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Sport in Society, 2009, 12(9): 1124-1138

The Glue that Holds the Community Together? Sport and Sustainability in Rural Australia

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Abstract

Drawing on the author's research in northwest Victoria, Australia, this article examines the forms of capital that are created in and through rural sport as well as the processes of social inclusion and exclusion that structure access to social networks and to the resources these networks contain. In the face of economic and social changes that affect the region, rural sport participants view local sport clubs as vital community hubs fostering social cohesion, local and regional identities and a shared focus and outlet. Sporting competitions in northwest Victoria also contribute to cultural and economic capital for some participants, and to relatively limited stocks of linking social capital. While the creation and transference of these capitals are to a large degree regulated by wider social divisions, structural changes in the area present increased opportunities for other people, including young women, to take on leadership roles and to develop new skills and knowledge through sport participation.

Introduction

The extrinsic significance of sport has emerged as a major theme in contemporary sports research. Several studies address sport's contributions to regeneration and community development in urban areas. Coalter and his colleagues have noted that there has been little systematic analysis of the precise role that sport can play in the regeneration of local urban economies.¹ While urban aspects of 'development through sport' have recently gained increased academic attention², this is not the case for rural areas, some of which experience multiple forms of social disadvantage.³ There is an odd paradox in regards to rural sport:

while many people living in rural areas herald what they regard as the profound contributions of sport to the social fabric of rural communities, these perceived effects remain seriously under-valued in the thriving sport-for-development debate. Illustrative of this point is that the few recent influential studies that specifically address rural sport tend to focus on social exclusion and deprivation in the rural context, rather than to critically and empirically scrutinize the ways in which sport (organizations) may contribute to social wellbeing in rural areas.⁴

The objective of this article is to rectify this omission. It aims not only to empirically assess the social benefits associated with rural sport, but also to formulate a conceptual-analytical framework, albeit sketchy, which enables such analysis. This twofold task will offer the reader insight into how the people under study experience and make sense of their sporting experiences, while grounding the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of rural sport participants in the wider academic and policy debate on the social impacts of (rural) sport. In doing so, this article addresses the following question: which types of benefits accrue to people living in rural communities as a result of sport participation, either in playing or non-playing roles, and sporting competitions more generally? This question will be investigated by means of a case study of sporting competitions in the northwest of the state of Victoria, Australia.

The major significance of this question is that it enables us to deconstruct and contextualize the argument put forward by academics and policy-makers alike that beneficial outcomes of sport are most likely to be achieved through well-designed sport-based development programs that are ‘consciously and systematically organized to maximize the possibility of achieving such outcomes’.⁵ The realities of sport in rural Australia contradict this assumption in that voluntary, autonomously run sporting competitions have been generating certain social benefits (and related forms of social inclusion and exclusion) for decades against the backdrop of profound structural changes. A recent study concluded that the contributions of sport to rural life should not be underestimated: ‘Its role in fostering social interaction, a sense of place and community, and the range of physical and mental health benefits contribute significantly to the well-being of rural citizens.’⁶ Such outcomes, as we will see, do usually not result from socially engineered and carefully crafted policies, but rather from the intersection of subtle and complex socio-cultural processes and the adaptive strategies and identity work of individuals and local sport organizations.

This article is divided into three main parts. The first part discusses the conceptual-analytical framework of the study, focusing on the interplay between economic, social and

cultural capital and its applications to rural sport. I argue that the social benefits of sport in northwest Victoria can be usefully analyzed in terms of the creation, maintenance, transference and diminution of these different forms of capital. The second part describes the research methods and the wider social context in which northwest Victorian sport is embedded. The final part of this article presents the study's findings regarding the social benefits that accrue from rural sport and the processes of social inclusion and exclusion that structure access to these benefits. The findings highlight the central arguments made in this article: firstly, while influential studies on rural sport emphasize exclusion, this study also finds potent processes of social inclusion; and secondly, voluntary community sport organisations in small rural towns tend to be effective vehicles for the creation and transference of social, cultural and economic capital resources.

Social and Cultural Dimensions of Sport in Rural Australia

Studies of rural communities tend to highlight the important role that sport plays in the social and cultural fabric of these communities. Robert and Helen Lynd's well-known study of life in a small regional American town compared leisure activity of the late nineteenth century with the 1920s, noting the impact of considerable changes in technology and communications.⁷ Mass production and the availability of the automobile led to greater mobility, in turn affecting communal activities such as church attendance. The Lynds argued that previous types of association and communally organized leisure had weakened or disappeared as new cultural forms took hold, with leisure involvement becoming more passive. At the same time, they indicated that high school basketball provided a renewed means of associational engagement fostering a sense of belonging, group cohesion and community spirit.⁸ The Lynds viewed basketball as a unique form of social cement, drawing residents together across suburban, class and religious divisions.

