

Changing people's lives for the better? Social mobility through sport-based intervention programmes: opportunities and constraints¹

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the capacity of sport-based intervention programmes to facilitate upward social mobility for disadvantaged young people. Social mobility is seen to comprise both objective and subjective dimensions, which are studied concurrently. The paper draws on a mixed methods study of the Vencer programme in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to analyse the development opportunities created by the programme as well as the constraints faced by participants in seeking to convert these opportunities into upward social mobility. The research combines qualitative and quantitative data using a complimentary design, where each type of data produced a particular kind of knowledge. It is concluded that participants' opportunities for upward social mobility are strongly affected by structural factors emanating from the labour market and education system. Where social mobility does take place it is at an individual and relative level rather than at a collective or absolute level. Directions for future research into social mobility through sport are proposed.

Keywords: social mobility; youth; sport for development; occupational attainment; Brazil

Introduction

Policymakers and practitioners have long advocated the value of sport as an educative context capable of facilitating the development of certain attributes and skills needed to achieve personal success. Sport is used in a wide array of intervention programmes aimed at achieving development objectives such as economic and social participation, educational attainment or health outcomes (Levermore & Beacom, 2009; Kay, Welford, Jeanes, Morris & Collins, 2008). Indeed, "sport for development" is a key buzz phrase at this point in the twenty-first century (Coakley, 2011). In 2005, Jacques Rogge, the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan issued a joint message in which they stated that sports entities are working together to "harness the great power of sport to change peoples' lives for the better," noting that well-designed sports programmes can be "cost-effective catalysts" for social transformation (United Nations

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2012 eass conference in Bern, Switzerland. Some of the quotes from programme participants are also used in Spaaij (2011).

New York Office of Sport for Development and Peace, 2005). The idea that sport might be directed towards wider social objectives is central to the development of modern sport. Many of the aspirations that are currently voiced in relation to sport for development can be found, in one form or another, throughout the history of modern sport (Hargreaves, 1986; Kidd, 2008).

One area on which these aspirations have focused is the socioeconomic advancement and social mobility of disadvantaged individuals and groups. A popular yet contested argument is that sport provides the poor and underprivileged with a means for upward social mobility through mechanisms such as increased occupational and income status, educational attainment and symbolic capital (Loy, 1969; Semyonov, 1986; Eisen and Turner, 1992). This belief is reproduced and enhanced by media representations of rags to riches stories of a few individual sports stars, rooted in the meritocratic principle which presupposes the equality of both opportunities and resources in sport.

In addition to the sociological debate on the myths and realities of social mobility through professional sporting careers (Eitzen & Sage, 2003; Eitzen, 2006; Anderson, 2010), in recent years significant attention has been drawn to the question how (if at all) participation in sport-based intervention programmes can enhance the socioeconomic status of disadvantaged youth, especially with the rise of the international Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) movement (Kidd, 2008; Darnell, 2010). Notwithstanding the laudable objectives of organisations working in this area, claims that such programmes can change people's lives for the better are troubled by their functionalist and utilitarian undertone, with many "sports evangelists" (Coalter, 2007) viewing sport as an antidote to a variety of social problems and as an inherently wholesome, harmonising and cohesive force. In its contemporary manifestation, the SDP movement has for the most part been devoid of critical reflection (Black, 2009; Darnell, 2010). However, sociologists of sport have long been critical of functionalist and utilitarian interpretations of sport, arguing that sport can never be adequately explained purely as an instrument of social harmony because this ignores the social divisions and power inequalities in societies, which register themselves in and through sports (Hargreaves, 1986; Coakley, 2011). A sociological understanding of social mobility through sport thus requires a critical approach which takes into consideration the wider social, economic and political contexts that enable or impede social mobility, and how these affect the outcomes of sport-based intervention programmes.

This paper, then, critically examines the capacity of sport-based intervention programmes to generate upward social mobility of disadvantaged young people. The paper draws on data collected by the author in one specific social setting: the Vencer programme in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This study was part of a larger international research project carried out between 2008 and 2010 which examined the relationship between non-professional sport and social mobility in diverse socio-cultural con-

texts. The first part of the paper conceptualises social mobility; this is followed by a discussion of the Vencer programme and the research methodology. The remainder of the paper presents and reflects on the research findings with an emphasis on occupational attainment and social mobility outcomes, as well as the key influences and constraints that affect these outcomes. The final section draws together the main findings, discusses the limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research.

