

Sport Participation and Community Capacity Building in Disadvantaged Urban Communities

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The aim of this study was to investigate the relationships between sport and community by examining the role played by sports participation in community engagement and community capacity building in disadvantaged urban communities. From a conceptual standpoint, the study is based on the sociological theory of the community and Community Capacity Building (CCB) theory, which provide overviews of the concept of community and community capacity and its characteristics. Four disadvantaged urban communities were investigated. Two of these communities had sports programs, while the other two did not. The online questionnaire methodology was adopted to assess the socio-demographic characteristics and community engagement of the participants (knowledge of programs and participation in community activities), and subsequently, an analysis of the online social media narratives of the community members themselves was developed to measure the characteristics of their community capacity building. We found that community engagement and community capacity values were higher in the communities with sports programs. These findings are promising and suggest that approaches based on sports participation development could be fruitful, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Keywords: community engagement, community capacity building, sport, disadvantaged community, online narratives

Bullet Points

- (1) We know that community engagement contributes to the well-being of community members.
We found that sport fosters community engagement and hence the well-being of community members.
- (2) We know that some socio-demographic characteristics of community members hinder their engagement in the community.
We found that sport helps to reduce some socio-demographic barriers to community engagement.
- (3) We know that participation in sports fosters community capacity.
We found that sports participation contributes to community capacity building in disadvantaged communities.

Introduction

Within the traditional sociological discourse on community, Tönnies (1887) and Durkheim (1893) adopted a model of social development from community to society, where the former is based on kinship ties and

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mutual loyalty, while the latter is based on organic solidarity and the division of social labor. Simmel's (1890) reflections heralded a transformed scenario. In modern times, solidarity is increasingly actualized in a 'disaggregated' form, reflecting the new profile of our societies; reciprocity, previously 'constrained' within the ascriptive ties between members, now rests on voluntary membership, social ties acquired through good practices and the construction of differentiated social portfolios.

In most attempts to define community capacity building, the underlying concept of community seems to have been maintained within the traditional sociological definition. Indeed, it refers to a definable, homogeneous group or social unit with some kind of affiliation (geographical, social/institutional, and psychological), operating with external agents that provide support. The problem with this conception is the 'romanticized' way in which the term community tends to be used: "The community ceases to be a subject (a group of people acting with their own intent), and becomes an object (community as a target of health programs)" (Labonte, 1997, p. 83). According to Labonte and Laverack (2001), community capacity can instead be more adequately defined as a descriptor of "social and organizational relationships [...] with dynamic qualities rather than static properties" (p. 112).

As regards online communities, Wellman et al. (2000) had written extensively on 'distributed communities' as social networks that exist on the basis of shared interests or experiences, showing that communities continue to share values and meanings regardless of boundaries. A common identity and participation become relevant, and are expressed in a sense of belonging, systems of common symbols, shared values, mutual influence and trust, recognized needs and a commitment to meet those needs (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

Our investigation adopted a concept of community as a set of dynamic qualities (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001), symbolic meanings (Cohen, 1985), and social bonds (Chiu, 2008; Walter & Hyde, 2012). Community capacity was defined as a framework for action, interaction and mediation. The level of analysis included an individual orientation referring to concepts such as social identity, personal network, and sense of community (Wendel et al., 2009). In the present study, community capacity was seen mainly as a set of action and resource systems that can be measured on an individual basis and then aggregated to approximate a phenomenon at the community level.

Sports participation has been linked to increased social connectedness (Putnam, 2000; Hoye, Nicholson, & Brown, 2015; Wray et al., 2020), reduced engagement in risky behaviors (Patel & Luckstead, 2000; Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000; Kulig, Brener, & McManus, 2003), and improved mental health (McHale et al., 2005; Babiss & Gangwisch, 2009). Sport has been widely used as a tool for social outreach, intervention, and prevention among populations considered 'at risk' for a host of physical, mental, and social problems (Hartmann, 2003; Fernández-Gavira, Huete-García, & Velez-Colón, 2017). Thus, some studies have focused on the capacity of community to increase engagement in sport in disadvantaged communities (Marlier, Cardon, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Willem, 2014; Marlier et al., 2015).