Hughson et al. make the important point that the rhetoric on which arguments for the integrative function of sport are pegged should not be taken for granted.⁹ Sport is not an inherently wholesome or socially cohesive force. Rather, sport has the potential of producing both positively and negatively perceived outcomes, and it often reinforces social inequalities.¹⁰ In their study of ice hockey culture in Canada, Gruneau and Whitsun warn that sport can work against as much as it creates a sense of belonging in small town life.¹¹ They note that 'visible minorities' are sometimes ostracized from social life in small towns because

they do not become involved in sporting activities. In such cases sport provides a social norm of inclusion for those who play the game, and one of exclusion for those who do not.

These themes have been addressed to some degree in publications on sport in rural Australia. Sport organizations are commonly regarded as an important forum of civic engagement in Australian rural communities. Local sport clubs are a major focus of rural community life, and participation in (or exclusion from) sport clubs affects residents' social status, social networks and access to resources.¹² It has been argued that at a time when other social institutions were diminishing, organized sport remained, providing a sense of social cohesion and belonging. In 2004, a Parliamentary Inquiry into Australian football in country Victoria concluded that 'football/netball clubs are, to a significant degree, the "glue" holding many small rural communities together.'¹³ The report acknowledged a range of positive outcomes associated with organized sport, including individual benefits (e.g. skill acquisition and greater social connectedness), economic benefits (e.g. increased revenue and tourism) and broader social outcomes (e.g. a sense of local community and improved public health). Below I will conceptualize these outcomes in relation to forms of capital.

Capital formation in and through rural sport

Contemporary research into rural sport draws heavily on the concept of social capital, as we will see. Social capital is generally viewed to stand for 'the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures'.¹⁴ Three types of social capital can be distinguished: bonding, bridging and linking social capital.¹⁵ Bonding social capital refers to ties between like people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours. Putnam notes that bonding social capital 'is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity'.¹⁶ At the same time, bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism and social exclusiveness. Dense social connections that reinforce homogeneity are more likely to build high social walls and be less tolerant of diversity. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to more distant ties with like persons, such as loose friendships and work colleagues. Bridging social capital can generate broader identities, mutually accepted norms of trust and reciprocity. Bridging networks are viewed to be 'better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion'.¹⁷ Bridging is nevertheless essentially a horizontal metaphor, implying connections between people who share broadly similar demographic characteristics. A

potentially troublesome aspect of this type of social capital is that the social connections tend to be weaker and are generally more fragile.

Putnam emphasizes that bonding and bridging social capital ‘are not “either-or” categories [...] but “more or less” dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital’.¹⁸ He asserts that the ‘right mix’ is required for benefits to accrue. One question this interpretation of social capital raises is whether bridging social capital can be imposed artificially by political decree or through social engineering. Hughson et al. point out that bridging social capital will accrue as individuals and groups seek out contact with others for whatever social reasons or through whatever institutional means.¹⁹ Improving community relations and networks might be an outcome of collective sporting engagement, but it is not an initial incentive to compete. As I will demonstrate, in northwest Victoria these outcomes principally accrue from voluntary contact between residents of different country towns rather than through socially engineered sport-based development programs.

A major limitation of Putnam’s interpretation of social capital is its failure to adequately address power relations, social inequalities and subtle processes of social inclusion and exclusion. In Putnam’s analysis ‘social capital becomes divorced from other forms of capital, stripped of power relations, and imbued with the assumption that social networks are win-win relationships and that individual gains, interests, and profits are synonymous with group gains, interests, and profits’.²⁰ Social capital also has a vertical dimension, which has been termed linking social capital. Linking social capital is concerned with relations between individuals and groups in different social strata. Linking social capital reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available within the community.²¹ Woolcock has extended the notion of linking social capital by including the capacity of individuals and communities to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the immediate community.²²

In his study of competitive sport in a rural region of Western Australia, Tonts suggests that sport plays a significant role in the formation of social networks that contribute to bonding social capital. According to Tonts:

Residents saw sport as a focal point of community life that brings people together and creates an opportunity for meaningful social interaction. The role of bonding capital was particularly evident, with numerous people discussing the way in which sport creates a sense of local pride and forms the basis of a ‘tight knit’ community.²³

These findings correspond to Atherley's study of sport and social capital in another rural region of Western Australia. She found 'a strong connection between sport and important assets such as community cohesion, identity and pride.'²⁴ Indicators of bonding social capital, such as elements of trust and co-operation, were particularly evident.

