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# **Sports Volunteering on University-Led Outreach Projects: A Space for Developing Social Capital?**

## **Abstract**

The focus of this paper centres around an established universities sports-based outreach programme – The Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE) project – and explores how its core workforce, student volunteers, perceive that they develop effective working relationships with the project's 'hard to reach' clients. The SUNEE project represents an alliance between the region's five universities to tackle social exclusion, and promote and nurture social capital and civil responsibility through the vehicle of sport. This joined-up approach to sports development provides the region's student volunteers with vast opportunities to gain both experience and qualifications as sports coaches, mentors and leaders by working with a range of 'hard to reach' groups. To explore how the dynamics of the project influenced relationship statuses between SUNEES diverse participants, from the perspective of the student volunteers, this article draws upon Robert Putnam's notion of social capital to interpret the experiences of the study's percipients (n=40). Captured using semi-structured interviews, students indicate that over the course of their participation in the project, social capital served both exclusionary and integrative functions, yet as time elapsed, social capital was increasingly generated between SUNEE's diverse participants, playing a crucial role in bringing both volunteers and 'hard to reach' clients together.

## **Key Words**

Social capital, 'hard to reach', sports-based interventions, student volunteers

## **Introduction**

This article explores student volunteering on an established universities sports programme - The Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE) project – which operates across five universities (Durham, Northumbria, Newcastle, Sunderland and Teesside) in the UK. The programme has the broad remit of promoting social inclusion and nurturing social capital amongst a range of ‘hard to reach’ groups, such as homeless people, former offenders, those rehabilitating from drugs and substance misuse and school children from schools that are situated within areas that are thought to suffer social/economic deprivation. The programme aims to provide both the resources for sport and physical activity, and employability and skills training for these ‘hard to reach’ groups.

Extant literature indicates that volunteers in sport experience a range of positive outcomes from their participation in sport-for-development programmes, including growing their networks, building their social capital and becoming better integrated into their local communities (Burnett, 2006; Kay and Bradbury, 2009; Welty Peachey et al., 2013). Previous research has investigated how antecedents to social capital may be fostered and subsequently realised within community volunteering in sport-based outreach work (Welty Peachey et al., 2011) and in college service learning programmes that are tied into credit bearing university courses (Breuning et al., in press), but none to date have examined the interactions and relationships that influence and engender processes of social capital development during participation in student-led sports-based outreach volunteering. Indeed, Breuning et al. (in press) suggest that further research is required to examine how the structures and processes of university-led sport-for-development programmes and the varying cultural contexts in which they operate in, might facilitate social capital. Adding an extra dimension to this, Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) highlight that because students often hail from more privileged societal positions than those that are the perceived ‘beneficiaries’ of their voluntary work, these differences in social position can lead to tensions between the two groups – a facet of such intervention projects which is vastly under researched.

To this end, this paper analyses the interactions between the student volunteers and ‘hard to reach’ groups that come together on the SUNEE project, in order to generate a better understanding of how effective working relationships are cultivated between these two socially diverse groups. Robert Putnam’s conceptualisation of social capital is drawn on to frame this analysis.

## **Literature Review: Student Volunteering**

A growing global phenomenon, volunteering has been widely incorporated by universities in recent times (Simha et al., 2011; Gray, 2010; Rochester, 2006). Student

volunteers are defined as those 'who volunteer in their time in their local communities through programmes organised at/by their students' union or institution' (Student Volunteering England, 2004). In cross-cultural, cross-national studies, students have been reported to engage in volunteering activities for a multitude of complex and interrelated motives (Handy et al., 2010). This myriad of motivational orientations to volunteer include drivers such as: altruism; upholding religious values; a belief in social justice; for the social value and a desire to increase networks of relationships; egoism, and utilitarian or instrumental motives for which volunteering is seen as an opportunity to enhance one's human capital and employability (Brewis et al., 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010; Grönlund et al., 2008; Eley, 2001).

Exploring student volunteering further, there is a substantial body of literature that both theoretically and empirically indicates that individuals often volunteer in order to enhance their employment prospects post college/university and build a career. Recurring themes within this literature suggest that students often view volunteering as an 'investment' in their human capital, helping them to acquire and build skills which may be desirable in and transferable to potential workplaces (Handy et al., 2010: 503). Wuthnow (1998) adds that volunteering offers an opportunist approach to expanding students' social contacts and forging links with 'gate-keepers' which they may be able to capitalise on in future to access jobs or internships. Furthermore, and what has become a persuasive theory in the study of volunteer motivation is that students undertake such 'helping and giving' activities as a positive signal to employers (Handy et al., 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010).

Katz and Rosenborg (2005) found that in a highly competitive jobs market, volunteering serves as a signalling device through which an individual can indicate to a potential employer that they possess the desirable qualities and skills that help to present them as the candidate of choice. Handy et al. (2010) highlight that there is a widespread understanding that employers use a student's volunteering experience as a proxy that helps them screen applicants for desirable personality characteristics which are unobservable and difficult to gauge from an application form alone. Such invisible traits might include: incurring net costs for the benefit of the public good; displaying good organisational citizenship; leadership abilities and markers of productivity (Handy et al., 2010).

Where students perceive employers and educational institutions to use volunteerism as a proxy for desirable personality characteristics, they will be more likely to engage in volunteering activities to enhance their résumés (Hustinx et al., 2010). In line with this trending perception that participation in civic and voluntary activity is necessary for gaining access to the next educational or career stage, Friedlund and Morimoto (2005) argue that a culture of 'résumé padding' has become de rigueur, particularly in Western societies.

The number of student volunteers in the UK is high: in 2013, over 725,000 students volunteered an average of 44 hours in a variety of activities across the average 32 week taught term (Ellison and Kerr, 2014). Contributing £175 Million to the UK economy per year, this total of volunteers account for 31 per cent of all students in Higher Education; of this 725,000 students, 39 per cent were introduced to volunteering through their institution and 13% via their Student's Union (Ellison and Kerr, 2014). When comparing these current trends with the 42,000 students in 2004 that Student Volunteering England reported to be participating in voluntary initiatives organised through their higher education institution (HEI), student volunteering represents a growth industry.