Conceptualising social mobility

Social mobility is a complex multidimensional concept that consists of multiple components (Westoff, Bressler & Sagi, 1960). It can be defined broadly as “the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational groups” (Aldridge, 2003, 189). Social mobility is strongly associated with educational and occupational attainment (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). In this paper, the focus is on one type of vertical social mobility, namely upward mobility, which refers to the (relatively durable) improvement of an individual’s position within the system of social stratification (Lipset & Bendix, 1992). Upward social mobility exists in two principal forms: as the rise of the individuals of a lower stratum to an existing higher one; and as a creation of a new group by such individuals, and the insertion of such a group into a higher stratum instead of, or side by side with, the existing groups of this stratum (Sorokin, 1959).

For the present purpose, an analytical distinction can be made between absolute and relative mobility, whilst recognising that these forms of mobility are interrelated in reality, for example in the terms of how people experience their social position (Saunders, 1995). Absolute mobility refers to large-scale changes in the occupational structure so that the distribution of the population between different social classes changes (Lipset & Bendix, 1992; Strauss, 1971). An example is the historical transformation of the occupational structure of advanced capitalist societies which resulted in the collective movement of large parts of the population (especially men) from manual labour occupations to administrative occupations in the service sector (Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe & Kelsey, 2007). In contrast, relative mobility refers to the ‘movement of an individual between different social classes, regardless of changes in the distribution of the population between them’ (Nunn et al., 2007, 16). This can be a result of factors such as work-life career transitions, improved educational attainment or the expansion of personal opportunities (Pastore, 1982). Relative social mobility can be seen as a standard feature of modern societies (Bottero, 2005), albeit with significant variations across time and space and, of course, between different social groups (Payne & Roberts, 2002). In this paper, I will focus particularly on sport-based intervention programmes’ impact on relative social mobility since it is assumed that their impact is to be found principally at this level. As will be seen, relative social mobility associated with sport-based intervention programmes is enabled

and constrained by the more structural forces that emanate from the wider economic, social and political contexts within which these interventions operate.

Another important distinction is between intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. Intragenerational mobility refers to the movement of individuals between different social strata during their lifetime and, in principle, can be measured between any two points during their life (Nunn et al., 2007, 16). In contrast, intergenerational mobility refers to the difference between the social position of individuals at a particular point in their adult life (destination) with that of their parents (origins). Whereas intergenerational mobility is envisaged as transitions between social origins and destinations, intragenerational mobility tends to be approached from within a complete life-course perspective (Goldthorpe, 2003). Although in this paper the primary focus is on the latter, it will also be seen that, in the social setting under study, there tends to be a strong association between social origins and destinations (see also Breen & Goldthorpe, 1999; Breen & Jonsson, 2005).

Objective and subjective dimensions of social mobility

There are several ways in which upward social mobility can be studied, but in social stratification research it is typically measured in terms of highly aggregated and quantifiable “hard” indicators such as changes in occupational attainment and income. These indicators can be viewed as the “objective” dimension of social mobility. However, such indicators alone provide insufficient insight into how changes in life conditions are actually perceived and experienced by individuals (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). It is possible to identify indicators of subjective experience of social mobility, such as how individuals perceive and appreciate changes in their labour market status, skills and attributes. Social mobility thus comprises both objective and subjective dimensions, and both dimensions will be examined in this paper. This approach is informed by research that shows that it is erroneous to posit interchangeabilities between objective and subjective dimensions of social mobility (Westoff et al., 1960; Strauss, 1971). Rather, the relationship between objective and subjective dimensions of mobility is to be empirically examined within social contexts.

An “integrated” approach to the study of social mobility through sport can make visible potential discrepancies or contradictions between objective and subjective social mobility. We know that upward social mobility in the objective sense may not necessarily be positively perceived even when it was initially sought explicitly. Strauss (1971) identified several sources of dissatisfaction experienced by those who have been upwardly mobile, for example when the novelty of the higher status and its rewards wears off, or when the new lifestyle proves restricting or generates a sense of social unease. Another advantage of the approach outlined here is that it can enhance our understanding of the processes of and strategies for social mobility, and of the

meanings social agents give to these processes and strategies. In other words, it allows us to analyse how people act, reflect on or think about mobility.

It is also important to take into consideration subjective social mobility at the level of knowledge production. It is questionable whether the concept of social mobility, which tends to be conceived of in a highly objectivist and positivistic fashion (Miller, 1998), can be applied in any time and place. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Spaaij, 2011), residents of the low income neighbourhoods in which the Vencer programme operates tend to conceive of social mobility somewhat differently from its traditional academic meaning. For many of them, social mobility is not a narrowly defined or static concept which focuses first and foremost on occupational attainment. Rather, they often construe upward mobility in more philosophical terms as increased agency and control over their own lives. Their mobility aspirations tend to be characterised by a desire to acquire more freedom, and not to simply move up the socioeconomic ladder (Spaaij, 2011). This interpretation of social mobility resonates with Sen's (1999) emphasis on the importance of developing "substantive freedoms" to choose a life one has reason to value. From this perspective, social mobility may be conceptualised in broad terms as "the removal [or reduction] of shortfalls of substantive freedoms from what they can potentially achieve" (Sen, 1999, 350).

