering information about the kinds of young people and communities engaged, the benefits accrued by young people, and the extent to which delivery staff felt that wider project aims and objectives (around sport for social inclusion, positive youth development and social change) were being met. In turn, nine focus group were carried out with statutory and voluntary representatives from associated (community) groups and agencies across the three project locations, (i.e., local authorities, teachers and workers from mainstream schools, employability centres, youth development workers and sports coaches etc.) and local community residents. The aim here was to explore agency representative and local resident views about the *Sporting Youth* initiative, and more specifically, sport's potential to operate as a vehicle for social change, social inclusion and social development.

⁵ Focus groups were used at the request of the project funder in order to explore further the key themes raised in semi-structured, one-to-one interviews and were conducted by two members of the research team, one facilitator and one observer. For further discussion on the use of focus groups as a data collection method see Parker and Titterton (2006).

Data were collected between October 2010 and May 2012. The interview schedule varied with participants being asked about their entry route into the project, their awareness of its overarching aims and objectives, and ‘critical’ moments which had defined their experiences. The research team explored testimonies where the projects had successfully and effectively removed young people from damaging social circumstances associated with crime and anti-social behaviour, and facilitated their (re-)integration within local communities. Interviews with project leaders/workers and partner agencies addressed their perceptions of the perceived benefits accrued by young people from the interventions and related activities, and the extent to which delivery staff (leaders/coaches) felt that wider project aims and objectives (around sport for social inclusion, positive youth development and social change) were being met.

Interviews lasted between 20-60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in full.⁶ Thematic and axial coding was used in relation to the analysis of these data with the research teams adopting a cyclical process of examination and interpretation to draw out themes and meanings in response to the primary aims of the research and in line with the key themes and concepts identified from the existing literature (Charmaz, 2002; 2014). Data were analysed in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain a sense of data saturation. Secondly, each transcript was individually coded and indexed whereby a capturing of the different aspects of participant experience took place. Thirdly, these experiences were categorised into a number of over-arching topics broadly relating to our central focus, positive psychological capital. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organisation of these topics into generic themes by further exploring the key issues around participant experience and framing those experiences within the context of existing conceptual debate (differentiated by respondents). Focusing on two of the three interventions originally under investigation, these themes have been organised and presented as geographical ‘case studies’ comprising: (i) boxing-based delivery in the West Midlands; and (ii) football-based delivery in the South East. These case studies primarily feature the perspectives of project participants (i.e., young people), with the wider views of coaches and project leaders being used in order to provide greater contextual clarity around intervention delivery and impact.

Results and Discussion

Over the last decade, a growing number of scholars have called for programme evaluations which present the underpinning (sufficient) conditions that explain how and why a sports-based intervention might contribute to broader social outcomes (see Coalter, 2013; Collins and Kay,

⁶ Variations on interview timings were solely due to the availability of respondents.

2014). Central to this form of evaluation is the necessity to: i) examine the mechanisms by which programme outcomes may be achieved and ii) consider the context for intervention by recognising that programme efficacy may be constrained by such contextual factors (Fox et al., 2017; Pawson, 2013).

In response to these invitations, and in order to provide key insights into the contexts and mechanisms which contributed to the programme outcomes of *Sporting Youth*, this section presents two separate case studies both of which offer qualitatively deduced perceptions from the programme contexts in question. These case studies feature testimonies from research participants to reveal how and why engagement with sports-based programmes contributed to the development of attributes associated with the theoretical components of positive psychological capital.

Case Study 1 – South East England

In the South East, Sporting Youth was delivered predominantly on urban residential housing estates in three specified boroughs of a large conurbation where youth crime and gang-related affiliations were reported as major issues. Such events resulted in a large proportion of young people feeling socially excluded from their communities and neighbourhoods. In partnership with the local housing association, the project utilised facilities to provide a variety of sporting activities, primarily football, as a means to engage ‘at-risk’ young people. In keeping with other projects of this nature, the emphasis was on using football for “social good” rather than “football, for football’s sake”, meaning that the initiative was not simply concerned with mass participation but with the wider social benefits on offer (Collins and Kay, 2014; Green, 2008). As one project leader commented:

... We just use sport as a hook ... to enhance their employability skills and their ability to stay away from crime ... Sport has an ability to reach out to these kids and through that we can work to improve other aspects of their life, like leadership, respect and trust...

