

## Youth Sport and Well-being

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It is widely maintained that sport may contribute to the development of young people's well-being. Sometimes the belief sports contribute to good living is so strong that it is couched in the language of 'human rights' (Kidd and Donnelly, 2000). Indeed, one nation has gone so far as to introduce a 'Sports Act', which guarantees state subsidies of sport, "to promote recreational, competitive and top-level sports and associated civic activity, to promote the population's welfare and health and to support the growth and development of children and young people through sports" (Finnish Sports Act, 1998). This line of argument was nearly taken a stage further at the UNESCO-organised meeting of ministers responsible for Education and Sport in 2004, when numerous member state representatives were supportive of a proposal that Physical Education and Sport be recognised as a 'fundamental human right', before retaining their senses and merely affirming that "the development of physical education and sport is one of the most effective means of improving, *inter alia*, health, hygiene, the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and the overall well-being of individuals, in particular young people" (MINEPS IV, 2004).

The more cautious conclusion drawn in Athens reflects an alternative mode of expression for the value of physical education and sport that is to be found beyond the typical realms of politics and educational policy in more fundamental arguments about the necessary conditions for human flourishing. According to this view, there are certain elements without which flourishing becomes impossible, and, it is argued, sporting activities offer distinctive ways to help realise such elements.

The educational implications of such a view seem clear enough. In light of these claims, and notwithstanding their validity, the considerable evidence of inequitable access to sports participation is a cause of concern (Sabo, *et al.*, 2004). Given that the promotion of well-being is an intrinsic feature of social justice (Powers and Faden, 2006), and that social justice, in turn, is generally understood to be concerned with those dimensions of well-being that are of moral import precisely because they matter to everyone, it follows then that educators ought to be seriously concerned with the provisions of such opportunities. Equally, it follows that, to the extent to which certain sections of society are deprived of these opportunities to engage in sport, or are offered second-rate or partial provision, educators ought think that a significant professional and ethical deficit has occurred. Yet the account that is offered for the educationally significant contributions that physical education and sport may make to well-being is often question-begging. We offer a consideration of the arguments that the activities of physical education and sport might make to the well-being of the educandus below.

### Prudential Value and Well-being

Theories of well-being are essentially concerned with what is prudentially valuable: what is valuable to us as individual agents; what makes *our* lives go well (Griffin, 1996).

Griffin (1986) refers to 'well-being', but it is important to note that not all theories that concern prudence use this term. Sumner (1996), for example, proposes a theory of *welfare*, defined as "the condition of faring or doing well" (Sumner 1996: 1), which he acknowledges is "more or less the same as her well-being or interest" (ibid). More recently, Nussbaum (2000) has proposed a capability theory whose primary concern is with "the level at which a person's capability becomes what Marx called "truly human," that is, *worthy*, of a human being" (Nussbaum 2000: 73). Each of the ways of understanding what is prudentially valuable can inform our understanding of the value of Physical Education and Sport and its contribution to our well-being. The variation of the particular labels used by each of these theorists sheds no significant light on the efficacy of the main contention that exercise contributes to well-being. This requires a more detailed analysis to which we now turn.

### **What is this thing called well-being?**

The concept of well-being continues to be the source of considerable debate (Griffin, 1986; O'Neill, 1998), and the points of contention and dispute have important implications for those who justify educational instantiations of sport in terms of well-being, and for addressing differences in terms of access to sporting experiences. Most academic discussions of well-being centre on a distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' accounts (see for example Arneson, 1999; O'Neill, 1998 in mainstream philosophy; and White, 1986 in the philosophy of education). Both views have their adherents (albeit in different fields) and both have their critics. At its heart, the subjective / objective divide centres on the different responses to the claim of "agent sovereignty" (Arneson, 1999: 116) of whether what is good for people depends on what they want or they think they want, or on what they need or it is thought they need.

Subjective theories of well-being predominantly take one of two forms: hedonistic and desire fulfilment. 'Hedonistic' accounts are premised on the view that what would be best for someone is what would make his/her life happiest, or place greatest emphasis on the quality of personal experience; 'Desire Fulfilment' theories focus on those things that would allow an individual to fulfil or satisfy his/her desires. Objective theories, by contrast, are characterised by the belief that certain things are good for people, irrespective of whether or not they want to have them (Parfit, 1984).