Another important reason for accounting for the subjective experience of social mobility is that it enables us to incorporate gender into our analysis. Social mobility research leaves a long legacy of the image of mobility as a process that is experienced by (white) males as a competitive game in which individual players are isolated and detached from others (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). This image is problematic when one seeks to understand the process and experience of social mobility for women, especially in relation to sports activities that are themselves gendered. We know that organised sport is structured in such a way that men's sport is prioritised and afforded greater value than women's sport and this impacts on the likelihood that women will participate in sport as well as the types of sport they do play and the experience they derive from it (Messner, 2002; Anderson, 2010). Moreover, women face unequal opportunities in the employment structure caused by gender segregation and gender discrimination. In Brazil, women (especially non-white women) are among the groups most vulnerable to changes in the labour market and their employment opportunities are frequently confined to the informal sector (Gacitúa Marió & Woolcock, 2008). Interestingly, two-thirds of the participants in the Vencer programme are female, and their specific experience and how it might differ from that of male participants has to be taken into consideration. As will be seen below, there are many similarities between how male and female participants experience the Vencer programme and its outcomes in relation to social mobility, but female participants tend to put greater emphasis on the role of family and community relationships than do male participants. It is to the specific social setting within which the Vencer programme operates that I will now turn.

The Vencer programme: approach and context

The Vencer (“To Win” or “To Succeed”) programme is a team sports partnership model for youth employability in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The programme is built on the belief that team sports are an effective tool for motivating youth to participate in vocational training and for teaching employability skills, which are defined as “a set of skills common to most kinds of employment, including discipline, teamwork, respect, communication and results orientation, which assist in the condition of successful employment” (Inter-American Development Bank, 2003, 2). The intended overall programme outcomes are demonstrably improved employability skills for participating youth, practical work experience that builds their credentials, and knowledge about how to search for and pursue job opportunities.

Vencer is part of a wider programme, A Ganar, which commenced as a pilot in Brazil, Uruguay and Ecuador, but has subsequently evolved into an eleven-country alliance of several organisations and donors. In Brazil, Vencer is coordinated by the NGO Instituto Companheiros das Américas (ICA) and sponsored by the Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s second-largest city with a population of just over six million, continues to be the largest programme site, and it is this location upon which the present analysis focuses. By the time the research was completed, a total of 1,286 young people had participated in Vencer. All participants were inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro’s low-income communities.

The aims and the impact of the Vencer programme need to be understood within the context of the economic and social disparities in Brazilian society generally, and in Rio de Janeiro specifically. On the one hand, Brazil is a country of great wealth and resources and one of the fastest growing economies. On the other hand, Brazil has one of the highest income inequality indices in the world (Beghin, 2008). We know that upward social mobility can be more difficult in more unequal countries such as Brazil (Andrews & Leigh, 2009). Brazil features high rates of youth unemployment and job insecurity, especially for those with low educational attainment (Gacitúa Marió & Woolcock, 2008). According to the World Bank (2001, 15), low educational attainment among the poor “remains the single most important obstacle to reducing poverty and inequality in Brazil.” Despite the increased access to primary and secondary education for all Brazilians, higher levels of education continue to be “a privilege enjoyed principally by persons originating from more elevated class positions” (Costa Ribeiro, 2003, 146). Young people with low educational attainment often experience great difficulty in finding decent work due to the lack of formal qualifications, experience and specialisation (International Labour Organization, 2008).

In Rio de Janeiro, violent crime has been identified as a key barrier impeding the escape from poverty and diminishing young people’s access to opportunity structures in the spheres of education, employment, health and leisure (World Bank,

2001; Abramovay, Castro, Pinheiro, Lima & Martinelli, 2002). Rio de Janeiro has become significantly more violent since the late 1970s due in large part to a combination of labour market transformations, corruption in the judicial and penal systems, political patronage and the rise of the drug industry (Zaluar, 2007). While the highest rates of violence are in favelas (squatter settlements) and poor neighbourhoods (United Nations Development Program, 2001; Goldstein, 2003), the government is generally unable to guarantee the political order necessary to protect the civil and human rights of residents in these communities (Arias, 2004). The increase in urban violence, and the fear thereof among Rio de Janeiro's middle and upper classes, fuel the demand for repressive policies to control the poor, resulting in a militarisation of urban poverty which negates the urban poor recognition as full citizens (Wacquant, 2008). The poor in Rio de Janeiro are also increasingly distant from the means to influence political processes (Wheeler, 2005). It is within this context that social investment programmes such as Vencer operate in low-income neighbourhoods in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The role of sport within the Vencer programme