These comments align closely with those of programme participants, and illustrate the effectiveness of football in engaging otherwise socially excluded individuals. Moreover, the centrality of football in the everyday existence of participants justified its inclusion as an outreach vehicle. For example, statistics available at the time indicated that within the inner-city boroughs of London, in excess of 300,000 individuals participated in football at least once a week (Sport England, 2011). Of these, the largest demographic was 16-19 year-old males (Sport England, 2011)

to further infer congruence as a tool for engagement. Interview data affirmed the selection of football as a logical and appropriate choice of sport with one project leader stating: "... it's all about football ... even when we put other sessions on its football that gets the most people here, so why waste time on other things?", while one young participant noted that football was an effective hook "because it's the main sport [in this area]... it's what we grew up playing".

Testimonies also revealed how programme participants were able to develop a range of 'softer skills' (Brown, 2006) related to team-building, empathy and punctuality which they recognised as beneficial to cope with the demands evident in their lives. As one respondent noted: "I think it's best to have as many skills as you can for when life throws challenges at you; you can have that base."

The development of softer skills and the recognition by the youth participants of their beneficial potential, draws a connection with the accumulation of positive psychological capital. Indeed, the interview data highlighted how and where participation in the programme had impacted on self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. For instance, a number of participants made reference to how they had developed their interpersonal skills, which spoke directly to notions of enhanced resilience (Skodol, 2010). Of these, "learning how to control the[ir] anger" was commonly cited, which further resonated with the development of resilience (Luthans et al., 2007).

However, the most significant contribution of the programme to the development of positive psychological capital appeared to be within the elements of self-efficacy and hope. Enhanced self-efficacy—or development of an individual's level of confidence or conviction to successfully execute a specific or challenging task (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998; Bandura, 2001)—was regularly articulated. For instance, one participant noted:

Confidence is so important ... it's another way to show, like, who you are ... you look different to other people, because some people are really shy, but on the football pitch they are really different and more comfortable.

Such testimony alludes to the impact which self-efficacy can have in helping young people express themselves and, perhaps more importantly, to feel secure with the notion of 'difference'; something which was frequently used as a point of demarcation. Consequently, enhanced self-efficacy contributed to a stronger sense of belonging with peers and programme leaders (Phillips,

2010; Rose et al., 2012), and developed aspects of positive psychological capital which were less concerned with employability and more about adding meaning to participants' lives (Seddon et al., 2013). The significance of providing opportunities for young people to engage with others should not be underestimated for it not only created potential for friendships to be built between and beyond rival (post-code) groups but further enabled young people to have the self-efficacy to recognise and put aside their differences. The effectiveness of football to achieve this latter end was certainly echoed by one male participant who claimed that when playing football, he was able to "work with other people" whom he would not normally associate with and, through this, "get to know them and become friends". Of course, the ability to make friends was, to some extent, reliant upon the capacity of the young people concerned to communicate and engage with others. However, for some it clearly presented an opportunity to "chat about interests", thereby breaking down initial fears, suspicions and preconceptions. Another participant talked about the initial worries which he had had about accessing such events. However, he went on to say that once exposed to such environments, he was able to see and experience the benefits for themselves. In interview the same participant stated:

Here on the [estate] ... football allows you to feel more comfortable ... You might feel intimidated at first ... but if you keep going there it gives you the confidence to play around with them, so it becomes easy to become friends and you don't fight with each other anymore.

Perhaps a more telling example of the impact that participation in the programme had on the elements of positive psychological capital was in relation to hope. More specifically, the testimonies of programme participants highlighted how engagement with football had created pathways for young people (Snyder, 2002) that either did not currently exist or had yet to be considered. Indeed, participants recognised the value of the wider opportunities offered through the programme suggesting that these experiences had been integral to their continued engagement. One participant recalled how his own aspirations had changed over time due to his involvement in football:

... when we was (sic) younger we obviously just focussed on football, but now you see the bigger picture ... you now know [the programme] can give you a lot more than football and we are willing to take all of it ...

As a result of sustained engagement in the initiative, this participant was able to make a connection between sport being a vehicle for social engagement and his own interest in becoming a youth worker. Clearly, engagement with the programme had not only impacted this individual's aspirations (Spaaij et al., 2013; Yates et al., 2010) but had offered a route to employment, along with the requisite agency and perseverance to follow this pathway and commit to the accomplishment of this particular goal (Luthans et al., 2007; Snyder, 2002). In this sense, obtaining meaningful employment was viewed as a key aspect of social integration (Levitas, 2005) and was something that engagement with the programme was able to foster.