Student volunteering in England dates back to the eighteenth-century and the formation of a number of university-based religious societies and has continued ever since (Brewis et al., 2010). Although a handful of universities and higher education colleges launched accredited service learning degree components for students in the 1980s, the 1990s marked a significant shift away from student-led community action towards more embedded models of community engagement and experiential learning that was to be typically brokered through university or students' union operators (Brewis et al., 2010). This was reinforced by the election of the New Labour government in 1997, championing the ideals of communitarianism and active citizenship (Macmillan and Townsend, 2006). Since 1997, considerable effort was placed on encouraging young people to volunteer (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). This stresses the role of Higher Education institutions in contributing to civil renewal by incorporating community-based experiential learning into academic programmes of study (Annette, 1999). The Dearing report into Higher Education (1997) had previously recommended that students receive wider experience of public work outside of university in order to develop a range of key skills that would to stand them in good stead in a competitive employment market as well as in life more broadly (Annette, 2005). Access to work-based placements or service learning and university-community partnership building was assisted with the introduction of the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) in 2002, a government funding stream which was financed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and which promoted a greater civic role for HEI's and their students (Annette, 2005; NCCPE, 2009). Indeed, HEFCE champions volunteering to pursue three key outcomes: to boost students' personal development and employability; develop university-community relations and help to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged sections of the community (HEFCE, 2005).

In this context, increasing government involvement has led to significant developments within the youth volunteering policy climate (Hill and Russell, 2009). For example, the Russell Commission, set up in 2004, yielded recommendations based on a nationwide consultation which was to strongly influence a national framework for youth

action and engagement (Russell, 2005). In 2005, the recommendations emanating from the Russell Commission's report 'A National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement', were to 'deliver a step change in the diversity, quality and quantity of young people's volunteering' and provide a framework which would concentrate voluntary efforts on community needs with a particular emphasis placed on the inclusion and skills development of under-represented and 'hard to reach' groups (Hill and Russell, 2009: 11). In 2006, this youth-led framework was put into action as management of the Millennium Volunteers Programme was handed over to the independent charity 'v' (the National Young Volunteers' Service) who rebranded it as 'vinvolved' and which aims to encourage young people in England between the ages of 16-25 to volunteer (Hill and Russell, 2009). The policy drive to encourage student volunteering meant its social significance grew.

## **Social Capital**

The concept of social capital will be utilised within this paper to better understand the ways in which working relationships were established and developed between student volunteers and the 'hard to reach' groups, and to illustrate how sports-based outreach projects such as SUNEE might facilitate social connectedness and bring socio-culturally diverse individuals together. Although, social capital has also been conceptualised and applied by a number of eminent scholars, namely Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, it is the political scientist, Robert Putnam's theorisation of it that has gained prominence in Western social policy discourse over the last two decades, chiefly in the UK and US (Field, 2008; Blackshaw and Long, 2005).

Broadly put, social capital refers to social networks that are predicated on established norms and precepts that result from active citizenship and which serve to promote community cohesion (Coalter, 2007). For Putnam (2000: 19), social capital in its simplest terms posits that 'social networks have value'. Social ties engender norms of trust and reciprocity which undergird civil society and enable people to cooperate and 'act together to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1996: 19). As such, reciprocity, generalised or specific<sup>1</sup>, is as a consequence of having social connections and networks (Skille, 2014). In these terms, a person's life and individual goals and objectives are made easier and more achievable when they are supported by and work in collaboration with 'thy neighbour'. Via reciprocal and obligatory social mechanisms, both the individual and society is fortified by

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<sup>1</sup> General reciprocity is to perform a service to someone without any expectation of receiving something in return; specific reciprocity is performing a service for someone in the expectation of having the favour repaid (Putnam, 2000).

such mutual civic and social cooperation. As a general rule of thumb, 'the more social capital that a community has, the better off that community is' (Skille, 2014: 342).

In 1995, Putnam produced the landmark study entitled 'Bowling Alone' which pointed to the erosion of American civic participation and social capital. Drawing on empirical data from a range of national surveys and records, Putnam was able to track civic attitudes and behaviours, and to his concern found that public voting activity was dropping, as was memberships to trade unions, religious associations and, in particular, voluntary organisations – when volunteering is understood to be one of the strongest indicators of social capital (Putnam, 1995: 2000). Putnam (1995) attributed the demise of active community participation to the rise in consumption of accessible leisure technologies, such as television and gaming, which outstripped cultural participation and led to increasingly privatised leisure lifestyles (Putnam, 2000). This retreat into social isolation was severely damaging to social capital according to Putnam (2000), and this was in no small part due to a weakening of institutions of primary socialisation, such as nuclear and extended family units in many, typically poor, communities. What is more, levels of public mistrust for the US government had risen from 30 to 75% in the 20 years spanning 1966-92 (Putnam, 1995). In Putnamian theory, trust – defined as 'the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and co-operative behaviour' – is the keystone of social capital, and a threat to social capital is a threat to the heart of civic society (Fukuyama, 1995: 26).

It is argued by Putnam that social networks rich in social capital can simultaneously offer 'a private good and a public good', meaning that systems of cooperation, civic responsibility and mutual obligation serve to strengthen both the community as a whole and also stand to benefit individual interests at the same time (2000: 20). By collaborating with others, individual reputations are cultivated enabling social connections to abound and a culture of generalised reciprocity and solidarity is grown (Putnam, 2000). By actively participating in the community in this way, and building social networks, confers an advantage on citizens which in turn expedites their membership into further groups or networks (Burnett, 2006). Oppositely, an inability to reach out to new or local networks can serve to debar an individual from important aspects of citizenship which promote social inclusion.