For Tonts, rural sport also contributes to bridging social capital. Local residents placed considerable emphasis on the way in which sport was able to transcend class, ethnic, religious and other barriers. Residents claimed that networks created through sport can connect different social groups that might otherwise remain disconnected from one another.²⁵ At the same time, Tonts acknowledges that sport is often not the egalitarian and socially inclusive institution that many residents claim. Even in those clubs thought of as egalitarian and inclusive, there appear to be social divisions along class, gender, ethnic and status lines as well as in relation to the length of residence.²⁶ Aboriginal participation in organized rural sport remains comparatively low and tends to be restricted to a small number of sports, notably Australian football, basketball and netball. Female residents also feel excluded to some extent. A number of women pointed out that they were not welcome at some of the functions at football clubs. The division of labour at club functions in a range of sports was also noted, with women usually responsible for activities such as preparing food, cooking and cleaning.²⁷ This division of labour often contributed to a spatial division of labour within clubs, with women and men often occupying different parts of a club or venue, with little interaction. Dempsey has also noted the significance of rural sport clubs as a site for male bonding and for the construction and reproduction of masculinities, with sport arguably providing the strongest marker of masculinity in country towns.²⁸ Notwithstanding these cultural norms and pressures, Tonts concludes that sport's positive contributions to rural life outweigh its more problematic aspects, especially in its role in fostering social interaction and a sense of place and community.²⁹

Social Benefits of Sport in Northwest Victoria: Methods and Context

In my analysis of the benefits that accrue from sport participation in northwest Victoria, I aim to expand the narrow focus on (bonding and bridging) social capital in the existing literature by arguing, following Bourdieu, that different species of capital are inextricably intertwined.³⁰ Applications of the concept of social capital to the realm of sport tend to incorrectly divorce the notion of social capital from other forms of capital, ignoring

Bourdieu's point that capitals are more or less fungible. For the present purpose, I will analyze the close interrelationships between economic, cultural and social capital and the ways in which rural sport participation influences the creation, maintenance, transference or diminution of capital resources. Economic capital corresponds to material wealth, as capital that can be readily transformed into money and that can be institutionalized in terms of property rights. Cultural capital (broadly defined) refers to cultural goods, knowledge, experience, education, competencies and skills which a social actor possesses and which confer power or status in the social hierarchy.³¹

The research on which this article is based was carried out in small rural towns in northwest Victoria in 2008 and 2009. These rural localities consist of population clusters of 400 to 1,600 people primarily living on farms or in agricultural service centres. The research incorporated five sports: Australian football, netball, hockey, cricket and tennis. Within each sporting environment, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were held with participants, volunteers, club and league organizers, and local residents who did not participate in any of these sports. Group sessions focused principally on participants' experiences and their views on the impact of sport participation on their lives and on the wider community.

Several local residents are involved in more than one of the above sports as part of their multiplex sporting relations.³² These sporting relations are often seasonally based, with some male residents participating in football during the winter season and in cricket during summer. As I will demonstrate, these multiplex relations allow resources embedded in one particular sport-based relationship to be appropriated for use in others and, more importantly, in interpersonal contacts outside the realm of sport. This is particularly the case for those individuals who hold positions within sport clubs or leagues that convey considerable social status, such as the roles of president, treasurer or secretary. In other words, the potential social benefits of sport are not only to be fostered through direct participation; involvement in the organization and provision of opportunities for sport can assist in the development of transferable resources and skills.³³

The case study included individual and paired interviews with people in the following categories ($n = 59$):³⁴

- Australian football players, league/club officials and volunteers ($n = 20$);
- Netball players, league/club officials and volunteers ($n = 5$)
- Hockey players, league/club officials and volunteers ($n = 5$)

- Cricket players, league/club officials and volunteers ($n = 2$)
- Tennis players, club officials and volunteers ($n = 3$)
- Non-playing residents ($n = 6$)
- Council members ($n = 3$)
- Representatives of local schools ($n = 5$)
- Health providers ($n = 3$)
- Local businesspeople ($n = 5$)
- Local journalists ($n = 2$)

Although Australian football is by far the most popular sport in terms of the number of participants and spectators in northwest Victoria, the comparatively large number of interviews with persons in this category may leave the other sports slightly under-represented. The popular over-representation of Australian football and its particular cultural norms (e.g. male bonding, drinking culture) has in fact been raised by some residents as an issue of concern, especially in relation to local government funding for sport. Most residents, and especially men, will nevertheless argue that ‘football is the dominant sport’ and that ‘football is unique’ in terms of its community appeal.³⁵ Other sport clubs ‘do not necessarily have the same standing as football/netball clubs in terms of their ability to act as a “community hub”, facilitate broad-based social interaction and engender a sense of collective, locally-based pride.’³⁶ However, there is often a high level of interdependence between football/netball clubs and other sport clubs.

