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Physical activity and community resilience

Dr Dan Bates

Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society,
Leeds Beckett University

D.J.Bates@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Dan is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Development at Leeds Beckett University. His research interests include community sport development, sport for development, and theory-based evaluation. His work is informed by critical social theory and explores the potential of community-based sport programmes for social change.

Janine Partington

Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society,
Leeds Beckett University

J.P.Partington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Janine is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Development at Leeds Beckett University. Her research interests include sport policy and governance, and community sport development. Janine has contributed to several textbooks on sport development and has a professional background developing community sport and physical activity interventions in disadvantaged communities.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound implications for our social and leisure lives. This chapter illustrates the important role that outdoor recreation, in this case Walking for Health groups, can play in creating and supporting community resilience during unprecedented social catastrophes. The research draws upon the community capitals framework to illustrate how physical activity can be developed and delivered with sustainability and community-resilience in mind. The research demonstrates how access to community capitals-as-resources enabled continued social and sporting participation even during COVID-19 lockdowns. Findings provide insight into the lived experience of participants' negotiation of health and social catastrophes, whilst also indicating how future place-based physical activity provision could be developed ways that are conducive to community resilience.

Keywords: Physical Activity, Walking, COVID-19, Community Resilience, Community Capitals

Introduction

When considered next to environmental, economic and health catastrophes the study of outdoor recreation may appear somewhat inconsequential. However, this chapter explores the role that physical activity through Walking for Health groups can play in fostering resilient communities, and how these communities adapt to ensure continued opportunities for social and sporting inclusion. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Western societies have been marked by their relationship to risk and characterised as increasingly individualised and socially fragmented (Beck, 1992). The much lamented 'loss' of community is symptomatic of this social change (Bauman, 2001). In the U.K., the Office for National Statistics (2020) recently reported that people feel less connected to their community; are less likely to engage with neighbour; less likely to help-out a sick or disabled neighbour or relative; and less likely to be a member of a voluntary, professional, or recreational association. Given the profound challenges that confront individuals and groups in their work and leisure lives, it is unsurprising that the notion of resilience has become something of a buzzword in several fields of study.

In this context, sport and physical activity provide a potential reprieve: islands of solidarity and stability in a world otherwise characterised by constant change and uncertainty (Bauman, 2000). Sport and physical activity are regularly extolled (albeit uncritically) as sites and spaces for developing a sense of belonging and connection with others. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing impact on social and leisure lives placed extraordinary restrictions on peoples' ability to engage with others. Though the pandemic is a global issue the disruption generated a state of crisis particular to specific contexts, and therefore requiring particular local responses. This provides an excellent opportunity to explore how place-based communities organised around physical activity responded to a particular crisis, demonstrating resilience through their continued functioning. This chapter draws on the community capitals framework (CCF) (Emery & Flora, 2006) to illuminate how one Walking for Health group ensured continued social and sporting opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter provides an insight into the relationships, characteristics and

culture of this Walking for Health group that embodies community resilience. It concludes with a reflection on the connections between physical activity, community capitals, and community resilience.

Community Resilience

The study of resilience has traditionally been associated with ecology, engineering, and behavioural science. However, conceptual and empirical work on resilience is becoming common in other disciplines too. This attention has come in response to a challenging array of interwoven contemporary social, economic, and environmental crises; we live in an era of profound and tumultuous change. In abstract terms, a focus on resilience means studying how systems cope, adapt or transform in face of exogenous disruptions that have created a state of local crisis or disorganisation (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017). Such shocks, or system disruption (Magis, 2010), present challenges to existing ways of being and doing. A resilient system is therefore one that has the capacity to adapt and yet maintain essentially the same function (Walker et al.). An understanding of resilience at the level of ecosystems and critical infrastructure is well developed, but the same cannot be said for the local and community level (Berkes & Ross, 2013). Even less has been explored within the context of sport and physical activity. While researchers have identified the importance of resilience for athletes and teams (Wagstaff et al., 2017), elite sport organisations (Fasey et al., 2021) and community sport provision (Kim et al., 2021; Wicker et al., 2013), there are no insights into how outdoor recreation can create and sustain community-level resilience, and how this supports both individuals and groups in times of extraordinary social upheaval.

