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Community sport and social inclusion: international perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This opening article examines the relationship between community sport and social inclusion in research and practice. We discuss the notion of community sport, its multifarious meanings and diverse applications in different parts of the world. We further explore the conceptual and practical links between community sport and different conceptions of social inclusion. In doing so, the article draws together key themes, issues and debates addressed in the collection of articles in this special issue. We conclude by formulating implications and directions for future research and practice.

KEYWORDS

Social exclusion;
inequality; sport for all;
sport-based intervention;
community sport

Social inclusion: a challenge for ‘sport for all’

Individuals and groups in society can experience social exclusion in multiple domains, such as education, employment, health, social participation and community integration (Levitas et al. 2007). Tackling social exclusion – often through promoting social inclusion – is a global challenge for policy makers, practitioners and societies in general. In this context, sport is often promoted as an inclusive environment, in which people of all backgrounds and abilities can participate and access a range of personal, health and social benefits. The European Sport for All Charter, adopted in 1976 by the Council of Europe and revised and renamed as the European Sport Charter in 2001, states that:

[M]easures shall be taken to ensure that all citizens have opportunities to take part in sport and where necessary, additional measures shall be taken aimed at enabling [...] disadvantaged or disabled individuals or groups to be able to exercise such opportunities effectively. (Council of Europe 2001, 2–3)

The policy ideal of ‘sport for all’ is, however, not easily realised in practice. Sport continues to be beleaguered by various forms of discrimination and social exclusion (Collins and Kay 2014; Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes 2014). This observation has led to the establishment of a variety of programmes that mainly focus on reaching groups that are not included in, nor attracted by more mainstream sport provisions. Community sports are perceived as an alternative to mainstream sport provisions such as organized sports clubs. Notwithstanding

the diversity of organizational formats, policy frameworks, funding schemes and professional practices, community sport programmes and provisions have a number of common characteristics (Haudenhuyse et al. 2018). Most community sport initiatives are characterized by their accessibility, affordability, local focus, modest budgets and relatively informal structures (Cuskelly 2004; Doherty, Misener, and Cuskelly 2014; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, and De Knop 2010). Community sport initiatives typically use a flexible, adaptable, (semi-) informal, people-centred approach, aimed at lowering the thresholds to participation in order to address the deficiencies of mainstream sport provisions (Haudenhuyse et al. 2018; Hylton and Totten 2013). Furthermore, community sports are often approached as more than 'just' sport in the community, as it aims to address social, political and cultural dimensions of inequality (Hylton and Totten 2013). However, the extent to which community sports initiatives contribute to the policy ideals of 'sport for all', has been – and continues to be – subject to critical debate amongst scholars.

The purpose of this special issue is to critically examine aspects of community sports that relate to social inclusion. This opening paper aims to set the scene and provide a conceptual backdrop for the empirically grounded contributions to the special issue. We first discuss the notion of community sport and some key issues in community sports research. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of social inclusion and its relationship to community sport. We use this discussion to draw together key themes, issues and debates addressed in the collection of articles in this special issue. The final part of the article formulates some implications and directions for future research and practice.

Community sport and social inclusion: concepts and research

There exists a considerable body of academic research in the field of (community) sport and social inclusion. Scholars have explored this complex relationship through different perspectives (e.g. racial equality and human rights; Donnelly and Coakley 2002; Hylton and Totten 2013), and by focusing on one single or multiple dimensions of social inclusion (e.g. spatial, relational, functional and power; Bailey 2008). One important challenge that has emerged from this literature is the need to conceptualize sport-based interventions more clearly in terms of inputs (i.e. the used human, social, physical, cultural, political, economic resources), throughputs (i.e. what is being done with used resources and how it is done), outputs (i.e. what is being accomplished with used resources) and outcomes (i.e. to what concrete consequences have such accomplishments led for those involved) (e.g. Coalter 2007). Such an approach can potentially contribute to the development of more effective sport-for-inclusion interventions and provisions. And this by providing organizations, policymakers and practitioners with a more robust, theory-based understanding of how sport participation is related to various forms of personal, social and community development (Coakley 2011). However, one of the consequences of this approach is that research seems to adopt smaller-scale units of analysis (i.e. individuals and programmes), instead of broader units (i.e. communities, neighbourhoods and municipalities). A focus on the micro level makes it more difficult to identify and analyze historical patterns of social transformation and structural inequality, which can provide greater insight into the extent to which and ways in which community sport may contribute to improving the human condition of communities and individuals (Currie-Alder 2016, Haudenhuyse et al. 2018). In addition, understanding the impact of community sports is complicated by the lack of