The role of sport within Vencer warrants further explanation here, particularly because the programme objectives reach beyond the realm of sport. Like most programmes, Vencer provides more than opportunities to participate in sport, and it is difficult to disentangle the effect of sport participation from the other components of the programme (Coalter, 2008). The approach can be understood as 'plus sport', where social, educational and occupational components are given primacy and sport, especially its ability to bring together and engage a large number of young people, is part of a broader and more complex set of processes (Coalter, 2007, 71). Members of staff describe Vencer as a holistic youth development programme in which the different activities, including sport, act in combination with one another in mutually reinforcing ways. Vencer uses team sports activities, and particularly football (soccer) games, to create an active learning environment for supporting and delivering educational content. During the first phase of the six-month programme, participants play approximately 50 hours on the field and spend around 50 hours in the classroom. In the remainder of the programme, staff members continue to use sports contexts and provide regular opportunities for games.

In this paper, I will examine the programme outcomes from this holistic development perspective. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse in depth the programme outcomes that can be specifically attributed to the sport component of the programme. I refer the reader to a previous paper that does provide such an analysis (Spaaij, 2012). However, the ways in which the sports activities in Vencer shape the processes examined in this paper do need to be highlighted.

The sports activities are an integral part of the broader project of opening up opportunities for improved educational and socioeconomic attainment. The sports ac-

tivities in Vencer have two key characteristics that can make them a suitable vehicle for delivering positive outcomes. First, sport (especially football) is used to facilitate a fluid learning environment for supporting and delivering educational content to young people. Sports activities are seen to generate valuable teaching and learning moments, which are carried over to the classroom-based education sessions. The activities are done in such a way that they align with and complement the more theoretical aspects of the programme, which focus on the development of key competencies such as teamwork, communication, discipline and respect. As such, they facilitate a platform for experiential learning where the practical sports activities constitute a concrete learning activity during which subject knowledge and generic employability skills can be applied and reflected upon. Vencer coordinator Julia describes the role of sport in this learning process as follows:

It's a kind of tool for them to realise through doing something the importance of the competencies we develop in the program, like respect and discipline. ... You have to construct the learning of the skill. They have to use the skill in practice in order for them to understand its importance and relevance. Through football we show them the importance of the kinds of things we are talking about in class and of the skills we are trying to develop. That is why I think it is a very important tool. And we can see the difference it makes.

Indeed, several Vencer participants note that it is very important to be able to apply the skills they are being taught to the 'real world', that is, to put them into practice in everyday life situations, for instance in work, family or community settings. The sports activities are believed to provide a practical setting where these skills can be cultivated and applied (Spaaij, 2012).

A second key characteristic of the sports activities in Vencer is that they contribute to the building of social relationships which underpin the outcomes of the programme. During sport, participants are able to develop a commitment towards each other and display their willingness to work as a team, resolve conflicts and support each other, both on and off the field. Programme coordinator Eduardo explains this in the following way:

Sport, and football in particular, gave us an opportunity to talk about other things, like work skills. Because everybody knows a little bit about football, and even if they don't like it they would like to go watch it. And so it facilitates negotiation and establishes relationships, institutional relationships, personal relationships.

The social interaction aspects of the sports activities are thus seen to further support the development of personal and professional skills such as co-operation, responsi-

bility, communication, conflict resolution, task orientation and discipline. One way in which this is done within Vencer is through the modification of the rules of the games, with the purpose of creating an inclusive participatory learning environment in which both males and females, and both talented and less talented players, have the opportunity to develop social skills and relationships (Spaij, 2012). Group discussions during and after the games facilitate collective discussion of and reflection on the experiences and lessons learned. These findings concerning the role of sport in fostering skill development are consistent with those found in comparable sport-based intervention programmes, such as Segundo Tempo (Kay, 2010) and Football for Peace (Sugden & Wallis, 2007). In the next section the methods used to investigate these issues are discussed.