The development of community-level resilience is of particular interest and potential value because it provides the opportunity to illuminate how communities, embedded within larger social systems, respond at a local level through the development and use of existing resources (Berkes & Ross, 2013). A focus on community resilience means seeking to explain how communities demonstrate their agency within a particular context, or in this specific case, during the multiple COVID-19 lockdowns and social

distancing measures. For Brown and Kulig (1996/1997), community resilience is the capacity of community members to engage in coordinated action despite the adverse impact of events that constrain them in some way. Magis (2010) also highlights the importance of members' agency, identifying that through the development and engagement of community resources members of resilient communities can develop personal and collective capacity to respond to change. Indeed, recent insights in community development have stressed the importance of community resources in understanding individual and collective agency (Berkes & Ross, 2013).

It is unsurprising therefore that the development of community resilience has become a significant focus for both national governments and global organisations. In the UK, the government has developed a 'Community Resilience Development Framework' (HM Government, 2019) that outlines a strategic approach to the development of resilience in communities and which seeks to build national resilience to withstand emergencies. For the UK Government, community resilience is 'enabled when the public are empowered to harness local resources and expertise to help themselves and their communities to prepare, respond, and recover from disruptive challenges' (HM Government, 2019, p. 2). Enabling community-led social action is a key aspect of building a 'resilient U.K.' with emphasis on the need to empower public and community networks to understand their capabilities, access resources, and take collective action. Many sports organisations have been forced to consider how they can 'build back better' from the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, with 'resilience' becoming a common phrase seen in guidance documents issued by national and global organisations (c.f Sport England, 2021; United Nations, 2021).

Community Capitals and Resilience

A number of studies have identified the community capitals framework (CCF) as a way to frame community resilience through a focus on the type and nature of resources that communities are able to operationalise in the face of exogenous disruption (Buikstra et al., 2010; Magis, 2010; Vaneeckhaute et al., 2017). Whilst recognising that the notion of 'community' is itself complex (Bauman, 2001; Delanty, 2018), the CCF

provides a suitable framework for understanding the factors that enable individuals and groups to organise themselves and take action (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017). The CCF (Emery & Flora, 2006) identifies seven types of capital, four 'societal' and three 'material'. The societal capitals are cultural capital (knowledge and values through which people understand and engage in the world), social capital (connections among people, including norms of reciprocity and trust), human capital (individual skills, abilities and attributes), and political capital (ability to access and influence power). The material capitals are natural capital (the environment and the natural assets that abide in a particular location), financial capital (money and financial resources), and built capital (physical infrastructure and facilities).

Clearly these capitals are substantive concepts in their own right, and any such integration risks oversimplification. However, we use them here as broad sensitising concepts, their integration providing a more holistic insight into the components of community resilience. The prevalence of community capitals should therefore not be understood as indicators of community resilience, but their presence may result in higher resilience (Magis, 2010; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017). For Magis (2010), it is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources (capitals) by community members that enables them to thrive, despite a changing and unpredictable context. The CCF therefore provides a framework to explore the interconnection and multiplying effects among capitals (Emery & Flora, 2006). The following sections introduce the community walking group used as the focus for this study. Through walking the reader through how the group developed and operationalised different community capitals, and how this enabled them to demonstrate community resilience in spite of the challenges faced, the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures on the group is made clear.

Introduction to the walking group

We draw on data collected with a community Walking for Health group in England. Data was collected over a two-year period as part of a larger study on the social value

of community walking groups, with a gap of approximately twelve months between the first phase of data collection and the second. Due to the COVID-19 lockdowns across the UK, fieldwork took place before the first lockdown in March 2020 and after the relaxation of government restrictions in March 2021. Using a range of 'walking and talking' research methods (Evans & Jones, 2011; Fink, 2012; Ratna, 2020) we offer a novel insight into the role of outdoor recreation in facilitating community-level resilience.

The selected walking group is in the North-West of England, within the village of Milnrow. Milnrow is a small suburb approximately 10 miles to the Northeast of Manchester city centre. Although an urban location, the suburb sits on the edge of the South Pennines and therefore the walk group has access to green space and numerous walking routes. Established in 2019, the walking group is part of a much wider network of Walking for Health's 'walk and talk' groups, which are based across England. These are overseen by The Ramblers and delivered locally in partnership with local authorities, the National Health Service and voluntary and community groups. The programme aims to increase physical activity levels amongst older adults (particularly those with health issues) with over 1,800 weekly walks provided via the scheme nationwide (Walking for Health, n.d). Prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, almost 100 different individuals had accessed the Milnrow walk group, with a regular weekly turnout of between 30-40 walkers. The group includes married couples, divorcees, widowers, and singletons, with a rough split between male and female attendees. Ages range from the late 30's to the mid-80's with most walkers living locally. Walks are held on Monday mornings and led by local volunteers who have been trained as walk leaders. Three or four different walks of varying duration and challenge (ascent / terrain) are provided every Monday, with participants free to choose which walk they want to join.