clarity about what concepts such as social inclusion and community sport actually mean in theory and in practice. It is to this conceptual challenge that we now turn.

Looking for conceptual clarity: community sport (re)defined

From an international perspective, there is a notable diversity and fluidity in the aims, organizational forms, pedagogies and target groups of community sport practices (Theeboom, De Knop, and Wylleman, 2008). In Belgium, for example, community sports imply all 'alternative' sport provisions that mainly lie outside the regular, voluntary-based sport club sector, such as neighbourhood sport programmes or after-school sport-based activities. In contrast, in countries like Australia (see the contribution by Jeanes et al. 2018 to this special issue) and the United Kingdom (see Evans et al. *in press*, in this special issue), community sports often includes (grassroots) voluntary-based sport clubs. From an international comparative perspective, these diverging definitions can cause confusion. One implication of the conceptual ambiguity is that organizations can claim to offer community sports, where the question needs to be raised if issues of inequality and social exclusion are being addressed at all. A first step towards dealing with this conceptual ambiguity may be to clearly define what we mean by 'community'. Unfortunately, community is no less a contested concept than community sport. The British sociologist Gerard Delanty (2003, 3) refers to community as a concept that designates 'both an idea about belonging and a particular social phenomenon, such as expressions of longing for community, the search for meaning and solidarity, and collective identities'. Delanty (2003) argues that communities, which are continuously created rather than primordial or static, cannot be simply equated with particular groups or places. He questions the classical tradition in sociology that views community as a basis for social inclusion or integration. Delanty writes:

This myth has been re-created by modern communitarianism which looks to community to provide what neither society, nor the state can provide, namely a normatively based kind of social integration rooted in associative principles of commitment to collective good. (Delanty, 2003, 192)

From this perspective, we can understand why community sport is often defined in opposition to state-led, mainstream sports provision. Such a juxtaposition is limiting, because it normalizes and legitimizes the exclusive nature of mainstream sport provisions. At the same time, it shifts the responsibility for addressing issues of social inclusion and exclusion to the (often under-resourced) community sport sector. Nonetheless, as will be shown, the articles in this special issue suggest that sports-based social movements within civil society can give rise to new expressions of community and associational life, in which people can discover common interests, develop collective identities and provide avenues for emancipation.

Rethinking social inclusion

Social inclusion has been a noteworthy theme in sport policy in several western countries in recent times (Fletcher 2014; McDonald 2005; Spaaij et al. 2014; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, and De Knop 2010). Policies on inclusive sport are mostly shaped by a dual focus on, on the one hand, extending social rights and citizenship (i.e. through access to participation)

and emphasizing various individual and collective benefits presumed to be associated with sport participation on the other hand (Coalter 2007). Social inclusion, as put forward in most public policies of sport, is an ideal that governments, policy makers and community leaders may pursue in order to prevent and mitigate the marginalization of particular social groups. Notwithstanding the concept's popularity in sport policy, it seems that social inclusion as a concept is often ill-defined and interpreted differently (Glazzard 2011; Levitas 2005; Silver 2010). We share Lindsay's observation that social inclusion 'is not a simple, unambiguous concept' (Lindsay 2003, 3) and that, as a concept, it has often been used to focus on notions of assimilation rather than representing a struggle for equality and social justice (Hodkinson 2012). One critique related to this concept is based on an underlying moral meta-narrative which assumes that social inclusion or integration, as the opposite of social exclusion, is inherently good and desirable (Hickey and Du Toit 2007).