Methods

The mixed methods study on which this paper draws aimed to produce a deep understanding of how the Vencer programme is experienced and interpreted by participants and staff, and to examine the programme's impact on participants' social position and resources. The research combined qualitative and quantitative data using a complementary design, where each type of data produced a particular kind of knowledge (Small, 2011). The qualitative and quantitative strands were implemented concurrently and the findings from both strands were brought together and integrated in the data interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

In the quantitative strand, a survey instrument was developed and utilised to obtain a relatively standardised picture of the nature and impacts of the programme and the life conditions of the participants. The survey data were gathered concurrently to the fieldwork method, which sought to produce an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences of the programme. The survey comprised 20 questions, half of which were multiple-choice questions. A total of 129 completed questionnaires were received, which corresponds to a sampling fraction of 10% ($N = 1,286$) and a response rate of 52%. Respondents were randomly selected and invited to participate either by telephone or face-to-face. The questionnaire was administered directly due to its more personal approach, its greater flexibility, and its potential to generate more thorough opinions from respondents in comparison with mail or electronic surveys. The gender balance of the survey sample was representative of the sampling frame (61% of respondents were female). A further 92 completed surveys were received from then-current participants of a female-specific version of Vencer, called Vencedoras, which corresponds to a sampling fraction and response rate of 77% ($N = 120$). The survey instrument method was also applied to programme staff and other relevant stakeholders to gather their perspectives on the delivery and the impact of Vencer, as well as on local social issues more generally. Twenty-eight completed surveys were received and analysed, consisting of a sampling fraction of approximately 55% ($N = 50$).

The qualitative strand consisted of in-depth interviews and direct observation.² Interviewing offered the flexibility to react to the respondent's situation, probe for more detail, seek more reflexive responses and ask questions which are relatively complex or personally intrusive. Key informants were interviewed up to four times at regular intervals, which produced rich data on their life trajectories and their evolving experience of sport. A total of 53 interviews were conducted with former Vencer participants. Females made up 66% of the interview sample. A further 36 interviews were conducted with programme staff and other stakeholders, such as local employers, school teachers and health providers.

Field visits to the research site provided the opportunity for direct observation, which was used to gain first-hand exploration of the social spheres in which the young people under study participate. Observation enabled me to obtain impressionistic information concerning the sports and educational activities on offer and participants' engagement with these activities. It also contributed to an understanding of how individuals interacted and to the assessment of approaches and activities (Coalter, 2002). Direct observations were made of sport and classroom activities, teacher meetings, workplaces where (former) participants were employed, and relevant social activities and institutions in the local area. Detailed field notes were kept in which all stories, informal discussions and observations were documented. The data gathered through these research methods are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Pathways into work: participants' experiences

As noted earlier, social mobility research typically focuses on changes in occupational attainment as an indicator of social mobility. From this perspective, the key question is whether, and if so how and in what circumstances, participation in Vencer affects young people's occupational attainment. In order to obtain a sense of the impact of programme participation on occupational attainment, former Vencer participants were asked whether they were employed and, if so, where and for how many hours per week. Nearly 63% of survey respondents indicated that they worked at the time of the survey (in 2009), whereas the remaining 37% reported that they were (still) unemployed. Of those who were in employment, 56% worked more than 20 hours per week, while a further 23% worked between 11 and 20 hours per week. The most commonly reported occupations were administrative assistant, apprentice, computer teacher or technician, and telemarketing operator. However, the survey data did not provide an in-depth picture of the *meanings* former Vencer participants gave to their employment situation and its effects (if any) on social mobility. The in-depth interviews are more instructive in this regard.

2 The study also used online blogs as a data collection method, however the online data are not used in this paper.

Vencer coordinator Márcia notes that “there is a financial gain for some” through occupational attainment, which can enable participants to “rent or buy their own house and go to university; a change of perspective but also a very concrete change in lifestyle.” For example, 25-year-old former Vencer participant Marta now has a full-time job as a call centre operator, having previously worked for a telemarketing company as part of her internship during Vencer. Her current job gives her and her family a better financial position, allowing her “to become more independent, which is important ... and to help your family”. Marta values the skills and knowledge she has developed during her participation in Vencer. However, she is adamant that she will need to continue her studies in order to further her educational attainment, which she believes would enable her to “open a better door for myself” in the future.

Jessica’s experience is broadly similar in this respect. Jessica is a 19-year-old former Vencer participant who now works as a part-time assistant at a local NGO. She reported that although she desperately wanted to work, there were few employment opportunities in her local community beyond those associated with the informal economy, something that is particularly true for women (as discussed above). This was her main motive for enrolling in the Vencer programme. Participation in Vencer gave her extensive employability skills training and a four-month apprenticeship in the city. It also helped her obtain her first job, which in turn facilitated further, on-the-job learning as well as a new social network.