Similarly, another young man spoke of his experiences of an event that was devised to provide constructive opportunities for young people to work with local primary schools and nurseries to deliver a sports-based curriculum of football, basketball and cricket. The young people involved spoke passionately about this venture identifying a multitude of benefits that it had spawned and the way in which it had acted as a means to generate hope. This was summarised by one participant, who explained how agency and pathways (Snyder, 2002) had been generated through this experience:

We got a whole new experience working with little kids, because we have never done anything like it before ... some of us decided that we would do well in a career as a PE teacher but others realised that they were good with working with the kids, but hated the school environment so they thought more about working as sports coaches and youth workers. It was a great experience, we never really have chances to think about our future, people don't give us that chance...

Case Study 2 – West Midlands

In the West Midlands young people were primarily engaged in boxing-based activities. For most participants, their vulnerability and exclusion from mainstream society stemmed from the fact that many were not enrolled in, or benefiting from, formal education or training opportunities; they had little or no formal qualifications; and/or work-related experiences to use to their advantage. A number were unemployed at the time of the research, claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) or looking for apprenticeship opportunities. In addition, a small proportion of participants had either served custodial sentences or were participating in community rehabilitation programmes through the local Youth Offending Service.

Boxing was the sport which proved most appealing to a number of the partners involved with the programme in the West Midlands. Emphasis was placed upon providing weekly training sessions with targeted small groups from a range of different organisations in and through the specific referral programmes. The benefit of this approach was that bespoke packages could be crafted and delivered with both young people and the agencies concerned in mind. For the targeted youth, boxing sessions were also valued as ‘safe spaces’ that were strategically accessible at times when individuals may gravitate towards potential ‘trouble spots’, such as street corners, parks, or derelict landscapes. In this sense, boxing was utilised as a diversionary tool (Nichols, 2007). At the same time, it provided a physical space where the focus on tackling behavioural factors that often contribute to offending were made visible and put into context to induce positive change (Nichols, 2007). This dual support process meant that ‘at risk’ young people were taught how to change their thinking as well as their behaviours, attitudes and approaches to better facilitate their ability to re/integrate (back) into their respective communities. The aims of the West Midlands programme were best captured by the Regional Development Manager of Sporting Youth who noted:

[The programme] in the West Midlands uses boxing to have a social change on the young people we work with, from the smallest of things like preventing anti-social behaviour, keeping out of trouble, to reducing their involvement in crime, and increasing self-confidence, to promote better behaviour at schools ... whatever that change might be, but creating that smallest change to facilitate the biggest change in the young person’s life.

In terms of how participation in the programme impacted the elements of positive psychological capital, the testimonies of the youth participants drew several comparisons to those of their London counter-parts. For example, there was further evidence of how self-efficacy had been enhanced through engagement with the boxing sessions, and how this increase had enabled marginalised young people to overcome their self-imposed isolation (Winlow and Hall, 2013). As one coach recalled:

I always remember this one lad because the change in him was incredible. He used to walk with his head down; he wouldn’t interact with anyone, he just didn’t socialise with anyone, wouldn’t speak to anyone ... But the boxing sessions completely changed him. He would never miss a session. He was there early. He was the first to start the training, keen to get started, you know, gave 100% of himself to the session, and completely changed his

personality. You could see the changes. Because he had changed, he was walking upright; he was confident; he was proud of himself.

In addition, there were perspectives from participants which inferred that they had become more self-motivated (Bandura, 2001; Luthans et al., 2007) through their boxing participation, to further emphasise how self-efficacy was developed. As one boxing coach highlighted, apathy was often the biggest barrier to young people bettering themselves:

... the lack of motivation is a big barrier for most of them so once they start coming here and see the positive changes, it changes their mentality. They start reaching out for things. They start setting goals, they want to push themselves ...

Indeed, self-motivation (either to seek personal help or to improve their social situation) was identified as a pivotal factor for young people in both evoking a rehabilitative state of mind and facilitating a greater level of community engagement, and was clearly something that boxing had the potential to unleash. In part this was because participation instilled a mentality that better enabled young people to challenge, if not counteract, negative public narratives about who they were to further highlight how participation has instilled a sense of acceptance (Rose et al., 2012) and meaning to life (Seddon et al., 2013).

A further similarity of the West Midlands programme was the manner in which participation contributed the construction of potential employment pathways and empowered young people with greater agency to generate an enhanced sense of hope (Luthans et al., 2007). For example, when speaking about some of the difficulties faced by those on the programme, one coach stated:

I think some people will look at boxing in the wrong way... it's all black and white to them ... but that's not what boxing trains you to do; that's not what we do. We don't teach sparring to kids ... We're not encouraging fighting. We're opening up doors for kids who haven't found an exit route in life ... The only way to change this is to churn out lots of results about young offenders who've turned over new leaves and who are not offending and not engaging in any difficult problematic behaviours. That's your proof ...