Structural changes in northwest Victoria: implications for sport and communities

The perceived significance of sport in the social life of small towns in northwest Victoria can be viewed as a historically evolved cultural pattern. Sport formed a large part of the social life of many of these towns from the very beginning. In most cases, the first sport to begin, the most popular and the most enduring was Australian football.³⁷ In some towns other sports such as racing emerged even earlier than football.³⁸ But the particular benefits local residents assign to sport should also be understood within the context of more recent structural changes. Northwest Victoria, like several other rural regions in Australia³⁹, has experienced profound social and economic changes in recent decades that impact not only on the general social and cultural life of small towns, but also specifically on the ways in which local residents perceive and experience sport. Lack of space prevents me from discussing these

changes in full detail in this article. The main social and economic changes in rural Victoria are summarized below.

The economic restructuring of agriculture, driven in part by technological changes, has resulted in a situation where farm incomes have steadily fallen and forced many families to leave the industry. The total number of farms operating in Australia fell from around 201,000 in 1960 to just over 130,000 in 2004. Australia experienced a decline of 20,000 farms between 1994 and 2004.⁴⁰ These families rarely remain in rural areas and tend to migrate to cities or coastal areas.⁴¹ Changes of this kind have been exacerbated by policy changes whose effects have been to link the Australian economy more tightly into the global economy and to make it more responsive to market forces, including deregulation in the finance sector and labour market, privatization of government business enterprises, reduction in general levels of government assistance to industries, and wider application of the 'user pays' principle.⁴² These changes are reflected in a general shift from government policies based on socio-spatial equity to those that emphasize economic efficiency, with many services relocating from rural communities into regional centres or capital cities.⁴³ This transformation has resulted in the loss of facilities and services that are deemed essential to the survival and identity of small rural towns (i.e. schools, banks, post offices, hospitals), and therefore an erosion of the roles and functions performed by these towns.⁴⁴

The rapidity of economic and social changes in the past three decades has generated particular difficulties for several rural communities. Many small rural towns have experienced a contraction of local economic activity (business closures, fewer employment opportunities), further outmigration of young adults and families with children, and the breakdown of certain local social institutions and networks.⁴⁵ McManus and Pritchard note the fundamental problem of population decline, locking some communities into a vicious cycle, where the removal of services not only contributes to population decline, but often results in the more entrepreneurial and higher spending members of a community moving elsewhere in search of opportunities.⁴⁶ We should add to this the impact of long periods of drought on agriculture in northwest Victoria, which has been an integral part of the economic, social and environmental issues facing farmers in the area for more than a century.⁴⁷ Drought has also affected the maintenance of sport facilities in the region, urging clubs to implement strategies for sustainable water usage on sport grounds.

The consequences of these developments are distributed unevenly across Victoria. There is a growing division between those (mainly coastal, accessible or environmentally attractive) rural areas experiencing population growth, and those (mainly inland agricultural

regions) experiencing decline. The wheat and sheep belt of northwest Victoria falls into the latter category, with many of its towns experiencing (either slow or more rapid) depopulation accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of public services.⁴⁸ In some cases the closure of public services has had a significant psychological impact on rural towns, arguably signalling the ‘death’ of the town.⁴⁹ Such changes may also affect the sustainability of voluntary organizations and sport clubs. All towns witness the ‘flight of youth’ to seek education, training and employment in regional and metropolitan cities (mainly Melbourne, Ballarat and Bendigo).⁵⁰ This has an impact on the social structure and amenity of each town. It also has an impact on sporting and social events and affects the supply of able-bodied volunteers for vital community work.⁵¹

Again, this development is more noticeable in some small towns than in others. Certain towns in northwest Victoria appear to have been relatively successful in retaining or attracting young people, for example through establishing cutting-edge agricultural organizations or by attracting new industries. These organizations have successfully tempted young professionals to move into the area. Many of these young professionals perceive sport as an important means for meeting new people and settling into the community, and some of them are prominent figures in the management of local sporting competitions. One male resident explained:

I have only been in the town for five years. Being involved in hockey and football is a great way to integrate and to get to know people, especially for my wife because she was a school principal in the past so she used to have a large social network.