Other former Vencer participants report similar experiences with regard to occupational attainment. For example, Felipe, who is in his mid 20s, now works as a telemarketing operator in a middle-class neighbourhood. During his participation in the Vencer programme he worked as an apprentice at a private education institution. His former mentor Sandra describes Felipe’s trajectory as follows: “His life has changed a lot. He works, earns more money and has become more motivated to study, to enrol in a university course. There are many people who don’t have that perspective.” Felipe himself acknowledges that “the Vencer programme has helped me in every aspect [of my life]. It is because of the programme that I gained my first job and I am still working there today.” On a more critical note, however, his former mentor recognises that the issue of financial independence “is very complicated here” and that only a small minority of Vencer participants are likely to achieve this. She takes Felipe as an example:

A telemarketing operator, who earns a good wage, will get R\$800 [\$480] [per month]. For someone to be independent, that is, pay rent... that’s difficult. There is certainly a financial improvement that sets a person in motion, which can generate more benefits in the long term. For example, Felipe earns well, around R\$800. If he invests this in his education, a university degree, then eventually he will be financially independent. So people go

on a pathway. Now, to be fully independent when the programme finishes, that's difficult.

This remark suggests that even though a proportion of Vencer participants have been able to improve their labour market position, financial rewards are generally rather limited, particularly in the first years of employment and in the absence of a university degree. It also indicates how it may be possible to use income from work to improve one's educational attainment, which in turn can increase one's future occupational attainment and income. This process of capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986) requires continuous effort by intelligent social agents in order to get ahead in the long term. However, there are several barriers that constrain this process, and it is to these barriers that I will now turn.

Barriers to upward social mobility

The capacity of the young people who participate in Vencer to achieve upward social mobility is affected by a number of constraints. Two barriers to social mobility are of particular import here: inequalities in the education system, and labour market dynamics. The nature of the Brazilian education system is viewed by many respondents as a major obstacle to social mobility for disadvantaged youth. Indeed, as Goldstein (2003, 94) rightly argues, it "is 'classed' from the very start, with a public school system that functions (rather poorly) for the masses and differing levels of private school education that cater exclusively to the middle and upper classes." Although, overall, access to and length of schooling has increased significantly in the past few decades (UNICEF, 2009), the quality and resources of Rio de Janeiro's public schools remain poor particularly in low-income communities (Abramovay et al., 2002; Perlman, 2010). For example, Vencer teacher Edu argues:

The problem is the quality of public education and this is a national problem. ... We have solved the problem of children who are not in school, but we haven't resolved the question of the quality of schooling. The classrooms are overcrowded, not enough teachers are hired, nor do we train those who are teaching. That's why those students arrive at secondary schools with terrible formation. In secondary education we see the same problems: classes are packed, teachers are poorly paid and trained, lack of teachers in some disciplines, and teachers teaching in disciplines in which they are not trained.

Moreover, Abramovay et al. (2002) found that young people suffer the effects of the gap between the public education system and the new demands of the labour market, often experiencing great difficulty in obtaining decent work. Many young people abandon school in search of employment, but lack the qualifications and skills necessary to obtain steady jobs (Gacitúa Marió & Woolcock, 2008). They commonly end

up working in precarious jobs in the informal sector from an early age, where they tend to earn less than the minimum wage and receive far fewer benefits and rights than those in the formal sector.

A recurrent theme in the narratives of interviewees is the perceived shortage of opportunities to advance their occupational careers due to persistent unemployment, underemployment or job insecurity, poor preparation for the evolving knowledge economy in terms of educational qualifications and work experience, and labour market discrimination. The limited work experience provided by Vencer can serve as a basis for occupational attainment, however the conversion of this experience into post-programme employment is often a difficult process. One of Vencer's challenges is to establish effective partnerships with public and private sector organisations to create job placements for Vencer participants (Spaaij, 2012). Some participants are critical of the extent to which job placements are available and/or translate into occupational attainment. For example, one former participant in his mid 20s asserts that "youth don't have the experience and employers generally hire people with experience. But the majority of those searching for dignified and secure work are young people, so how are they going to find their first job if companies are not hiring them?" Vencer staff recognise this concern. Some staff members feel that "companies are not always open and willing to receive the young people," and point to the "highly competitive labour market". They note that when participants complete the programme without having access to a job placement, they may well remain jobless.

Labour market discrimination can exacerbate this experience of labour market exclusion. Some participants feel discriminated against by potential employers for being *favelados* ("slum dwellers"). Prejudices and stereotypes held by potential employers may frustrate Vencer staff's efforts to establish partnerships with the private sector. Programme coordinator Ana points out that few companies welcome young people from the *favelas* with open arms because "they have the idea that it's poor so nothing is good".