Political praxis for augmenting social capital aligns with neo-liberalist ideology and norms of communitarianism which stress that each individual has a responsibility and a moral obligation towards their community. The drive to empower communities to provide the contexts and sources of their own resources through active participation is reflective of government rhetoric towards a 'big society, small state', which aims to devolve state responsibility and instead harness the capacity of the voluntary sector, charities, social enterprises and 'the people' to play a more prominent role in the running of public services

and welfare provision (Hardill and Baines, 2011; Kisby, 2010). In keeping with current governmental austerity measures in the UK, social capital becomes a key tenet of political strategy where redistributive state welfare grows increasingly scant and which instead encourages self-responsibility and active community social support (HM Government, 2009; Kisby, 2010; Macmillan and Townsend, 2006). This is especially pertinent in the case of this article due to a heavy emphasis on voluntarism, as voluntary organisations have the potential to perform an important dual role by mediating between the state and market as well as serving as a catalyst, at least in theory, for active citizenship and social capital (Levitas, 2000; Milligan and Conradson, 2006; Houlihan, 2008).

Social capital as theorised by Putnam is not without its conceptual flaws. Despite its acclaim within centre-left political spheres, Putnam's application of social capital exalts the concept almost as a panacea for a myriad of society's many ills, and as such has received criticism for its structuralist-functionalist outlook and sanguine nature (Field, 2008). Somewhat romantically, Putnam's application of social capital is overly society-centred and underplays the role of the state, removing the role of the political system from debate and undermining the existence of a welfare state (Cohen, 1999). In overlooking policy and placing the onus for civic participation and democracy upon society, Putnam further silences the voices of those groups in society who continue to be excluded from 'membership' within the mainstream. This goes hand-in-hand with Putnam's measures of social capital. Putnam (1995; 2000) formed the basis of his arguments from empirical data gleaned from existing US national surveys and records of institutional and organisational membership. The methodological limitations are clear, as such research instruments were not designed specifically to measure social capital, and instead the concept of social capital has been, in Field's (2008) words, 'retro-fitted' from these existing measures. What is more, the adoption of such Positivist methodologies and quantitative data are used to generate a theory of 'community', yet they present a disconnect between the objective and subjective realities of people's everyday lives and experiences, further suppressing the individualised voices of the public, and of particular importance, those who are suffering poverty and experiencing long-term exclusion from the mainstream (Blackshaw and Long, 2005).

Furthermore, Putnam attaches a superiority to voluntary associations, indicating that they are the bedrock for a stable democracy and he is explicit in stating that volunteering is synonymous with civic engagement, as Siisiäinen (2000) suggests, Putnam ostensibly reduces civil society to the fabric of voluntary organisations that exist in the US. This has implications around the notion of trust. There is a 'dark side' to social capital which is acknowledged by Putnam (2000) and which is typically associated with bonding social capital: this side to social capital represents an inequitable and exclusionary aspect of the concept. Bonding social capital is underpinned by trust and refers to the close ties between



like-minded individuals (Putnam, 2000). Voluntary organisations, many of which in the UK and US are sports-based, are usually organised around common but narrow group interests (Shibli et al., 1999; Putnam, 2000; Harvey, Levesque and Donnelly, 2007; Doherty and Misener, 2008; Nichols et al., 2012). As a consequence, strong in-group trust foments high out-group distrust, with Putnam offering minimal redress to this problem which, and as Siisiäinen (2000) posits, endorses and sustains internal power structures and relations of domination.

Indeed, the demographic profile of volunteers in the field of sport is reported as being quite narrow and this observation may transcend into various fields of voluntarism (Doherty and Misener, 2008). As identified from the literature base, sports volunteers tend to be white, male, belong to one of the four highest socioeconomic classifications, hold or are studying towards a college/university degree and are in or on course for full-time employment (Doherty and Misener, 2008; Taylor et al., 2012). If, as the literature indicates, volunteering in the Western world is traditionally the preserve of such a homogenous and 'privileged' demographic group – which according to Putnam (2000) possesses the hallmarks for high levels of trust that operate within a rich network of social connections – then these dominant power relations serve those citizens who are able to participate in mainstream society, but they are likely to exist away from and/or exclude more marginalised and less well connected social groups. This 'taken for granted' privileging of certain social networks over others is poorly attended to by Putnam and he needs to do more in the recognition that, against his structural-functionalist outlook, there will be members of society that will become excluded as a consequence of various manifestations of social capital (Sztompka, 1999: 196). According to Kisby (2010), this not only reflects but reproduces the disproportionate mobilisation of volunteers in affluent communities compared to more socially and economically disadvantaged areas.

Saliently, Kisby (2010) highlights that communities comprised of individuals of higher socio-economic classes tend to be better connected with one another and possess greater stocks of social capital, and are therefore able to organise higher levels of volunteering and social action than poorer and less well-networked communities. Citizens in possession of high levels of human capital are likely to have more extensive social networks and more social ties thus increasing their exposure to information about volunteering opportunities and make them more prone to requests to volunteer (Strauß, 2008). Conversely, rates of volunteering amongst long-term unemployed people are consistently low (Strauß, 2008). This indicates that the work environment is a form of social integration, offering extensive social networks and memberships through which to spread information and encourage volunteering (Strauß, 2008). Kisby (2010) therefore presents a problem, highlighting an uneven distribution of resources, in this case volunteers, in less privileged communities. This

study investigates volunteering on a sport-based outreach project in which student volunteers – who would fall into the narrow demographic profile of a typical British volunteer – work with disadvantaged groups. As socio-historical trends suggest that these students, who possess archetypal volunteer characteristics, are the future mainstays of UK voluntary service clubs, university-led outreach projects like SUNEE may help to lay a platform for increased volunteering in disadvantaged communities by building social capital between the programme's diverse participants. In examining the mechanisms underpinning social capital, this study demonstrates how social connectedness is cultivated between volunteers and 'hard to reach' clients from diverse backgrounds.

### **The North East of England: Identity and Social Exclusion**

The North East was historically associated with traditional industries such as coalmining, shipbuilding, manufacturing, steel-building and heavy engineering which provided local economic security and social stability (Johnston et al., 2000; Nayak, 2006). Once a symbol of the 'Iron North' due to its shipbuilding heritage, the North East is home to the 'Geordie' public (Nayak, 2001: 15). As Nayak (2001) expounds, beyond the region the term 'Geordie' is geographically confined to people from the North East and is representative of people from Newcastle upon Tyne, the Tyne Valley, Northumberland, Wearside, South Tyneside, and Durham – although colloquially, and to natives of the North East, the term is reserved for those specifically from the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and supporters of Newcastle United Football Club. The term is however, synonymous with tough masculine identities and a strong work ethic and, as such, the term 'Geordie' refers to those white working class males who were born and raised in the North East and whom learned and plied their trade in traditional North East industries (Nayak, 2001).