In total, we attended six walks with the group and collected data via informal conversations during the walks and the social gatherings at the end of each walk. Our enquiries focused on members' experiences of walking with the group, its dynamics, and the interactions between group members, and what the group meant to them.

When we returned to the walk group after lockdown our questions and conversations focused on how the group and individual members had adapted and coped during the pandemic and what role (if any) the walking group played during this period. We were particularly interested in exploring notions of resilience in terms of whether the group continued to function in some way, and how community capitals, appropriated through group membership, enabled individuals and the collective to negotiate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community capitals in practice

The library sits on the main road in the village, an impressive sandstone building dating from the early 1900s. It's quarter to ten, and inside a dozen walkers are already massed. The library plays host to a number of community groups and clubs; their flyers adorn the noticeboards. Geoff, today's group leader, greets arrivals and notes their names on a small slip of paper. On the hour we leave the building, walk a short distance along the main road, and then turn down a narrow gap between buildings. Our route leads us through a rabbit-warren of residential back-streets and alleyways, and eventually brings us to the edge of an estate. Over a stile we pick up a small track that leads off through farm pasture. The walk uses a number of footpaths, bridleways, and rights of way; though very few of them are signposted or marked.

The value of public and community space is well established. Libraries in particular have been identified as vital community assets, providing not just traditional access to information but also access to services and programmes that are community centred and focused (Edwards, 2018). This extract from our research diary attests how Milnrow Library provides a focal point for a number of community activities and services. Clearly the group is not dependent on the existence of the library for their functioning, because as we will see, they continue to function even when this particular space is no longer accessible. Nonetheless, the availability and access to infrastructure has been identified as a necessary component of community resilience (Buikstra et al., 2010). In this instance, it is the ability of the group to utilise local built and natural assets that gives the group its character and appeal. The proximity and

accessibility of rural green space underpins the popularity of the group. However, the existence of these capitals does not ensure community resilience. Individuals need to know of and navigate these assets in order to capitalise on them.

Geoff tends to suggest the route; the others trust his judgement. As one group member put it neatly, "he knows what's muddy, and when". He has a relaxed and approachable character, and a level of fitness that belies his age. During the walk he is typically near the front, but never 'in charge'. On sections with awkward footing or unhelpfully high steps he waits patiently to support others.

Geoff was an exemplar, but not alone in the style and manner through which the walking group was led. Other group leaders also reflected his approach. Geoff's empathetic leadership style, combined with a thorough knowledge of local rights of way, demonstrates the centrality of human capital in accessing local natural capital and creating an inclusive group culture. The combination of access to desirable greenspace, and the leaders' knowledge of routes and interpersonal skills to create a welcoming space, is illustrative of the interdependence of community capitals in fostering community resilience. Furthermore, a desirable by-product of such walking groups is that participants also gain knowledge of the local area and ways to access local natural capital.

The designated walk leader is towards the back of the group, whilst one of the 'regulars' leads the way from the front. This draws a number of comments from walkers, one joking "Margaret, you've been sacked". Margaret raises her eyebrows and says "it's great, I don't actually have to do anything these days".

Many participants expressed how much they valued the knowledge of the local area that they gained through the group. The walk group has also created a sense of curiosity amongst group members about where different paths and trails led and how they connect together. For Berkes and Ross (2013), the process of communities drawing upon and fostering such resources in combination is a characteristic of community level resilience. For the majority of walking group participants, it was the opportunity to socialise with others, whilst being active in the outdoors, that was the

primary attraction of the group. Walking, by its nature, is conducive to conversation and reflection (Evans & Jones, 2011). The importance of social networks and mutual support in the success of walking group interventions has already been well documented (South et al., 2017); this particular walking group also reflected the value participants placed on building social relationships. As one participant put plainly, “the talking is as important as the walking”.

We've paused at the top of a sloped track that winds between two farms. People catch their breath whilst waiting patiently for others. The halt means that, rather than walking in pairs or small groups, the whole group is bunched together admiring the elevated views over fields and towards the distant moorland. At one point, the majority of the group is engrossed in sharing the latest update about the local councils' decision around planning permission that may impact local greenspace and rights of way. A number of the group have been active in campaigning on these issues.