Those participants who do enter the labour market may experience colour-based wage discrimination, as the literature on labour market discrimination in Brazil clearly shows (Lovell, 2000; Silva, 2000). A number of interviewees report that they experience labour market discrimination. However, they nonetheless endeavour to be proactive in the process of finding decent work. For example, Juliana, a former participant in her 20s, describes how she feels discriminated against because she is dark-skinned and lives in a *favela*. She indicates that she would really like to change her life and that of her family, and that this desire stimulates her to engage in programmes such as Vencer. Juliana notes:

Discrimination exists. But I've learned that I have to believe in myself, and not think that I won't get a job because of my skin colour or race. Doesn't matter whether there are ten people and

I'm the only black one. You need to believe in yourself. You don't know what the profile of the company is, whether the employer is black or white, so you just have to show your best side. Many young people are still afraid. If you go to work in a shop they have to know where you live, and you cannot lie. They have to hire me based on who I am, not what I pretend to be.

Labour market discrimination not only affects the availability of pathways into decent work, but also subjective experiences of occupational attainment and social mobility.

Social mobility paths: objective and subjective indicators

The preceding analysis indicates some of the ways in which participation in a sport-based intervention programme such as Vencer can facilitate occupational attainment, which in turn can create paths for upward social mobility. However, considering the barriers to social mobility discussed above, it is clear that upward social mobility is not widespread and is strongly affected by structural factors emanating from the labour market and education system. Moreover, where social advancement does take place it is at an individual and relative level rather than at any collective or absolute level. In other words, sport-based intervention programmes like Vencer are far more likely to stimulate personal change than effect any long-term structural change.

Vencer staff are generally cognisant of this important limitation. They emphasise not so much short-term economic improvements but rather the longer-term possibilities and prospects that flow from the development process they seek to engender, the outcomes of which may not yet be visible and cannot be seen in isolation from other spheres of participants' lives. For example, Vencer coordinator Bianca regards participation in the programme as "a first yet significant step" towards improved educational and occupational attainment. In the same vein, NGO director Celi asserts: "It's a first step, seemingly a small step but I believe that it's a large step. I believe it's a door that can open other doors." Bianca and Celi both recognise that a sport-based intervention programme with an average duration of six months cannot fully compensate for major income and educational disadvantage. Nevertheless, Bianca estimates that approximately one quarter of Vencer participants, notably those who already have educational qualifications and are highly motivated, will experience upward social mobility in the short or longer term. These participants, Bianca argues, "just need one opportunity" to get ahead.

Vencer educators recognise that even for those who do not achieve upward mobility in the objective sense, programme participation can still be advantageous in a very real and important way: "to transform them from not being a citizen to being a citizen." Here Bianca refers to the sense of exclusion that many poor young people in Rio de Janeiro feel, a stance expressed in their complaint that they perceive that they are not seen as full citizens. Admittedly, the challenge this poses is enormous

as it links into the struggle against need, disrespect and violence (Wheeler, 2005). Also, it points to the potential discrepancies or contradictions between objective and subjective social mobility: improvements in the material conditions of life do not necessarily translate into perceived social mobility in the sense of increased agency and recognition, and vice versa.

The lived experience of Vencer participants strongly resonates with the views of programme staff. Former Vencer participant Rosa, who is in her mid 20s, is one of the interviewees who has experienced significant social advancement. She describes how:

The change [in my life] has been profound, not just a small step. Very positive. I've moved to a different neighbourhood, so also residential mobility. I now have a continuing job in telemarketing and save money to pay for my studies. I have more financial independence but I spend a lot of my income on the *pre-vestibular* [university entry exam] course I'm doing. I have always wanted to do this but Vencer has helped me to focus my future plans, to encourage me and make it more real. My family also support my education but they don't have any experience with university so they cannot really help me with that. Vencer gave me more concrete opportunities and examples. I now also have a scholarship for an English language course. Vencer helped me apply for the scholarship.

At the same time, however, Rosa emphasises that this is part of, and a stepping stone for, a longer-term development process in which she aspires to complete a university degree. Rosa is one of several former Vencer participants who aim to invest their newly acquired skills and resources in further education, which they believe will enable them to become upwardly mobile in the longer term.