However, the relative prosperity enjoyed in the region under these thriving industries was to change in the 1980s amidst a 'ruthless' New Right agenda which invested in business and deprioritised manufacturing, causing the gradual closure and downsizing of highly skilled manual jobs which underpinned a North East economy (Nayak, 2006). Today, as a region, the North East of England is characterised by relatively high unemployment, labour market inactivity and consequently, high levels of social and economic exclusion (Government Office for the North East, 2007). The North East has higher levels of unemployment than any other region in England, with five of its local authorities presenting an unemployment rate at 11 per cent, and eleven of its twelve local authorities comprising unemployment rates of above 9 per cent (MacInnes et al., 2013). Contributing to this has been the long-term decline of such traditional industries and manufacturing jobs that propped up once tight-knit communities in this region, and with them the erosion of many school-to-work apprenticeship and training schemes that enabled young people make the

transition into adult jobs (Nayak, 2001; Government Office for the North East, 2007).

Deindustrialisation and the decline of associated careers has given way to often low-paid and low-skilled service sector jobs in private sector activities such as retail, tourism and leisure (Nayak, 2006; MacInnes et al, 2013). In addition, full-time 'jobs for life' have been replaced by casual forms of work such as part-time, fixed term and zero hours contracts which are often below the minimum wage and offer little long-term security – and many of these roles are taken up by women, distancing men further from traditionally ascribed roles (Wilson and Power, 2000; Nayak, 2006; MacInnes et al., 2013). As a consequence, previously cultivated norms of 'breadwinner', toughness and traditional conjugal labour divisions that were inculcated and reproduced within such working-class communities, and that defined the male role, have since dissipated leaving once clear and accessible adult statuses out of reach (Johnston et al., 2000; Nayak, 2006). This long-term structural unemployment and subsequent breakdown of traditional patterns of work has led to a breakdown in communal and familial social infrastructures, removed educational and career aspirations from young people in disaffected communities and has inadvertently laid tracks into criminal, deviant and risk taking behaviour.

## **Methodology**

The SUNEE project ran from 2006 until 2012 and was a partnership between the non-academic sport departments of the five North East UK universities (Durham, Northumbria, Newcastle, Sunderland and Teesside universities). It aimed to promote social inclusion amongst a range of 'hard to reach' groups. As well as providing the contexts and resources for sport and physical activity, it is claimed that SUNEE blends these programmes with a raft of employability and skills training courses and workshops for its client groups (Universities for the North East, 2007). The project was principally financed by HEFCE but also supported by a range of other agencies including County Sports Partnerships, local authority sports development teams, Sport Coach UK, Sport England, National Governing Bodies and several specialized voluntary social service organizations. The project ended in 2012 when HEFCE ended its funding arrangement, after renewing its resourcing of the project beyond its initial five year period.

This research evolves from a doctoral project which assessed the impact of the SUNEE project on the different stakeholder groups involved in the intervention (Hayton, 2013). In this, the experiences of the undergraduate student body engaged in outreach activities were examined in order to develop an understanding of the integrative processes that they perceived to occur with the 'hard to reach' groups. The participants were student volunteers and data was gathered using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were

conducted between December 2008 and February 2010. As the SUNEE project was operational in each of the region's five universities, a strategy of cross-university sampling was adopted including a total of 40 students (eight per university). These participants ranged from 18 to 23 years of age and were spread across first, second and third years of undergraduate study. Fourteen of the interviewees were female, just five of the forty were private school-educated (the remaining 35 were state school educated) but having asked all participants to name their parents' profession, it is worth pointing out that 32 out of 40 originated from NS-SEC social class I (higher managerial and professional occupation), II (lower managerial and professional occupations) or III (intermediate white collar occupations). The remaining 8 were spread across NS-SEC positions 4-6. This stood in contrast to the demographic profile of the 'hard to reach' group, as SUNEE's data showed them to be of lower social classes

The initial step in the participant recruitment process involved meeting SUNEE's Regional Universities Sports Coordinator (SCO) to assist in identifying the local co-ordinators at the five HEIs. Contact was then established with these sport development officers (SDOs). The SDOs provided the dates and times that their sports programmes took place, revealing when I would be able to meet face-to-face with the student volunteers for the first time. The aim in this first contact-point was to become familiar with the regular volunteers, introduce the nature of the research and obtain the students' contact details. A follow-up email was then sent to those student volunteers the following morning with the correspondence requesting their potential availability for an interview. Those student volunteers who responded to my email were included in the sample. To protect respondents' rights to confidentiality, all were assigned pseudonyms, with their universities labelled 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D' and 'E'. The data elicited from the interviews was analysed using coding schemes operated through NVivo 8 software. Codes were drawn by exploring the transcripts to find data that connected to mechanisms and typologies of social capital as theorised by Putnam (1995, 2000). It is important to point out that no attrition rate was tracked for the student volunteers on the project, yet all the respondents that participated in this study continued working on the SUNEE project at least for the duration of the research.

## **Findings**

### **Early volunteer encounters *the 'hard to reach' groups and detrimental bonding social capital***

In the early stages of their involvement in the SUNEE project, student volunteers found it difficult to approach and interact with the 'hard to reach' groups and generally reported

negative feelings following their initial meetings with the clients. In fact, just three volunteers stated that developed an immediate rapport with the 'hard to reach' clients and many held negative preconceptions of them – for instance, five student volunteers independently reported their expectation that the 'hard to reach' would be aggressive and one, Joey, perceived them to be 'lazy'. Indeed, Joey linked social exclusion to joblessness and posited that clients may have been unemployed out of personal choice stating:

Before I started my perception before I started was that I linked social exclusion with people like deliberately not having a job and like just being layabouts and stuff.