Atherley argues that processes of restructuring are having direct impacts on rural sport clubs. The adaptive strategies of sport clubs in Western Australia are a direct result of the clubs being exposed to these processes and include amalgamation and the spatial reorganization of sporting competition locations.⁵² The extent of these impacts appears to be less pronounced in northwest Victoria, where the loss and amalgamation of sport clubs has been a less frequent but nevertheless significant occurrence. In recent years there have been two amalgamations of football/netball clubs in the area under study, as well as an amalgamation of tennis clubs. The loss of a local sport club has the potential to impact negatively on existing social networks and community identity, cutting deeply into the pride of the town. For example, a male resident interpreted the amalgamation of his football/netball

club with a club in a neighbouring town (with the latter club functioning as the club's new home base) as follows:

The end of the footy club was due to the loss of population, which in turn is due to changes in farming. This has signalled the death of the town, loss of a community hub. Now the club is amalgamated but only in name. It has lost most of its community appeal.

Furthermore, many football/netball clubs in northwest Victoria struggle to retain young people who have moved to Melbourne or other regional centers for work or education. They encourage them (especially talented players) to return 'home' on weekends to play football or netball by paying their petrol costs and/or offering playing fees. While this appears to have been a reasonably successful strategy, individuals rarely continue to do this for more than a few years. One former football player, who is now a league representative, explained how 'young players only travel back for two or three years normally, then you lose them because they settle down and have family or job obligations.'

Sport Clubs as Community Hubs Fostering Social Interaction

'Sport is the soul of the community.' (local male teacher)

Many participants and volunteers emphasize the contributions of local sporting competitions to social networks. Sport clubs, and especially football/netball clubs, are viewed as important hubs for social interaction, providing a shared focus and outlet. Football/netball clubs play a vital role in maintaining and improving community facilities, such as leisure centers and social club rooms. For many residents, the significance of sport as a site for social interaction has increased in recent decades as a result of mostly negatively perceived structural changes. It was observed that some of the historically dominant forms of associational engagement, such as church groups, had diminished and that few major forums for social interaction remain, with sport clubs occupying a prominent place in the towns' social and cultural landscape. Participation in sport clubs, whether as player or volunteer, is predominantly motivated by the fun, friendship and social aspects associated with club membership.

Given the relatively small population sizes of the towns, it is perhaps unsurprising that several residents indicated that they already knew most club members before they joined the

club, for example through school or work. Involvement in sport clubs allows them to get to know others better and to develop closer ties. This social aspect of sport does not interest everyone to the same degree. While some spend a large amount of their leisure time at the sport club, others are more pragmatic in their sport participation. For example, a man who recently moved into the area stated: ‘My two sons play junior football. They enjoy football and have made new friends through their involvement. I take them to the games, but I do not stay around all day. I usually go home straight after the game to do things around the house.’

Sport clubs in northwest Victoria not only foster the creation of bonding social capital, but also facilitate social connections between people from different walks of life. Residents tend to argue that ‘at the footy social barriers don’t exist’ or that ‘in tennis you mingle with people in different age groups ... who you wouldn’t normally meet’. For some farmers, Saturday afternoon sport is quite literally a principal form of social interaction. One farmer commented:

I live on a farm 12 kilometres from the town, quite isolated. If it wasn’t for sport, I would probably stay on the farm to fix a fence or something. At footy I talk to other farmers about sport and farming issues, for example new methods, machinery and funding options. It is also a great way to meet other types of people, like teachers and doctors.

In times of drought and economic hardship, involvement in sport is believed to have a positive impact on physical and mental health. Another farmer stated: ‘For me it is a switch-off cue, to get away from the farm and a sort of outlet, fun, to release tensions and stress. To share experiences or just to crack jokes. It gets you out of your isolation.’ Comments of this kind are fairly common and underline the belief of many local residents that ‘sport gets people out of their homes’ and that sport allows one to ‘meet people you wouldn’t meet in a social context otherwise’.

The significance of sporting competitions in the creation of bridging social capital in northwest Victoria is enhanced by two characteristics of the regional sport landscape. Firstly, population decline has forced some football/netball clubs to merge. Although this is interpreted by most local residents as a loss of identity and local pride, amalgamations also provide new opportunities for social connections between people of different towns, enhancing trust and cooperation in both an economic and a social context. One female resident commented:

You mix more with ferals through football now [after the amalgamation], for example a few players and fans from a lower socio-economic background from the other town. They blend in very well at footy and have made valuable contacts. If not for sport you wouldn't engage with them.

However, this comment also reveals that bridging connections at sport matches are situational and do not necessarily challenge existing social inequalities, but rather reproduce them through subtle mechanisms of social distinction (e.g. stereotyping). Furthermore, growing contacts between people living in different towns cannot be attributed to sport only. Young people generally have more, and more intensive, contact with their peers in other towns than in the past, partly owing to increased mobility and the availability of Internet and mobile telephony. This wider trend is reflected and enhanced in sport, with young players at times staying in town the evening after an away match to catch up with opposing players and other friends or acquaintances. One netball player explained how she sometimes stayed over after a night out in another town instead of having to drive home. She described sport as a way to get away from parents and visit other towns as part of away games.