Within the literature considering sport's potential contribution to social inclusion, different, yet often overlapping conceptualizations of social inclusion can be found (Bailey 2008; Collins and Kay 2014; Spaaij et al. 2014). Social inclusion is furthermore often defined in relation to social exclusion, and as such remains under-defined (Haudenhuyse 2017). Social inclusion and exclusion are habitually talked about, rather uncritically, 'diametrically opposed poles', encouraging a perception that solutions to problems related to social exclusion are into promoting the inclusion of the socially excluded (Macdonald et al. 2012 cited in Haudenhuyse 2017). The question needs to be addressed if combatting social exclusion can effectively be tackled by promoting social inclusion? In other words, are promoting social inclusion and combatting social exclusion two sides of the same coin? We cannot unconditionally assume that groups that are excluded from society and its mainstream institutions (including sport), will simply and unidimensionally benefit from their inclusion in sport when society has excluded and marginalized them in the first place.

The focus on social inclusion can be problematic in practice. In its more critical interpretations, the concept of social exclusion focuses on power relations and the ways in which institutions and policies generate exclusionary practices leading to the marginalization and discrimination of groups in society (e.g. Byrne 2005; Galabuzi 2006). The ill-defined concept of social inclusion, on the other hand, largely ignores structural inequalities and power relations and unproblematically assumes that societies, including (community) sport provisions, are inherently and indisputably 'good' for everyone (Haudenhuyse 2017). A more critical and theoretical informed approach to social inclusion is therefore required.

Introducing a continuum of inclusion

A critical approach to social inclusion that holds promise for the study of community sport can be found in DeLuca's (2013) continuum of inclusive approaches (see also Jeanes et al. 2018). DeLuca (2013) distinguishes four conceptions of inclusion: normative, integrative, dialogical and transgressive. DeLuca (2013, 326) suggests that normative approaches to inclusion focus on the 'active assimilation and normalization of minority individuals to a dominant cultural standard'. In other words, while non-dominant groups are recognized, they can only be included if they assimilate to the dominant standard or norm. Within DeLuca's integrative approach, inclusion means the acceptance and legitimization of the presence of difference in society through formal modification. Integrative approaches often

involve segregated opportunities which maintain and highlight the ‘duality between the dominant group and the minority group’ (DeLuca 2013, 332). For example, Jeanes and colleagues (2018) found the largely separatist nature of disability provision within Australian sports clubs, with people with a disability often being confined to the periphery of clubs in ‘all abilities teams’, as opposed to the main teams.

DeLuca’s (2013) dialogical and transgressive conceptions provide a more radical interpretation of social inclusion that can potentially underpin transformative praxis in community sport. Within the dialogical conception, the dominant group continues to be evident as such but, at the same time, cultural complexity is recognized and celebrated. DeLuca (2013) notes that dialogical interactions ‘bring forward knowledge as rooted in the lived, cultural experiences of diverse students’ (334). This conception of inclusion extends the familiar, gathering ideas from different sources with the intention that all individuals will be enabled to participate fully in learning without prejudice. Finally, in DeLuca’s (2013) transgressive conception of inclusion individual diversity is ‘used as a vehicle for the generation of new knowledge and learning experiences’ (334). This conception of inclusion emphasizes the disruption of a dominant cultural group and highlights the need for society to recognize the very different ways of being human and being different. It intends to value individual difference and empower individuals.

To date, community sports practitioners appear to struggle to enact the more radical conceptions of social inclusion outlined by DeLuca (2013), as evidenced by, for example, Sabbe et al.’s analysis in this special issue. Jeanes et al.’s (2018) recent study of disability provision, which draws directly on DeLuca’s (2013) framework, revealed that enactment of inclusion agendas involves complexities at different levels. Jeanes and colleagues highlight the challenges that clubs (e.g. the largely separatist nature of disability provision within clubs) and their volunteers (e.g. individuals that sought to problematize narrow interpretations of social inclusion typically received little support) face in this process. As such, DeLuca (2013) provides a useful framework that can provoke important questions about how community sports practices and their stakeholders frame, understand and enact inclusion and inclusive practices.