Joey, University A

In addition, five student volunteers admitted that they were fearful of entering the project once they had heard which types of client groups they would be working with (i.e. ex-offenders and former substance misusers), associating them with violent behaviour and expressing a concern for their own safety. Similarly, Stuart intimates his surprise at receiving a more hospitable welcome than he was expecting from the client groups and describes them as 'canny' (meaning 'good'):

It was sort of a lot different from what I was expecting. I was expecting them to be a lot more aggressive than that, but they were quite... they were pretty canny with us, to be fair, but throughout the weeks and the months that I've been coaching them, the rapport has built and I'm getting more and more close to the clients.

Stuart, University C

The majority of participants reported that in the early stages of a new programme or when working with a new client intake, student volunteers and 'hard to reach' clients 'did not mix' (Craig, University E). Many student volunteers reported experiencing client behaviour which served to socially exclude or emphasise these divisions between themselves/colleagues and the 'hard to reach' groups, with interviewees suggesting that the client groups appeared to be wary and standoffish of the student volunteers:

There was a big, actually, there's a big divide in that they like stick to their shelter<sup>2</sup>, so it was one group versus us, and that was very apparent.

Vicki, University E

In further analysis of the initial difficulty students reported experiencing in attempting to integrate with the client groups, Joey's comments below highlight that social capital, in Putnam's (2000) terms, is active and is actually proving inhibitory to the building of

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'shelter' refers to the temporary accommodation certain client groups are associated with.

relationships between the two diverse groups rather than facilitatory. For Putnam (1996; 2000), social capital can be the result of social networks and the benefits that can be secured through them. Putnam (2000: 22) distinguishes between two principal forms of social capital: 'bridging' and 'bonding'. Bridging capital reflects the inclusive facet of social capital; it is outward looking and helps to foster connections between diverse social groups (Putnam, 2000; Field, 2008; Welty Peachey et al., 2011). On the other hand, bonding social capital emphasises group solidarity, it is inward looking and exclusive, reflecting the ties between homogenous and like-minded people (Putnam, 2000; Spaaij, 2009a). However, Putnam (2000) suggests that a 'dark side' of bonding social capital, where insular attitudes and strong in-group identification can provoke exclusionary practices towards diverse groups or individuals, may exist, consequently deterring 'outsiders' from engaging with these established and closed off groupings. In the following example, Joey was recorded as perceiving that this existed between members of the 'hard to reach' groups early on in his time volunteering:

I personally feel for myself that when I first started there was... It's not suspicion, but they treat you like maybe as an outsider. Oh, it's a student. But in terms of values, one thing that I'm impressed with is, they're really loyal to each other. Like, if they're from a certain area... they're really loyal to each other, and that's something you don't, you don't see really.

There's definitely some cliques within the group. There's a group from Town A, and there's a group from Town B, and when I say they're loyal to each other within those groups they're loyal, and it's really quite competitive within the two towns or the two teams.

Joey, University A

Joey refers to himself as an 'outsider' and describes the cliques that he thought existed in the early stages of the programme. As an indicator of bonding social capital, Joey's repetition of the word 'loyalty' amongst the 'hard to reach' factions illustrates the tight bonds shared between familiar and like-minded clients. These tight bonds demonstrate the in-group loyalty held by the 'hard to reach' clients and how such ties elicit 'strong out-group antagonism and social exclusiveness' (Spaaij, 2009b: 1134). The inward looking nature of these distinct groupings reflects the 'dark side' of bonding social capital which Putnam (2000) warns of, and provides an understanding of the early bedding-in problems encountered by student volunteers. Interestingly, many of the students that were interviewed implied that the early lack of integration between themselves and the 'hard to reach' groups was their 'fault':

When they [hard to reach communities] come here, they come here with this preconceived notion that it's, it's them against everybody else. And if it's not them personally, it's their own small little group from whatever community they come from.

Craig, University E

A lot of them seem to come from backgrounds where they don't want to interact with anyone that's not in their core group of mates or whatever. . . They don't, they wouldn't respect anybody really outside their group so basically they don't want to change that.

Scott, University C

In the examples above, Craig and Scott are critical of clients' lack of sociability and desire to mix with new and diverse people. This lack of accountability on behalf of the student volunteers is perhaps manifested through their prior fears and misconceptions (as illustrated in Table 1) of the client groups due to the labels and stigmas that had preceded them. Below, Nile follows the same pattern by placing the onus for the divide on the 'hard to reach' groups; on closer analysis however, there emerges a tacit acknowledgment that the clients might have held their own anxieties about entering the project:

When you first come in they're a bit wary, thinking, who's this? That they're not used to seeing you in all, in a social group with each other. A lot of them... associate several days of the week with each other, people in a similar position to them so they're quite in a comfort zone, so to speak, so when you come in out of university, they're a bit wary, a bit quiet.

Nile, University D

Here, Nile suggests that the 'hard to reach' clients might also enter the project with some trepidation and feel more comfortable with people in a 'similar position' to themselves and that this makes them feel safe. Based on this account, it would seem reasonable to suggest that the clients' emotional and perceptual responses to entering the project were not too dissimilar to those experienced by the student volunteers and may, in part, help to explain their reluctance to break away from those 'like' themselves and approach the student volunteers. Beyond this, a number of locally born volunteers who detected feelings of animosity and resentment towards some students who were not originally from the local area by certain members of the 'hard to reach' groups, sentiments which manifested themselves in anti-social and exclusionary behaviour by clients:

At the last match day<sup>3</sup> there was quite a few students from University C who did have quite a posh accent and the lads [hard to reach groups] were taking the Mickey out of them. It's a lot of jealousy, like, them students have had a really good upbringing whereas our lads haven't, so there's a bit of resentment there.

Alison, University D

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<sup>3</sup> A match day is an inter-project/university sports tournament where clients attached to each of the five regional institutions compete against each other.