Community sports programs have been shown to have both individual and social benefits, such as youth development (Donnelly, Darnell, Wells, & Coakley, 2007; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Svensson, & Misener, 2020), social integration (Ekholm, 2019) and community cohesion (Misener & Doherty, 2012). According to Edwards (2015), sport has been shown to be effective in building local skills, knowledge, and resources; increasing social cohesion; fostering structures and mechanisms for community dialogue and encouraging civic engagement.

The ‘sport for development’ (SFD) model has been seen as a tool to develop community capacity, which is considered a fundamental mechanism for supporting and promoting community-level health and well-being (Lawson, 2005; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Spaaij, Schlenker, Jeanes, & Oxford, 2018). However, to date, few approaches have attempted to understand the potential role of sport as a mechanism for community capacity building in disadvantaged urban communities. The present study seeks to extend the current body of knowledge by examining the effectiveness of sport in contributing to community engagement and the process of community capacity building by focusing on several disadvantaged urban communities.

Methodology

We investigated the relationship between sports participation and community engagement and capacity building in individuals at high risk of social deprivation in four disadvantaged urban communities. Two of these communities had sports programs, while the other two did not. Our aim was to understand if the communities’ sports programs helped individuals to overcome barriers in order to build community capacity and attain well-being.

The aims of the study were:

(1) to investigate whether the programs and activities of the communities actually involved the identified individuals to verify the presence of any barriers to or facilitators of community engagement related to socio-demographic variables;

(2) to examine differences in community capacity building between participants in the communities with sports programs and those residing in the communities without such programs.

The four disadvantaged urban communities were selected on the basis of their similar socio-demographic and environmental characteristics: two of the communities had sports participation programs (program communities), while the other two offered no such programs (control communities). The study was conducted in the Marche region, in Italy. The data were collected in March 2021. A total of 20 adults between the ages of 18 and 45 were randomly selected from each community from a list provided by the local municipalities. Participants were contacted online and asked to fill out a questionnaire which provided data on their socio-demographic characteristics and community engagement. Of the 80 subjects selected, 72 adults participated in the study.

Eligible communities had the following characteristics:

- urban;
- medium-sized (about 300 residents);
- socially disadvantaged (characterized by a high percentage of immigrants, comprising over 80% of the residents, low income, below the national poverty line, and a high unemployment rate, above the national rate);
- having members who were active on the Facebook social platform.

The investigation was conducted on two levels: one related to the socio-demographic characteristics and community engagement of the participants, and the other to their community capacity building.

Due to the restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the virus during the Covid-19 pandemic, the first level of the investigation was carried out employing an online questionnaire, while the second level consisted in the analysis of online contents and network traffic of members of the urban communities on the Facebook social platform during a period of two weeks (from 15 to 30 March, 2021).

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first section collected personal data (gender, age, education, country of origin) and the second section aimed to gauge the community engagement of the

members of the urban communities by assessing their knowledge of the programs and their adherence to the activities. Community engagement was determined by asking participants to indicate the community activities in which they participated and the duration of their participation measured in hours per week. An index of community engagement was calculated by summing the number of hours of participation in the various activities over the two-week period.

The analysis of the questionnaire data was carried out in two stages: a first phase consisting of frequency analysis to assess the distribution of the response modalities and describe the characteristics of the respondents, and a second phase consisting of the identification of the relationships between the variables to evaluate the differences in community engagement of subjects based on gender, age, education and country of origin.

The second level of the investigation, related to the detection and measurement of community capacity, was carried out by analyzing the externalizations (narratives) and the online production of the members of the four urban communities in shared groups on Facebook. The analysis of the online activities and content posted by the participants was used to measure their community capacity in relation to participation, trust, connectivity and social support. These characteristics constituted the semantic areas used to frame the observation of online activities and the gathering of information on community capacity building.