International perspectives on community sport and social inclusion: cross-cutting themes

Against this background, this special issue on social inclusion in community sport brings together a group of emerging and established scholars from across the world whose research addresses this complex relationship between community sports and social inclusion. Their contributions critically examine the notion and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in community sport, as well as the outcomes and impacts that community sports practices may have in terms of promoting, or hindering, social inclusion in other areas of life, such as employment, education and migrant settlement. The contributions are characterized by their rich diversity in terms of geography, topic, theory, methodology and practical implications. The present collection of articles can be situated within an ongoing process of critical reflection regarding the transformative capacity of community sport. Our aim is to provide a stimulus for the critical analysis of current approaches to inclusion in community sport practices around the world. In conjunction, the articles provide rich insight into three

broad themes associated with community sport and social inclusion: (i) community sport practitioners' perspectives on social inclusion; (ii) processes and mechanisms underpinning social inclusion and exclusion in community sport and (iii) impacts and outcomes of community sport participation.

Practitioners' perspectives on social inclusion

The vast majority of community sports practices that feature in this special issue work with marginalized individuals, and particularly marginalized young people. They do so through a pedagogical focus on the relational dimension of social inclusion and, to a lesser extent, the functional and power dimensions (Bailey 2005, 2008). For example, in their article Debognies and colleagues explore practitioner-participant relationships in three community sport practices in Belgium. Using Ethics of Care as a theoretical-analytical tool, the authors highlight practitioners' relational strategies in order to understand the personal development potential of these relationships for marginalized young people. Roe, Hugo and Larsson similarly foreground the role of practitioners and their relational strategies in a football programme for youth in detention in Sweden. They identify key aspects and opportunities for initiating and guiding a process of growth and change among detainees, arguing that the value of sport for correctional institutions lies in the fact that sport can be part of a pedagogical approach to expand young people's horizons and life perspectives that moves beyond a deficit perspective.

The interplay between relational and power dimensions is described in the contributions by McDonald, Spaaij and Dukic, as well as Sabbe, Roose and Bradt. Both articles conclude that while community sports practices can enable situational and temporary gains in inclusion, such momentary pockets of inclusion do not necessarily translate into structural, longer-term inclusion. McDonald and colleagues derive at this conclusion through an ethnographic study of a Melbourne-based football team of people seeking asylum. They argue that the micro-social moments and interactions experienced by the asylum seekers are meaningful in the sense that they enable participants to negotiate the terms of the established sporting-social order and redefine the meaning of local spaces and their sense of belonging and familiarity of being within those spaces. In a similar vein, but instead focusing on practitioner perceptions, Sabbe et al.'s study of three community sport practices in Belgium identifies momentary pockets of emancipation, understood as ways in which practitioners deal with dominant logics of control.

The power dimension of social inclusion is explored from a different angle in Queri's assessment of the indigenous tribal games (ITG) in the Philippines. Queri points out that empowering indigenous athletes can also enable the very same space and process for their disempowerment. By exploring a space that aims to advocate indigenous empowerment through traditional sports, and using critical performance and postcolonial approaches, the author attempts to uncover the different nuances in terms of power. The results reveal that the creation of the ITG as a 'third space' enabled some performative (dis)play of athletes and was necessary to develop the athletes' indigenous consciousness. Yet, at the same time, Queri identifies moments of disempowerment within this space. The author points to the urgent need to understand that empowering disempowered populations through sports-based initiatives should be initiated and developed with members of these communities.

Processes and mechanisms leading to social inclusion and exclusion

Recent research on the relationship between sport and social inclusion has been particularly concerned with opening the ‘black box’ (Herens et al. 2017; Moreau et al., 2018); that is, with identifying the processes and mechanisms that underpin any outcomes or impacts that sports-based interventions may have (Coalter 2013a,b). Several articles in this special issue provide critical insights into the processes and mechanisms that underpin or lead to experiences of social inclusion or exclusion in community sport. The paper by Jeanes and colleagues examines why community sports clubs are frequently unable or unwilling to translate policy ambitions into practice. Their analysis reveals resistance to inclusive practice as an important process that constrains change efforts at the local level. Specifically, the authors illustrate how community sports clubs in Australia resist policy ambitions to develop inclusive practices for young people with disabilities. The resistance they uncover operates by discursively framing disability provision as being ‘too difficult’, ‘not core business’ and antithetical to competitive success.