Secondly, the league under study, the North Central Football League (NCFL), is unique in that it incorporates three sports at both junior and senior levels: football, netball and hockey. Match days feature a large number of matches involving people in different age groups (from juniors to seniors) in male and female sport teams. This set up stimulates interaction between different generations and between men and women, diverging to some extent from the more traditional view of rural sport as heavily male dominated. This particular configuration of the league is principally a consequence of adaptive strategies of sport clubs to cope with wider social changes, such as population decline. Many teams struggle to field the required number of players, especially the lower-level teams, and teams therefore regularly borrow each other's players, generating more multiplex sporting relations. Consider the following observation by a female resident:

One team has too many junior players, so they are on a roster system and each week some players have to play for the opposing team, but not just the worse players. They see this as a fair play system, and it brings kids into contact with each other and as a consequence their parents as well.

The shortage of players appears to reduce to some degree the talent barrier of sport participation and to enhance the inclusiveness of sport clubs. A female resident gave the following example of sporting inclusion in northwest Victoria, drawing a comparison with sport in urban areas:

Our league is very inclusive. You don't have to be talented to be able to play. New residents told me that their kids wanted to play football when they were living in the city, but they were not selected because apparently they were not good enough. Now they have moved here they can play. We are very happy to have them.

Another implication of the shortage of players and volunteers has been that, in addition to hockey and tennis clubs, women increasingly occupy leadership positions within football/netball clubs, enabling them to acquire greater social status, broaden their social networks and develop new skills in management, finance and diplomacy. This issue is discussed below.

Developing Skills and Knowledge through Sport

Several interviewees argued that they can acquire new skills and new forms of knowledge and experience through sport participation. Although the development of cultural capital through sport is commonly presented as open to all participants, in reality it is mainly confined to those who occupy leadership positions within sport clubs and leagues. The former president of a football club described how he, a farmer in his late fifties, learned about administration and management through his roles in the club. The professional skills he claimed to have developed include public speaking, engaging with government and sport organizations, conflict resolution and people's management. Additionally, in his previous role as club treasurer he was responsible for the financial business of the club with an annual turnover of \$200,000. Stressing that he never completed secondary education, he argued that he uses these skills in his profession and that this has opened up new opportunities and networks. Another male farmer similarly stated that his role as club president enabled him to learn to speak in public, manage people, lobby at a political level and work in a team, leading him to gain access to new business networks. Both men emphasized the importance of these experiences for young people with little or no previous (work) experience. Older, more experienced people, they felt, should guide and mentor them and act as role models. This

belief was shared by a local businessman who stressed that he learned many skills at a relatively young age through his involvement with football. He became the secretary of his local club at the age of 21, which he sees, in hindsight, as a major life experience that has helped him to set up his own business.

While these opportunities for skill development are presented as egalitarian and open to everyone, access to status positions within clubs and leagues is in many cases regulated by wider social divisions. People in certain occupations, such as managers, teachers or doctors, are relatively often in managerial positions in sport clubs. Recruitment is regularly based on pre-existing skills in particular areas and/or social status as a (former) player rather than on expected future outcomes in relation to skill development and cultural capital. There thus exists a pattern of social reproduction in which people with relatively large stocks of cultural and symbolic capital are most likely to obtain prestigious and culturally beneficial positions in sport clubs and leagues. However, given the shortage of qualified volunteers in most small towns, there are also regular opportunities for younger or less educated people (including young women) to take up leadership roles in sport clubs and to use these roles to expand their social networks and acquire new skills and knowledge.

Another important aspect of the creation of social and cultural capital in and through sport is the way in which these practices are gendered. Sporting fields have long been identified as ‘sites of masculine power and privilege’ as indicated, for example, by the almost total absence of women from rural media reports of sport.⁵³ Gender relations permeate northwest Victorian sport clubs in several ways. Some residents commented on the pressures associated with the cultural perceptions of different sports, with football being regarded as a ‘man’s game’ compared to games such as hockey, while netball is traditionally viewed as the most prestigious and culturally appropriate game for women, with talented players often having substantially more social status than female hockey players. But although these cultural images persist, there have been some changes in recent years, partly as a result of depopulation. There are now more men who play hockey in all male or mixed hockey teams in the region, with hockey providing new participation opportunities for men who dislike Australian football or its culture. Some parents actually discourage their sons from playing football due to fear of injuries. A number of reserve football players also play hockey, which at times has concerned football teams for fear of decreased interest in Australian football. The latter point indicates that while there are major overlapping sporting networks in northwest Victoria, there are also variable degrees of competition between different sports, generated in part by demographic changes and evolving cultural norms.