The accounts reported by participants of their early exchanges and experiences of and with the client groups only provides the student perspective and are not necessarily accurate representations of how the project dynamics were played out at the outset, however the language used does give an indication of the divide between the volunteers and the 'hard to reach' groups. Indeed, perhaps the slow pace of integration in the early stages was down to both sets of individuals. Putnam (2000) might attribute this initial reticence to interact to a deficiency of bridging social capital – the drive and ability to acquire new information, resources and connections – possessed by either the student volunteers and/or the client groups. Furthermore, and as discussed above, intra-group bonding social capital amongst the 'hard to reach' and separately, between the student volunteers, insulated both groups from acts of parley and consociation. The SUNEE project might invite convergences of two groups of people – 'posh' students and 'lower class' 'hard to reach' groups – yet, and as Persson (2008) notes, the socio-cultural differences between the groups may be accentuated as a consequence, meaning that bridging capital does not develop.

## **Overcoming Challenges, Developing Relationships**

After six weeks, these feelings and perceptions had changed – there was some evidence that the groups had 'bridged'. The emotions that the majority of student volunteers reported feeling towards the 'hard to reach' groups after six or more weeks of participating in the project sharply contrast with those recalled from their first meeting with the clients. Students' attitudes, experiences and perceptions of and with the 'hard to reach' groups began to change, leading to a more cohesive and unified group as a whole:

The fact that with these sort of ones you don't expect them to basically let you into their lives but obviously in such a short time whenever you're like playing football they'll actually let you in. Like some of them have let you into like their past basically and told you what they've done and what they've been ashamed of basically and why they wouldn't do it again. So, in a way, it's probably just the trust, them being able to trust you is something I've got to take out of this the most because obviously I couldn't, I didn't expect, it's one thing I didn't really expect to get much of whenever I first started this programme, in such a short period of time.

Scott, University C

Framed in a temporal context, Scott comments above that he was surprised by the level of trust he came to establish with the client groups, particularly when considering the initial reception he had experienced from them when entering the project. For Putnam (2000), trust is a key tenet of social capital and is essential to the social organization and effective coordination of collectives. Trust implies a confidence in the honesty, integrity and mutual cooperation of others and it comes about when shared norms and values are established



and propagated along burgeoning social networks (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). To emphasise the strength of trust developed between student volunteers, Mike and Nile, who had both been volunteering on the project for over a year, describe their relationships with the 'hard to reach' groups, below:

I found that their trust and respect comes quite quickly, when you're working with older individuals, it took me maybe three to four weeks just to get their trust and respect, and it's, now they see me as one of their friends and they can trust me with knowledge and information.

Mike, University D

We act on a family level... all of them are family, to be honest.

Nile, University D

In the examples above, Mike speaks of his friendship with the 'hard to reach' clients whereas Nile goes as far as referring to them as 'family'. Mike implies that the strength of his relationship with the clients is parallel to the level of trust and respect he has cultivated with those individuals. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between 'thick' and 'thin' trust, and these two forms are more simply understood in relation to the dynamics of bonding and bridging social capital. Thick trust reflects tight-knit personal relations whereas Putnam (2000) suggests that thin trust is more useful to a cohesive society as it extends the radius for social connectedness beyond the parochial represents the more generalised trust and reciprocity that 'lubricate' community systems. Both Mike and Nile infer that the rapport that they have with the client groups undergirds the effectiveness of their working relationship and as Tonkiss (2004) expounds, friendship is the strongest indicator of trust and cooperation between social relations.

Moreover, many of the student volunteers, particularly those who were native to the North East, suggested that they were able to obtain social acceptance from the 'hard to reach' clients through familiarity and then acknowledging commonality. A network of bridged social capital had been formed. In the six weeks, students on the SUNEE project showed signs of adapting the embodied states of both student volunteers and clients alike by subtly manipulating modes of thinking, personal characteristics, manners and so on. The following passages highlight how client recognition of familiar and similar embodied traits of a number of local student volunteers facilitated the development of a rapport between the two groups:

They're normally all right [with me], obviously, because I'm, like... I'm local, and I've got a bit of a Geordie<sup>4</sup> accent and stuff. Obviously, they took very well to me. Like, one of the other lads, Aaron, he's from the North West, so he's got a different accent, and he gets a bit of lip... he gets a bit of grief off them sometimes. . . . So, um, yes, I mean... because pretty much all of them are... they've all got a passion for sport, and, obviously, I love my sport. I study a sport degree, I did all sport at college. Um, I've only ever worked in sport and leisure, and so I absolutely love it, and, obviously... especially the Street League, all the lads want to do is play football. And they're all a group of lads and they all support City B, and I'm a Geordie lad, so I happen to share that with them, and we can always have a laugh about it and stuff.

Stuart, University C

I think, maybe being from up here, I had things in common with them such as sport, knowing the local town, we all support the same football team, they all have an interest in sport. Normally I'd have discussions about what was on Sky Sports News, a bit of interaction there, and just social aspects, we'd normally have discussions about social aspects and having a general laugh, I think that gets you that trust, he seems all right, he's like one of us.

Mike, University D

Stuart and Mike capture this 'commonality' and the integrative potential it holds for socialisation between the two groups. Stuart refers to characteristics such as being from the local area, having a local accent, supporting local teams and sharing interests and knowledge of sports-related topics as an effective means of establishing relationships with new and diverse individuals. The passages above also reflect a shift in the language used by many interviewees when referring to the 'hard to reach' groups, using the personal pronouns 'we' and 'us' instead of 'them' as they begin to take on a group identity. In light of the evidence cited above, the SUNEE project provides an environment where 'hard to reach' clients and student volunteers can explore and discover a variety of sports and social related themes in which they have a common interest or to which they share similar traits which may draw them closer to each other, fostering interaction and reciprocal exchanges in skills and information. As a result, student volunteers perceived themselves as having become part of a common network with the 'hard to reach' group. Persson (2008) supports such a trend, iterating that the procurement of capital and linking of individuals represents a return on the investment of effort and persistence by an actor in a project.