The contribution by Rich and Misener complements these insights through an examination of how two rural community sports clubs (i.e. a hockey club and a figure skating club) in Powassan, Canada, responded to tensions that emerged at the intersection of a rationalized policy context and the constraints associated with the clubs’ operation. The authors suggest that shifts in the Canadian sport system towards a centralized and rationalized system may be marginalizing rural citizens by constraining their ability to access the resources and support offered through policy frameworks. In addition, Oxford’s study of female participants of a Colombian sport for development programme draws attention to the intersecting gendered social elements of language, gender-based socialization, and social stigma as key processes that constrain girls’ social inclusion in the programme. Her findings demonstrate how female participants are required to negotiate spaces with contradictory gendered meanings, and confirm that social transformation within masculine structures is difficult to achieve.

In a similar vein, the contribution of Ekholm, Dahlstedt and Rönnbäck focuses on girls, more specifically on the absence of girls from ethno-cultural minorities within sports, which is noted as a problem both in social policy debate and in the research literature. Based on in-depth interviews with community sport coaches, managers and partners involved in four sports-based interventions in Sweden, the authors analyze how the absence of girls is problematized and explained in relation to the sports-based interventions, how girls are made governable and how the anticipated ends of the sports-based interventions are articulated by these actors. Their analysis shows that girls are stereotypically represented as passive and absent from sport practices. They are represented as being both in need of intervention and as victims of patriarchal cultures. Such problematizations make girls the targets of interventions that focus on emancipation and empowerment, which sport participation is assumed to provide.

Impacts and outcomes of community sport participation

There is ongoing debate in the academic literature on the impacts and outcomes of community sport participation. Specifically, scholars have been debating what counts as ‘evidence’ and how this evidence is best captured and represented in research and evaluation

(e.g. Coalter 2007, 2013; Tacon 2007). The articles in this special issue present arguments and empirical findings that can inform this debate with regard to a range of intended and unintended impacts and outcomes of community sport. In keeping with the aforementioned relational and power dimensions of social inclusion, Barrett explore the social significance of cricket for a local South Asian Population in the northeast central region of North Carolina, United States. The results of this case study reveal that playing cricket can contribute to social inclusion through both the power (i.e. the power to realize culturally appropriate recreation as a social right) and relational (i.e., developing a sense of belonging and attachment to place) dimensions. The author conclude that the development of the cricket field fostered a mono-ethnic and diasporic identity, as well as a rich sense of belonging among the growing South Asian immigrant population in the region.

Extending the discussion on migrant settlement and belonging in and through community sport, Mohammadi reports on a qualitative case study of the Bike Bridge project that works with female refugees and asylum seekers in Freiburg, Germany. Echoing Oxford's aforementioned conclusion regarding barriers to girls' and women's participation, Mohammadi shows how gender-based socio-cultural constraints in the homeland limited the women's opportunity to participate in physical activities such as cycling. The Bike Bridge programme, characterized by its needs-based, informal and intercultural practices, assists female refugees and asylum seekers' ability to acquire the necessary physical capital and local knowledge (e.g. traffic rules and customs) for riding a bicycle. These newfound skills are shown to have consequently affected the women's habitus. In terms of fostering social inclusion, Mohammadi's findings suggest that participants' prolonged and sustained engagement in the programme as volunteers was necessary to enable the accumulation and the possible transformation of multiform capital and to provide chances for upward social mobility and social inclusion. A combination of individual factors, structural conditions and contextual circumstances affected this process.