An analysis of network activities and contents was carried out by evaluating the presence/absence of elements to be attributed to the indicators and by verifying the scope of the characteristics of community capacity relating to the participating subjects. The characteristics under investigation were assessed over a two-week observation period (see Figure 1).

Participation was assessed by measuring: feelings of being accepted by the group (reactions to likes and comments received); personal investment in the group (frequency of interventions and continuity of conversation); identification with the group (sharing of ideas, acceptance of comments, expressions of recognition).

Trust was measured by assessing: community orientation (sharing of content: posts, photos and videos); sense of connection (requests for help, sharing problems); commonality of values and purposes (expressions of consensus on values and shared ideals).

The connectedness was measured by assessing: sharing of places and stories (publications, posts, narratives of personal stories and images of places); online and offline contacts (friendships and contacts in the network and spillovers in real social life); participation in initiatives and events (participation in activities and programs promoted by the group).

Support was measured by assessing: emotional involvement (shares, comments and signs of participation); fulfilment of needs (requests for help, expressions of thanks and expressions of satisfaction); skills development (participation in training, development, growth opportunities).

A data sheet was used to record the indications that emerged from the online analysis: from the ways in which the social group was used to the type of topics addressed and shared in online conversations (posts, links, photos...), from forms of self-representation (user profiles and other information posted by the user) to different ways of socializing (contacts and friendships). Observing the ways in which the social medium was used and the online behaviors of the users allowed us to address the issues related to the analysis thus enabling us to grasp the peculiarities and the numerosity of the actions and relationships that were generated online and their influence on community capacity building.

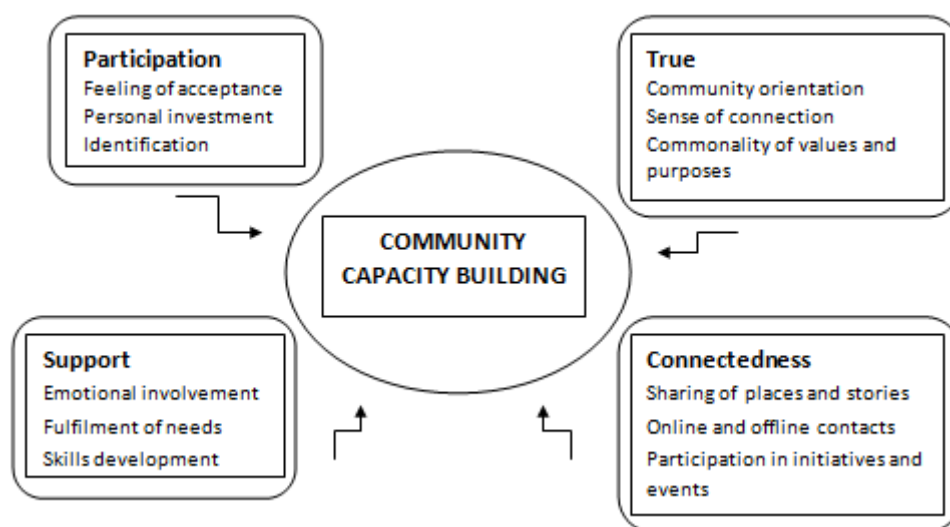


Figure 1. Community capacity building: characteristics.

Finally, a comparison of the community capacity of the members of the four communities was made.

Results

Analyzing the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample resulting from the answers to the questionnaire, we found that the respondents of the four communities are comparable in terms of age, level of education, and ethnicity, which makes it possible to compare the results of the research and to study the role played by sport in community engagement and community capacity building. The results of the questionnaire generally showed that a greater percentage of subjects in the urban communities with sports programs developed community engagement ($54.3 + 27.4 = 81.7$), measured as knowledge of the programs and adherence to community activities (at least three activities for a total of five hours a week), than subjects in the control communities ($40.1 + 17.6 = 57.7$) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Community Engagement