Another way to interpret gender relations in northwest Victorian sport is in terms of the division of labour at sport clubs, leading some female club members to feel partially excluded. In most sport clubs women are usually responsible for activities such as preparing food, cooking and cleaning, limiting their interaction with players and fans of opposing teams. At most sport venues I have visited women run the catering, bar and kitchen, with very few men taking on these tasks. But also in this area gender relations are subject to a variable degree of change. While football is still a men's game in most respects, women are now more centrally involved. A few women occupy leadership positions in football/netball clubs, for example in junior football. Social roles are also no longer as traditional as they once were. At some sport clubs all members are on the roster to cook and clean, and not just the women. These practices appear to have transformed traditional gender roles to some degree. Local residents explained these changes in terms of the shortage of volunteers (resulting in increased opportunities for women to take up leadership roles) and the fact that more women in small towns work nowadays. As the secretary of a local hockey club, who is a teacher, asked: why would we have to do all the work at the club when we also work during the week?

Social Capital and Economic Opportunities

Sport clubs in northwest Victoria have a significant economic impact. The fortunes of sport clubs and small town economies are linked to a considerable degree. This interrelationship is based on sponsorship of sport clubs by local business and reciprocal support from football/netball clubs for local businesses, especially shops and hotels. Fundraising activities can raise significant amounts of money, representing a high level of local investment in sport clubs.⁵⁴ Economic opportunities also accrue at the level of individuals as part of the social networks that are created and maintained through sport participation. For example, sport clubs sometimes organize fundraising campaigns to provide much-needed financial support for fellow residents experiencing hardship, for example after a house fire or to pay for expensive surgeries.

Some residents stressed that it is 'good for business' to be involved with a football club. A tradesman argued that some of his football-related contacts have resulted in new business opportunities, such as being contracted to work at the farm of another club member. The owner of a local hotel stated that many of his customers visit his hotel because of his status as a key representative of the football league. Access to job opportunities is not

restricted to individual towns based on bonding social capital, but extends to other towns in the region as a consequence of relatively loose sport-based ties between people in different towns. For example, the abovementioned tradesman claimed to have acquired several short-term plumbing and trading jobs in other towns in northwest Victoria through his multiplex sporting relations.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the types of benefits that accrue to people in rural northwest Victoria as a result of their participation in sport, either in playing or non-playing roles. I have drawn on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to analyze in conjunction different forms of capital that are created and converted in and through sport. While Bourdieu's approach may be too instrumental in its focus on deliberate strategies by individuals to acquire capitals (most people do not play sport principally for these reasons), most applications of the concept of social capital to the realm of sport can be criticized for divorcing social capital from other forms of capital. A major limitation of Putnam's influential interpretation of social capital is its failure to adequately address power relations and the subtle processes of social inclusion and exclusion that structure both access to social networks and to the resources these networks contain.

Highlighting these processes of social inclusion and exclusion serves to counterbalance romanticized communitarian generalizations about sport's potential to transcend class, gender, ethnic, religious and other divisions. Although there is robust evidence for this potential in the rural context, it should also be noted that social networks and status positions in sport generally tend to reproduce social divisions rather than contest or resist them. Not only is rural sport gendered (as is urban sport!), but the perceived centrality of football/netball clubs to the social and cultural fabric of rural communities in northwest Victoria can actually create social pressures to become involved in sporting activities. The data presented in this article confirms Gruneau and Whitsun's finding that 'visible minorities' are sometimes ostracized from social life in small towns because they do not become involved in sporting activities.⁵⁵ It is for this reason that some local residents argue that although 'sport is crucial to the community', facilities (e.g. for the arts) also need to be provided for those who are not interested in sport to enable them to access similar social networks and to prevent them from being socially excluded.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the data presented in this paper is that compared to bonding and bridging capital, opportunities for linking social capital in and through sport are relatively limited in northwest Victoria. Some representatives of local sport leagues have leveraged resources, ideas and information from institutions beyond the immediate community (e.g. regional sport organizations and health providers), and these resources can contribute to their personal stock of linking social capital and cultural capital. However, for the vast majority of sport participants, who do not occupy leadership roles within their clubs or leagues, linking opportunities are far more limited due in part to the wider economic and social changes discussed in this article, notably the decline of public and private services in the area. In the face of these changes, sport participants nevertheless view voluntary sport organisations, especially football/netball clubs, as vital community hubs fostering social cohesion, identity, and a shared focus and outlet.