Sports-based outreach programmes such as the SUNEE project open up a multitude of further opportunities, physical or dialogical, to facilitate social learning and integration as well as the subsequent shifts in capital. 'Accent', 'knowing the local town', 'support local clubs', and being a 'Geordie' aided the student volunteers bridging with the clients. On the other hand, Putnam's notion of the 'dark side' of social capital continued to persist for

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<sup>4</sup> A 'Geordie' is a person born and raised in the North East of England, yet who is more locally associated with being a native of Newcastle upon Tyne.

volunteers who did not share familiar characteristics and traits with the client groups – they continued to bond between themselves but not bridge like the local volunteers - thus continuing their exclusion from the group, perpetuating feelings of anxiety and leading to their own disengagement from the programme. Stuart's comments offer an indication of this possibility as he states that students considered non-local are teased and tormented by clients more than and for longer than volunteers originally from the region. What is more, and predicated on this evidence, there is an argument to say that social division and enmity might not be a class issue, or based on having a university education or not, but based upon 'being from' the same place.

However, some volunteers who hailed from outside the North East implied that they were able to gradually bridge into the group, even if this happened through processes of assimilation into the norms values and precepts of the client groups. Tom, for example, and who was not from the region, describes of having to learn 'how' to speak to the clients in a manner in which they would be receptive to, and once he had developed a working 'grasp' of how to achieve this then the members of the 'hard to reach' groups were more responsive to him:

Once I'd kind of got the grasp of how to speak to them, I found generally that they were really, really good and they responded really well. I think it's just learning by personal experience, learning how to use it, how to, what words to use and just even the language kind of thing, just what to use and what to say to them.

Tom, University C

Tom's initial difficulty in forging relationships with the clients may have stemmed from a deficiency of certain attributes, traits or values forms of capital which the 'hard to reach' groups were amenable to. It can be postulated that the 'hard to reach' clients did not recognise or value the yield of capital brought to the programme by Tom and his fellow student volunteers and instead felt opposed or threatened by it. However, over varying periods of time, and depending on student and type of client group, the volunteers indicated that they gradually gained recognition and acceptance from the majority of the clients that they were working with on their given programmes, to the point that many student volunteers felt that they had built solid working relationships and even friendships with many clients. Tom's reflections demonstrate that the recognition of skills, assets and resources that the student volunteers could offer the clients underpinned the development of these relationships.

As a trend across the interviews demonstrated that a shift occurs in which the clients recognise the uses and opportunities that the student volunteers can appropriate them with. It is at this point when 'they', the clients seek help from the students that the volunteers begin to feel accepted by the 'hard to reach' groups and the dynamics between them begin

to shift. The passages below illustrate that students are aware that members of the client groups have identified them as 'gatekeepers' to desirable information and qualifications:

There's a couple of guys there who basically when they first showed up obviously had... they seemed like not really... well they just showed up and played football, basically. But then after we got talking to them week after week they wanted, they came to us about qualifications, basically, about doing their level one football (qualification). And basically one of them came and got talking with Peter, then Peter, said, well, I'll tell you what, I'll observe you basically, look at your behaviour and then we'll see how it goes and then maybe I'll put you through it, maybe. And then obviously he shaped up. His manners was brilliant, everything. And then Peter, obviously put him through his level one.

Scott, University C

Volunteers such as Scott perceive that they are able to establish 'credit' amongst the 'hard to reach' groups because they come to be valued as 'gatekeepers' to qualifications, skills and developmental services. This sentiment is further backed up by Dominic (below) who felt he was able to establish relationships with a number of clients that were undertaking coaching qualifications in an area in which he possesses significant expertise, as they hoped to mine subject specific knowledge from him:

I'm a qualified referee and I referee them [the clients] in the tournaments. Some of the lads [clients] are on the refereeing courses so they'll always be coming and asking me questions about it and about why I made certain decisions... So they definitely look up to you. They see you as someone who can help them out.

Dominic, University A

Dominic states that the client groups see him as someone who can help them, inferring that he can help them learn as developing referees and assist them with passing their formal courses. Dominic (like Scott and Peter) accumulated an implicit debt or sense of obligation in the client groups through providing assistance and help which is given freely and absent of vested interest, but which can be later used to their own (volunteers) advantage. The benefit to the student volunteers in this instance is that in return for the information and support that they provide to the client groups over time, they come to receive, as repayment, a sense of gratitude and respect from the clients which translates into compliance and effective working relationships and derives from the moral and social pressures created out of the original symbolic exchanges between the diverse groups. Simply put, student volunteers are able to garner social acceptance from the client groups, but it comes when 'they' ask for help. Such opportunism on the behalf of the clients indicates that they were attempting to 'bridge out' and seek out means of developing their knowledge-base and skill-sets, and this could suggest a precursor to self-endorsed social inclusion. This might not come as a surprise to Putnam (2000), who states that frequent interaction between diverse

sets of people tends to initiate mutual cooperation for mutual benefit. In this particular case, the emergent generalized reciprocity occurring between student volunteers and the clients binds them to a mutual obligation which drives collaboration and provides a foundation for trust from which a reported sense of camaraderie and belonging springs (Putnam, 2000).

Remaining on a similar track, there is general concurrence amongst the experiences and perceptions of the student volunteers that as soon as they feel like they are helping the client groups in some fashion, that they are simultaneously making a breakthrough in terms of rapport and relationship building. To illustrate this, below, Alison infers that she and fellow volunteer, Abby, are imposing a stream of social learning cues upon the clients who assimilate to the student codes of behaviour by learning how to interact appropriately with people based on the conduct of the student volunteers:

I think when they see how we get on with each other, me and Jess, then that does sort of, rub off on them and it does make them act positive towards you and have more respect for each other and I think when they're, like, working with us, it is giving them respect for different people, like, they might have never met before. . . and I think they've had to change because obviously two women involved which they've never had that before, so I think they have had to change, like, and I feel that the lads, come on lads, there's girls here, watch your language, and then the older lads will tell them, all right, there's girls around and stuff and even when they're cracking a joke, some of them, some are really rude. Not what you want to hear but then they realise we're there and they're, like, sorry, I totally forgot. But I think it's probably because they're not around, never been around females like this before... After the first couple of weeks, you find they are really nice people and they're so easy to get along with, and they're no different. They're probably a lot nicer than people who go to university... Because they're not stuck up, and you and just have a good laugh with them, like.