Until now, the role of political capital – the ability to access and influence power – had appeared negligible. However, the group appears to facilitate an awareness of the political sphere, a kind of social and political imagination (Mills, 1959), whilst also providing the social connections for participants to become more active in local politics and the championing of community issues. Participants frequently identified distant landmarks or developments, reflecting on the changing landscape and urban sprawl. Several were active in council-led community steering groups and ‘Save the Green Belt’ campaigns, and regularly lobbied local councillors and MPs. Most of the walks combine green spaces with brownfield sites and, on occasion, local heritage areas. For those walkers who have lived in the local area for most of their lives, the walks provide an opportunity to reminisce about how the area has changed and developed.

As we walked down an old track, the group cheerfully say ‘hello’ to a pair of men passing carrying spades and rakes. “They’ll be off tidying up the nature reserve at the old Jubilee Colliery” comments one of the walkers, “They’re here every time we pass, part of the ‘Friends of’ group”. As we continued walking down the track and across a road, we pass over some tram tracks and then enter a small industrial park which houses a number of small businesses. Various members of the group comment that they

hadn't realised how many small businesses existed in the area, and how the area has changed over time.

This demonstrates how the walking group not only provides opportunities for social interaction, but also the opportunity to connect local spaces together, creating an enhanced sense of place and belonging amongst group members. Whilst this may have been a subconscious connection for some of the walkers, others were keen to emphasise how much they valued these local spaces and the socio-historical background of the area. As Inglis (2009) comments, in today's globalised societies, a sense of place is still a strong marker of identity and can be important to an individual's understanding of themselves and others. These connections between group members and their local area also contributed to the development of cultural capital through a shared sense of belonging to the local community. The fostering of social capital, cultural connection to place, and the sharing of knowledge on routes and rights of way was paramount in giving participants the connections and confidence needed to continue functioning as a group, even during an unprecedented and tumultuous period of social change.

Community resilience tested

During the first COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020), guidance issued by the British government called for people to isolate and minimise social interactions. As a result, the walk group was indefinitely suspended. A core group of 4-8 women of similar age who had met and connected through the walk group became known as 'the girls' to other walk group members. Throughout lockdown, they had kept in regular contact, checking-in on one another to see how each member was coping with lockdown. Several of 'the girls' live alone, so, for them, the lockdown could have been an extremely challenging period of time, particularly for those living away from family. The regular phone calls and text messages were therefore important in facilitating social contact and reducing feelings of isolation. As restrictions started to ease and guidance allowed people to meet in pairs outside with somebody from a different household, 'the girls' started to arrange to meet up in pairs so as to walk at different

times during the week, rotating the make-up of the pairs (often organically) in order to catch-up with different people.

Ironically, they would also regularly bump into other configurations of walkers from the walk group who had also self-organised themselves into walking 'pairs'. Being able to say 'hello' to people they had not seen for over 12 months provided a sense of normality and a collective experience of adversity. Such self-organising further demonstrated that social networks and support are critical success factors in community resilience (Buikstra et al., 2010), and that a communities 'social memory' (Vaneekhaute et al., 2017) plays a significant role in supporting members through periods of exogenous crises. Walk routes that had been learnt from the main walking group were followed, with different routes being used, dependent on the weather. This illustrates the broader value of the walk group and how it has fostered capital within and between its members, developing their knowledge of local walk routes and giving them the confidence to make use of local green spaces outside of the group itself. Several of 'the girls' commented on how they now knew routes they did not know existed and how they had been able to merge different walk routes together to create new routes in order to add variety to their repertoire. The importance of being able to 'get out' and meet up during the lockdown was described as a 'lifeline' and vital to their health and wellbeing.

Following changes to government guidance issued in September 2020, groups of six individuals could meet outdoors. This enabled the walk group to formally start meeting again using a local park as a meeting point and walking in small groups of six, each with its own walk leader. Pre-COVID, there were only two main leaders (Geoff and Gwen), with leaders 'borrowed' from other walk groups to cover holidays or absences, illustrating the importance of social links to the broader 'Walking for Health' network. However, due to the success of the group, a number of members had fortunately volunteered to train as walk leaders just before the pandemic struck. This meant that when the group started to meet again, human capital had been increased, enabling the group to function, despite the restrictions, as well as facilitate 5-6 walks each week. The willingness of other group members to take on added responsibilities

was crucial – without enough trained walk leaders it would have been unlikely that the group could have re-started before the full lifting of lockdown restrictions in June 2021. The success of the group before lockdown and the encouragement of the two original leaders (demonstrating their ability to influence other group members) was vital in helping the group demonstrate resilience during lockdown. They had created a friendly, safe, and supportive environment where other members felt able and comfortable in taking on additional responsibilities as leaders.