Notes

¹ Coalter, Allison and Taylor, *The Role of Sport in Regenerating Deprived Areas*.

² E.g. Coalter, *The Social Benefits of Sport*; Long and Sanderson, 'The Social Benefits of Sport: Where is the Proof?'

³ Vinson, *Dropping off the Edge*; Alston, 'Social Exclusion'.

⁴ Collins and Kay, *Sport and Social Exclusion*, 194-216.

⁵ Coalter, 'Sport-in-Development', 62; cf. United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, *Sport as a Tool for Development and Peace*.

⁶ Tonts, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', 149.

⁷ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 485-87.

⁹ Hughson et al., *The Uses of Sport*, 63.

¹⁰ E.g. Eitzen, *Fair and Foul*; Coakley, *Sports in Society*.

¹¹ Gruneau and Whitsun, *Hockey Night in Canada*, 203.

¹² Bourke, 'Rural Communities.'

¹³ Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, *Inquiry into Country Football*, 50.

¹⁴ Portes, 'Social Capital', 6.

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- ¹⁵ E.g. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22-23; Woolcock, 'The Place of Social Capital.' The literature on social capital and its applications to sport and leisure have been reviewed elsewhere. E.g. Blackshaw and Long, 'What's the Big Idea?'
- ¹⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 23.
- ¹⁹ Hughson et al., *The Uses of Sport*, 68.
- ²⁰ DeFilippis, 'The Myth of Social Capital in Community Development', 800.
- ²¹ Woolcock, 'Social Capital and Economic Development', 13-14.
- ²² Woolcock, 'The Place of Social Capital.'
- ²³ Tonts, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', 143.
- ²⁴ Atherley, 'Sport, Localism and Social Capital', 355.
- ²⁵ Tonts, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', 144; see also Townsend et al., 'Playing their Part'.
- ²⁶ Cf. Dempsey, *Smalltown*, 60-62.
- ²⁷ Tonts, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', 147.
- ²⁸ Dempsey, *A Man's Town*, 52-58, 77-83.
- ²⁹ Tonts, 'Competitive Sport and Social Capital in Rural Australia', 149.
- ³⁰ Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² See Coleman's use of Max Gluckman's distinction between simplex and multiplex relations. Coleman, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', S108-09.
- ³³ Coalter et al., *The Role of Sport in Regenerating Deprived Areas*, 60.
- ³⁴ The total n is higher than the total number of interviews due to the existence of multiplex sporting relations. For example, some people participate in both netball and hockey clubs, while others are involved in both football and local business. These people have been included in all relevant categories.
- ³⁵ Excerpts from field notes, July 2008.
- ³⁶ Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, *Inquiry into Country Football*, 48. In most small towns in Australia, there exists a partnership between football and netball teams.
- ³⁷ E.g. Senyard, *Birchip*, 170.
- ³⁸ Kirk, *An Introduction to Donald*.

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- ³⁹ E.g. Cocklin and Dibden, *Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia*; Black et al., *Rural Communities and Rural Social Issues*.
- ⁴⁰ *The Age*, 31 August 2005; Data collated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- ⁴¹ McKenzie, 'Population Decline in Non-Metropolitan Australia.'
- ⁴² Black et al., *Rural Communities and Rural Social Issues*, 13; Lawrence, 'Globalisation, Agricultural Production Systems and Rural Restructuring.'
- ⁴³ Tonts, 'Government Policy and Rural Sustainability'; Alston, 'Gender Perspectives', 146-47.
- ⁴⁴ Budge, 'The Changing Dynamics of Small Towns', 56.
- ⁴⁵ Tonts, 'The Restructuring of Australia's Rural Communities', 52; see also Stayner, 'The Changing Economies of Rural Communities', 128.
- ⁴⁶ McManus and Pritchard, 'Introduction', 10.
- ⁴⁷ E.g. Kirk, *An Introduction to Donald*; Cf. Alston and Kent, *Social Impacts of Drought*.
- ⁴⁸ Budge, 'The Changing Dynamics of Small Towns', 56.
- ⁴⁹ McKenzie, 'Population Decline in Non-Metropolitan Australia.'
- ⁵⁰ Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, *Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities*. It should be noted that this development is by no means new.
- ⁵¹ Martin, 'The Study of Small Towns in Victoria Revisited', 63.
- ⁵² Atherley, 'Sport, Localism and Social Capital.'
- ⁵³ Alston, 'Gender Perspectives', 142-143; cf. Dempsey, *A Man's Town*.
- ⁵⁴ Driscoll and Wood, *Sporting Capital*, 77-78.
- ⁵⁵ Gruneau and Whitsun, *Hockey Night in Canada*, 203.

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