Indeed, a common view among respondents is that although participation in Vencer increases their future mobility prospects, they have not yet achieved upward mobility. They tend to subscribe to the view that participation in Vencer constitutes "a first yet significant step" towards durable social advancement. Nilton, who is in his early 20s, expresses this as follows: "I think [in my case] it was the first degree of getting ahead. ... I made the first step which was learning how it is to really enter the labour market, to have that knowledge and to prepare myself for that. It was a step ahead." Nilton's story suggests that progression is often fractured, inconsistent, and strongly influenced by external factors as well as personal drive, persistence and luck. In his case, significant contextual factors are the poor quality of public schooling in his local community, labour market discrimination and the impact of public violence. With regard to the latter, Nilton argues:

I really want to take my mother out of the community. It's sad, sometimes when school finishes I cannot go home because of the

shootouts, full of stray bullets, police everywhere. Sometimes I cannot sleep due to the shootouts. You have no peace, no freedom; you have to do what they [drug factions and police] want.

Nilton's experience highlights the relevance of the broad notion of social mobility referred to earlier in this paper, which construes upward mobility in more philosophical terms as increased agency and control over one's own life. Moreover, his reference to the impact of violence reveals some of the contradictions and ambivalence in Vencer participants' pathways to social mobility: securing jobs with good pay can be a way to enhance control over their own lives and those of their families, but their opportunities for securing such jobs remain strongly affected by external constraints, which are also likely to diminish their sense of agency and autonomy. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that participants' narratives of social mobility are often fractured progression stories.

The subjective experiences of Rosa, Nilton, Marta and other Vencer participants quoted in this paper highlight that, for many of them, social mobility is not simply a competitive game in which individual players are isolated and detached from others and driven solely by career goals. Instead, family and community relationships are central to how they envision social mobility, indicative of which are their aspirations to also lift their kin and community out of poverty and/or to accomplish mobility whilst maintaining strong family and community relationships (Spaaij, 2011). Female participants typically emphasise the role of family and community relationships to a greater extent than do male participants, and their narratives of sought or experienced freedom, independence and agency should be understood in relation to these aspirations.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to critically examine the capacity of the Vencer programme to engender upward social mobility of disadvantaged young people in Rio de Janeiro, highlighting the opportunities created by the sport-based intervention programme as well as the constraints faced by participants in seeking to convert these opportunities into occupational attainment and social mobility. Although the study was carried out in one particular social setting and the research results cannot be generalised, the findings can inform the academic and policy debate on "sport for development" by emphasising the need for a more realistic, critical approach that takes into consideration the social, economic and political contexts in which sport-based intervention programmes operate and how these contexts affect programme outcomes. Specifically, the paper found that programme participants' prospects and possibilities for upward social mobility are strongly affected by structural factors emanating from the labour market and education system. Moreover, where social mobility does take place it is at an individual and relative level rather than at a collective or absolute

level. In other words, the impact of the Vencer programme is to be found principally at the level of individual relative mobility.

It is now possible to propose some directions for future research into social mobility through sport. In this paper, I have sought to show that sport-based intervention programmes' effects on participants' social trajectories need to be viewed as non-linear processes which are profoundly affected by factors outside of the realm of the programme's influence. This type of fractured progression story should not be seen as a programme "failure" but rather as the inevitable context in which work with participants occurs (Crabbe et al., 2006). It is recommended that future research capture these stories and processes more accurately by means of longitudinal studies. This involves selecting a group of participants and following them through, administering interviews at intervals, for as long as funding and participants' interest permit. Unfortunately, to date longitudinal designs are non-existent in research on sport for development. As Collins, Henry, Houlihan and Buller (1999) already observed more than a decade ago, very few studies look at longer-term outcomes due to the difficulty of measuring such outcomes and/or the lack of data or resources over a long enough period to make a rigorous assessment. Moreover, it seems that collecting longitudinal data of the kind needed for social mobility research can be especially time consuming in less-developed countries (Buchmann and Hanum, 2001). The approach presented in this paper can serve as a basis for future longitudinal research.

Another issue that warrants further research is the capacity of sport-based intervention programmes to affect social mobility processes beyond the level of the individual, most notably at the family or community level. For example, the role of family and community relationships in the process and experience of social mobility is emphasised by many programme participants, especially women. A focus on family-level effects resonates with recent thinking about social mobility (Miller, 2001) and sport for development (Kay, 2009; Kay & Spaaij, 2012), and opens up the study of the experience of social mobility to incorporate gender into our analysis (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). It is recommended that gender-specific analysis be expanded beyond what has been offered in this paper. Indeed, locating young people's experiences of sport-based intervention programmes within their family and community contexts is an important step in developing a better understanding of the types of (intended and unanticipated) outcomes such programmes produce, as well as an understanding of the processes and mechanisms that drive these outcomes. It is imperative that efforts to engender progressive social change transcending the lives of particular individuals be informed by such an understanding.

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