Two other articles in this special issue examine the development of different forms of capital as a significant outcome of community sports programmes. Morgan, Parker and Roberts explore the acquisition of positive psychological capital, which comprises personal characteristics such as resilience, hope, optimism and self-efficacy. They offer empirical insights from three sports-based employability programmes operating in different regions of the United Kingdom. By drawing on the theoretical lens of psychological capital, the authors provide an additional piece of the puzzle on the contribution of sports-based interventions towards social inclusion among marginalized youth. Extending the evidence on capital formation in and through community sport, Evans and colleagues examine whether community sports clubs can stimulate the use of Welsh from a linguistic capital perspective. The evidence presented in this paper derives from one school (i.e. Welsh-speaking environment) and seven community sports clubs (i.e. English-speaking environment). The findings reveal a complex range of behaviours, attitudes and beliefs surrounding the use of Welsh language. The authors conclude that increasing the use of Welsh in these community sports clubs entails the risk of excluding non-Welsh speakers, but that ignoring the language denies Welsh speakers the opportunity to participate in Welsh. Hence, the authors contribute not only to the debate on impacts and outcomes of community sport participation, but also to knowledge about processes of inclusion and exclusion in community sports contexts.

Future directions

Based on the individual contributions to this special issue, we can identify a number of directions for future research and practice. We observe that in terms of theory, the majority of current research on community sport and social inclusion either explicitly or implicitly draws on what DeLuca (2013) calls integrative or normative conceptions of social inclusion, especially where analyses focus on personal development and capital formation as key outcomes. In other words, research tends to focus on the smaller-scale units of analysis of individuals, interpersonal relationships and individual programmes. However, some articles experiment with more dialogical and transgressive conceptions of social inclusion. Queri's aforementioned exploration of the Indigenous Tribal Games is a case in point. Moreover, as noted earlier, some contributions draw explicit attention to, and provide empirical evidence for, structural inequalities and power relations as critical issues to be addressed in community sports research and practice. The results of these studies reinforce previous critiques that urge us to think and act on structural exclusion and inclusion beyond the individual, interpersonal or programmatic level (Collins and Kay 2014; Spaaij 2011). We would encourage future research to build more deeply on transgressive and dialogical conceptions of social inclusion to advance the current knowledge base and to help inform future community sports practice.

Another consideration for future research on community sport and social inclusion concerns methodology. As the articles in this special issue exemplify, the bulk of research in this area is qualitative in nature. The strengths and contributions of qualitative research in (community) sport are well established (Smith and Sparkes 2016). The articles in this special issue similarly demonstrate the analytical power and value that qualitative methodologies can provide. However, we believe there is room for additional innovative methodologies in the study of community sport and social inclusion. The lack of mixed methods research designs is particularly noteworthy. The integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches deserves greater consideration in future research (van der Roest, Spaaij, and van Bottenburg 2015). More specifically, we encourage researchers to adopt longitudinal research designs that enable the monitoring of change over time, in terms of both mechanisms and outcomes of community sport participation, and the broader contextual influences (i.e. meso and macro level) that shape these outcomes. For example, longitudinal studies could seek to ascertain whether, how and in what circumstances, the situational and temporary moments of inclusion documented in this special issue translate into more structural and longer-term inclusion.

Finally, the insights presented in this special issue have implications for community sports practice. They do so by drawing attention to several concepts, contextual factors and mechanisms that are associated with social inclusion in and through community sport. This knowledge can potentially contribute to the development of more effective sport-for-inclusion interventions by informing the theories of change or logic models that underpin such interventions. In order to stimulate knowledge translation, we encourage researchers and community sports practitioners to collaboratively engage in practices, such as codesign, boundary spanning, adaptation of research products as well as linkage and exchange activities, that have been proven to enhance this process (Schaillée et al., in press). However, in order to foster social impact beyond academia, researchers as well as practitioners also need to recognize and, where possible manage, individual (e.g. investment costs of knowledge

translation incurred by researchers and users), organizational (e.g. different ways of working of academics and practitioners) and external (e.g. scarcity of highly skilled boundary spanners) constraints. With this special issue, we hope to make a modest contribution to researchers and practitioners' shared objective of not only making community sport more inclusive, but also more effective in stimulating social inclusion in other life domains.

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