Characteristics	Totals (%)	Program communities (n = 36)	Control communities (n = 36)
Gender (%)			
M	45.7	47.4	43.5
F	54.3	52.6	56.5
Age (average)	38.8	39.0	38.5
Education (%)			
low (primary, secondary)	53.1	60.4	44.0
high (university)	46.9	39.6	56.0
Country of origin (%)			
native (parents born in Italy)	53.6	50.4	57.6
foreigner (parents born abroad)	46.4	49.6	42.4
Community engagement (%)			
knowledge of the program	49.1	54.3	40.1
activity adherence	23.0	27.4	17.6

By creating subgroups obtained by crossing the variables gender, level of education and country of origin, it was found that foreign-born females with low levels of education were less engaged in the community than other members of the same community. However, the results also showed that subjects in this group were more engaged in the community in communities with sports programs than they were in the control communities. This effect was foreseeable, thanks to the sports activities offered in the program communities. Such activities were geared to disadvantaged groups with reduced mobility and financial barriers, offering them enhanced opportunities for community engagement. For example, inexpensive dance lessons for women were taught by female instructors from local volunteer sports associations and held in local sports facilities.

These results are promising and underscore the potential of initiatives fostering sports participation in disadvantaged urban communities as a path to increase community engagement.

Table 2

Average Values of Individual Indicators and Their Synthesis on a Scale of 0-10, by Size and Overall Value, in the Experimental Group (n = 36) and Control Group (n = 36). All Values Are Weighted Equally

Categories and indicators	Cases (n = 36)	Controls (n = 36)
Feelings of being accepted by the group	5.11	4.25
Personal investment in the group	5.97	2.67
Identification with the group	8.00	7.33
Participation	6.36	4.75
Community orientation	2.69	2.03
Sense of connectedness	1.58	3.33
Commonality of values and purposes	3.72	4.22
Trust	2.67	3.19
Sharing of places and stories	8.64	4.89
Online and offline contacts	9.11	7.11
Participation in initiatives and events	3.56	3.56
Connectedness	7.10	5.19
Emotional involvement	2.89	3.44
Fulfillment of needs	3.78	4.50
Skills development	2.00	2.50
Support	2.89	3.48
Global community capacity	4.75	4.15

The second level of the investigation examines community capacity through observation, recording and assessment of the activities and content posted online by the members of the four communities.

Overall, slightly higher values for community capacity building were found in urban communities with sports programs than in the control communities with a small difference in values (+ 0.60%) (see Table 2): in total, in the four communities, the highest values were found in the category of connectedness, followed by participation, support, and finally, trust. Examining the different categories more closely, we found the highest values of community capacity in the communities with sports programs, particularly in the categories of connectivity and participation, while values that were slightly lower than those of the control communities were found in the categories of support and trust (see Figure 2). In general, the higher values for connectivity and participation found in all four communities can also be attributed to the type of context (social platform) in which the investigation was carried out. Indeed, it is well known that such platforms offer opportunities for the development of connectivity and participation.