Following a further relaxing of government restrictions in March 2021, the small walking groups were increased to ten individuals, before the group was able to return to ‘normal’ once lockdown restrictions were fully lifted in July 2021. At this point, attendance at the walk group returned to pre-pandemic levels, suggesting that enthusiasm for the group had not waned during the lockdown. Indeed, new members continued to join the group on a weekly basis as individuals started to feel more confident with socialising in larger groups. Other positive stories have emerged from group members since lockdown, providing further examples of how the walk group supported its members to ‘prepare, respond, recover’ from the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. When reflecting on their experience of lockdown, several participants identified that the group – especially for people who had lost family either through COVID-19 or other causes, thus finding themselves alone through lockdown – had been a ‘lifesaver’. Being able to walk again in small groups provided much needed social interaction, routine, and some semblance of normality.

Arriving back at the library everyone put their £1 contribution into a small pot, before helping themselves to a hot drink and biscuit. There are a couple of members who couldn't join the walk, but have come to meet others afterwards nonetheless. Over the next hour, several of the participants say their farewells and drift off. But for others, the biscuit and brew last almost as long as the walk!

These closing remarks in our field diary reiterate the importance of social capital for participants. They also highlight that, until now, financial capital has been conspicuous by its absence. The modest cost of participation, coupled with the use of central meeting points (the library and park are both on a main road serviced by public transport) meant that the group was easily accessible. It is apparent that the group

required little direct economic capital for its functioning, placing limited economic burden on participants. This undoubtedly reduced a potential barrier to participation.

Reflection

This chapter illuminates how a seemingly ordinary community walking group successfully navigated extraordinary times. This research on the relationship between outdoor recreation and community-level resilience is the first of its kind, and highlights the potential that sport and physical activity can play in supporting individuals and groups during unprecedented changes in society. The COVID-19 pandemic was initially a health crisis, but with a catastrophic impact on individuals' ability to socialise and connect with others. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Worldwide, people are learning to live with this crisis as part of their everyday lives. At this interregnum, with its intersection of social, political, economic, and environmental catastrophes, it is unclear what may eventually come to constitute the 'new normal'. In the UK at least, the notion of developing resilient individuals, organisations and infrastructure is likely to continue to grow in currency. Our fieldwork with the Milnrow Walking for Health group goes beyond resilience-as-buzzword, illustrating the realities of community resilience through the utilisation and fostering of resources that strengthen the adaptive capacity of individuals and groups.

Through exploring community capitals (Emery & Flora, 2006) as a way to frame community resilience, this chapter demonstrates how community members collectively foster access to different resources as part of their organic self-organisation. For Berkes and Ross (2013), drawing upon resources in combination is an important characteristic of generating community level resilience. This chapter has highlighted that opportunities to foster social capital and access to natural capital provide the primary attraction for walking group participants. The other capitals interlace, to varying degrees, with these primary capitals to give the group its character and resilient capacity. It remains to be seen how typical this may be of other Walking for Health groups. Nonetheless, our findings extend the concept of community capitals and community resilience into community sport development

more broadly, providing further indication of the advantages of incorporating asset-based community development approaches into physical activity provision development (Bates & Hylton, 2021; Partington & Totten, 2012). Given the continued catastrophes of COVID-19, such practical and conceptual developments are likely to become increasingly pertinent.

Community resilience is conspicuous during periods of 'system disruption' (Magis, 2010), and given the nature and severity of possible future disruptions, it is important to avoid over-claiming the resilient capacity of this particular group or the theoretical utility of the CCF. However, as Matarrita-Cascante et al. (2017) identify, although well-developed communal resources are not the only components of resilience, their presence is indicative of higher resilience; how communities have dealt with past crises and what they have learnt from these experiences is also integral to adapting to future disruption (Buikstra et al., 2010). This particular Walking for Health group is therefore well placed to deal with the ongoing challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is hoped that insights provided in this chapter can contribute to a wider understanding of how to cultivate resilient physical activity provision in times of social catastrophe.

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