In a similar vein, another coach mentioned how the programme had:

... let them [participants] meet new people, not just young people, but professional adults who are there to help kids like them is a great thing in itself ... if they can build their networks of people they can call on for help, they're more likely to ask you for help and therefore empower themselves to change their lives.

However, where the data from the West Midlands differed from that in London, and provided new insights into how participation had contributed to the elements of positive psychological capital, was in relation to the development of optimism. More specifically, it revealed how theoretical components of optimism, such as enhanced self-discipline and the ability to make a rational assessment of an environmental situation (Schneider, 2001), had been unlocked through engagement with the sports-based programme. West Midlands respondents recounted how disciplined training schedules appealed greatly to a number of targeted agencies already working with 'at-risk' groups. For example, young people were encouraged (and, indeed, expected) to commit to weekly boxing sessions, mainly comprising of circuit training and 'pad work', which sought not only to reduce levels of aggression, but also to draw young people's attention to the negative consequences of harbouring anger, resentment and confrontational attitudes for sustained periods of time. As one mentor explained:

The discipline side of boxing is important and they wouldn't get it with usual gym routine ... At the gym they might get caught up with the who-size-power mentality, but the boxing gives them [different] skills. They learn how to respect individuals, how to keep time, how to live a nutritious life, how to control their own behaviour, how to control their own anger and the negative impact all that anger and aggression can have on your performance, your learning of skills and your own emotional levels ...

Clearly, the disciplinary benefits provided by boxing challenged young people to recognise and appreciate how they had both a responsibility for, and a control over, their life chances and choices. Consequently, it could be inferred that exposure to boxing had enabled the young people who engaged to develop an ability to make rationally-informed life-choices (Schneider, 2001) which, in turn, enhanced the levels of optimism which they possessed.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how participation in sports-based interventions may influence the accumulation of elements associated with positive psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), and, as a consequence, enhance an individual's sense of social inclusion. While the data presented offers perceptions and views as to the correspondence between participation in sport and the development of positive psychological capital, we acknowledge that these findings are tentative in nature, and do not represent the experiences of all participants who were engaged with the Sporting Youth programme. Furthermore, and is often the case, the self-selection of research participants to the study may provide overly positive reflections in relation to how participation in the programme developed the attributes of positive psychological capital and translated this into enhanced social development (Coakley, 2015). Therefore, we advise caution in advancing the claims made by this and similar research as to the capacity of sports programmes to enact social change.

Nevertheless, in the quest to understand more thoroughly how participation in sports-based interventions may contribute to social inclusion, these findings provide a further layer of investigation via which to position the theoretical worth of positive psychological capital. Furthermore, the findings may have relevance for policy-makers and the architects of sport-based interventions, by encouraging the design of such programmes to consider how the activities that participants are exposed to may enhance their sense of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience.

Above all, we have attempted to challenge the focus of recent youth policy, which has amplified the need for marginalised youth to augment their stores of human and social capital (Strathdee, 2013) by providing an alternative theoretical lens through which social inclusion may be considered and enhanced. Therefore, while the context for this research provides a typical scenario regarding the potential of sporting interventions to act as a stepping-stone to further engagement in similar or wider activities (be they sporting related or not) that may enable capital accumulation, we advance the viewpoint of Brown et al. (2011), who propose that the further accumulation of human and social capital alone cannot deliver social justice and social inclusion to young people residing in disadvantaged localities.

While we do not suggest that the accumulation of positive psychological capital is capable of completing the social inclusion jigsaw, the perceptions and views provided by the participants in this research infer that an awareness of this form of capital may contribute to a more complete

picture of the worth of sport-based interventions in enhancing social inclusion among marginalised youth. Likewise, while further research is necessary, not least in discovering how the attributes of positive psychological capital that are developed by participation in sports-based programmes may translate to other domains, these findings suggest that sport-based interventions have the potential to positively impact an individual's sense of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. Consequently, by engagement in such programmes marginalised youth may develop qualities that are recognised as important commodities for negotiating success in terms of wider employment (Rose, 2000; Luthans et al., 2007; Winlow and Hall, 2013), or that contribute to the holistic development of young people and add meaning to their lives (Phillips, 2010; Seddon et al., 2013). In doing so, irrespective of how it is defined, there is clear potential to heighten social inclusion for marginalised youth when enhancement of the elements of positive psychological capital is the focus of sport-based interventions.

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