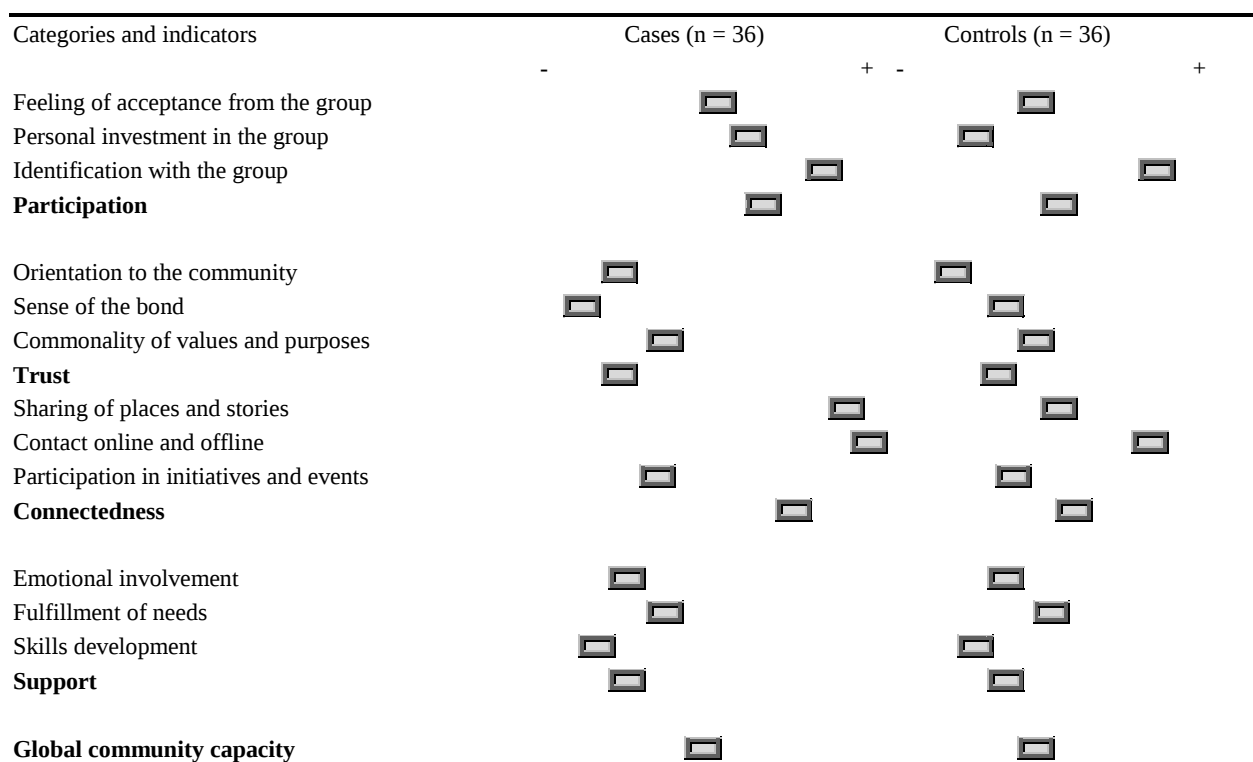


Figure 2. Trend of the individual indicators and their synthesis on a 0-10 scale by size and overall value in the experimental group (n = 36) and control group (n = 36). All values are weighted equally.

The higher values in connectedness and participation found in communities with sports programs in the community capacity investigation confirm the result of the questionnaire, which assigned higher values to the members of communities with sports programs for the community engagement variable. At the same time, the difference in the comparison between the two types of urban communities retains its validity.

Conclusions

This study, which focuses on sport programs as a means to enhance community engagement and community capacity building, aims to promote community development through sport. The study had some obvious limitations, mainly attributable to the methods of gathering information, which was collected online due to the restrictions that were in place during the COVID-19 pandemic to contain the spread of the virus. Hence, the community capacity of participants was investigated using online communities. However, despite these limitations, some findings are worthy of consideration also in the light of the statistical investigations that were developed.

The main finding was that members of the communities with sports programs reported greater community capacity than their counterparts in the control communities, suggesting that initiatives that seek to promote sports programs may hold promise for community capacity building. It must be said that the differences in the values relating to community capacity do not differ greatly between the urban communities; therefore, the value of community capacity attributable to sports participation represents a small percentage of the total amount of community capacity. However, sports programs were found to have a greater effect than the other variables under consideration, such as age, gender, level of education and country of origin. Indeed, for the latter

variables, we found fewer direct correlations with community engagement when the two types of communities were compared.

It therefore appears that sports programs affect the community capacity of subjects in disadvantaged urban communities through their impact on the level of participation and involvement of practitioners. Specifically, according to our study, sports programs generated more opportunities for the development of community engagement, promoted social activities, thanks to the alliances that were built, and broke down barriers for the most socially disadvantaged. In all this, the influence of sports participation on community capacity is intertwined with the other variables, making it very complex to measure and define its effects at the community level. The potential of sport to contribute to community capacity in disadvantaged communities may pave the way for further important applications in various settings. Many studies suggest, for example, that the main strength and fundamental value of building and developing community capacity lies in its capacity to enhance health gains.

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