Alison, University D

As a consequence, in a scenario which Alison perceives to be unfamiliar to this predominantly male group, a recognition and respect is garnered which helps engender a social connectedness and mutual understanding between the clients and student volunteers. In this example, Alison believes that she is making a genuine difference and helping clients in this way facilitates the emergence of bridges between these two socially diverse groups.

## **Conclusion**

The SUNEE project provides a platform in which university students and 'hard to reach' groups are able to transcend mainstream social distances and perceived differences to cooperate and work together within a sports-based setting. Analysis of the students' experiences whilst participating on the project demonstrates that, in time, the development of close working relationships made for a more effective project and a more emotionally satisfying venture for the volunteers.

Many student volunteers entered the project with a degree of uncertainty and trepidation, and their early experiences were generally not easy ones as their presence was largely met with animosity and suspicion – an atmosphere which made many student volunteers feel uneasy or even afraid. Volunteers also reported feeling like outsiders as clients appeared reluctant to stray from their cliques and cooperate with students. However, interviewees indicated that they were able to gradually overcome these initial barriers, suggesting that recognition of their skills and assets by the clients served to confer upon them a higher status amongst many of the ‘hard to reach’ groups. Students claimed that some clients might have perceived the student coaches as valuable developmental agents or gatekeepers to desirable opportunities such as sports and exercise-based accreditation courses and qualifications. Such recognition of the leadership and coaching abilities of the student volunteers seemingly provided the basis for the engendering of trust and friendship between the two diverse groups, relationships which helped to subvert earlier instances of aggression and hostility meted out by certain clients. As the students grew increasingly embedded within their programme streams there was consensus amongst the interviewees that the ‘hard to reach’ groups began to treat them as ordinary people, and they themselves did not set themselves apart from the clients. In parallel to this relationship of trust, respect and friendship fostered between the volunteers and clients, the majority of students interviewed declared that their self-confidence as coaches and as people had grown considerably, as had their ability to communicate and relate to the ‘hard to reach’ groups.

Although this article does not seek to evaluate the broad goals for social inclusion and employability that sport-based interventions such as SUNEE pursue for its ‘hard to reach’ clients, it does provide an important insight into the experience of such programmes from the perspective of the volunteers who help to sustain them. Indeed, this study demonstrates how positive relationships are developed between two diverse social groups on a university-led sports-based outreach project, and how these relationships are conducive to a more effective working environment which provides students with rich social learning experiences along their journey as volunteers.

The outcomes of this research and the dynamics of the SUNEE project are generally reported to be positive on the behalf of the student volunteers, individuals whom are to be located at higher and more privileged positions in the social structure than their ‘hard to reach’ counterparts. It is reasonable to suggest that the social benefits accrued by the student volunteers are likely to fortify and enhance their resources and networks both internally and externally from the programme via their volunteer peers, project partners, potential employers and of course, the clients. But what of the clients? They may have new ‘friends’, but are their social and economic resources, and external networks stronger and broader? Of course, this paper reports only the interactions and relationships that occurred

on the SUNEE project from the perspective of the student volunteers, and that is a clear limitation of this research, but have the 'hard to reach' gained tangible resources to facilitate their upward mobility and propel themselves into mainstream society? This is a critical question because individuals and groups who are resource poor on an economic and an educational level, and who have come to depend on external provision, are likely to continue to have few assets that are neither desirable nor usable beyond their social locale. Portes and Landolt (2000) elaborate by stressing that social capital is not a substitute for the provision of economic resources and a good education. Sport does not confer social capital, it is instead determined by virtue of the social organisation of society (Coalter, 2013). Essentially, as Unger (2006) expounds, the limiting factors for social mobility are that in poor areas resources are so scant, and social groups so insular, that poverty is at the root of social inertia. From this perspective, Coalter (2013) has argued that engrained social and economic inequality prevents social mobility. However, Coalter (2013) also indicates that if collectively-minded, yet insular and closed-off groups, as initially characterised by sections of the 'hard to reach' clientele on the SUNEE project, are held together by bonds which are just weak enough to permit for bridging social capital – given the appropriate contexts and resources - then those individuals would have greater access to and be more susceptible to wider networks, opportunities and stocks of capital. From this study, it could be postulated that clients from disparate locations and backgrounds possessed a degree of bonding social capital through commonality, but a lack of previously established relationships and/or unfamiliarity with the SUNEE environment meant such homophilic ties were vulnerable enough to enable student volunteers to gradually develop a rapport with the 'hard to reach' groups. That set-ups akin to SUNEE might optimise bonded capital to the point where they facilitate bridging capital between diverse social groups over a sustained period of time, and the potential programme retention effect that this combination might encourage, warrants further investigation.

To return to Kisby's (2010) concerns that because the more affluent communities consist of individuals who tend to be well educated and well connected, they are generally better socially and economically positioned to participate in and benefit from volunteering and reciprocal prosocial exchanges, the more disadvantaged locales with greater numbers of 'hard to reach' cases, have less social capital and less capability with which to mobilise a local volunteer workforce to support sporting provision as well as a range of other forms of welfare services. A further and often intractable problem associated with established voluntary organisations that are composed of volunteers who conform to the homogenous demographic profile outlined above, is that they have been purported to operate via dominant networks of relations and possess internal structures of power and democracy (Siisiäinen, 2000). Within these clubs and organisations, particularly those that are long-

running and well-established, bonding social capital can be too strong to the point that insular and antagonistic attitudes are engendered towards 'outsiders' which subsequently serves to deter or exclude new or potential volunteers who are 'unlike' themselves (Putnam, 2000; Coalter, 2007; Brown, 2008; Crossley, 2008; Nichols et al., 2012). However, evidence from the current study suggests that sports-based outreach projects akin to SUNEE, and that rely on the efforts of students, might help to bridge a volunteer gap in disadvantaged communities. To this end, the relationships established between students and the 'hard to reach' clients, combined with a raised awareness of the need for and a commitment to social justice of these volunteers, may offer a platform not only for increased volunteering in poorer areas of society, but also provide a conduit for the transmission of information and skills which can support the development of social capital and promotion of social inclusion in these communities.

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