Hedonistic theories ultimately equate well-being with a certain quality of experience. Psychologists have been anxious to distance *subjective well-being*, a psychological theory of well-being, from hedonistic theories defined in this fashion (Diener *et al.* 1998). *Subjective well-being* is comprised of a judgement of life satisfaction, alongside positive and negative affect (Diener and Suh 1999), the life satisfaction domain, in particular, should ensure a relation with what is "important in life" (Diener *et al.* 1998: 35), not just short-term pleasures such as "partying and entertainment" (ibid.). This is one of the primary concerns with hedonistic theories, their scope does not extend beyond the experiences themselves, there are all sorts of ways of ensuring pleasurable experiences, but would a life filled with such experiences necessarily constitute a life of well-being?

Awareness of the limitations of hedonistic theories is evident within mainstream psychology, yet exercise psychologists appear to have allowed affect, or pleasurable experience elevated status as an indicator of well-being. Numerous textbooks discuss sport and other physical activities' contribution to individual's positive psychological states (Biddle, Fox and Boucher, 2000; Weinberg and Gould, 2003), and this is reflected in the academic research literature (Fox, 1999; McAuley *et al.* 2000). Moreover, positive feelings, like fun, are frequently cited by teachers and coaches as primary goals in introducing young people to sport (Garn and Cothran, 2006; O'Reilly, Tompkins and Gallant, 2001).

Nozick (1974) highlighted the limitations of hedonistic views with an ingenious thought experiment. He described an imaginary experience machine that can give an individual a perfect simulation of the experiences associated with any type of life. Hooked up to this machine, the individual can lead any life she might choose, whilst floating in a tank. Most people would be repelled by the thought of being plugged into this machine, in place of actually living, even if real life was unable to match the quality of experience offered by the simulation. Whilst positive experiences matter, our sense of well-being extends to aspirations beyond such experiences.

A reflection on sports experiences provides other reasons to doubt the hedonistic account of well-being. The first relates to the sustainability of feelings linked to sports participation. Numerous studies have found that a positive mood following exercise can be short-lived (for example, Faulkner and Biddle, 2004), possibly because the exerciser adapts, and the elevated feelings disappear. Some experiences, though, seem immune to this effect:

The “flow” experiences (of being caught up in exercise of skills) reported by Csikszentmihalyi's subjects also can be related to sense of self, especially when there is room to be proud of the skills involved; and these satisfactions too can be largely exempt from the hedonic treadmill. (Kupperman 2003: 26)

Satisfactions related to our sense of self may be longer lasting, such as when engagement in sport requires the mastery of new skills. This point is interesting because it highlights the importance of the type of activity to be undertaken. It also, implicitly, cuts away the case for purely pleasurable experiences with its emphasis on meaningful activities and the learning of new skills. Pleasure or satisfaction in isolation it seems, is not enough to ensure enhanced well-being. We need to differentiate between different types of satisfaction, as Kupperman (2003) suggests, and we must pay attention to the activity with which the pleasure or satisfaction is associated (McNamee, 1994). Indeed Kupperman states “it looks as if the values of such a pleasure enhanced life would have a great deal to do, not merely with the pleasure, but also with the values of the activities that give the pleasure” (Kupperman, 2006: 14).

The second difficulty with hedonistic theories concerns the association (or, worse, reduction) of sport with (or to) fun. Whilst it certainly seems to be the case that sport is enjoyable for some (perhaps most) players, some (perhaps most) of the time, it is not the

case that all derive pleasure from engagement in sport. Many young people do not enjoy sport, and even those who initially derive enjoyment from it may gradually disengage as they find sources of pleasure elsewhere (Fuchs, Powell, Semmer, *et al.*, 1988). Even those whose lives amply demonstrate a commitment to sport cannot expect a life of pleasure. There may be times when it is positively boring, such as when players are trying to automatise skills through repeated and sustained, and not necessarily motivating, practice (Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer, 1993)<sup>1</sup>. In fact, focusing completely on pleasure might deprive learners of sport's more significant long-term benefits, such as competence in the skills necessary for life-long participation. Hochstetler captures what all experienced sportspersons know well (2003: 232): "Part of understanding sport, then, is paying attention to the prose, the everyday, the arduous, the repetitive".

None of this should be taken to mean that sport experiences ought not be positive and enjoyable, nor that educational lessons ought not to be experienced as rewarding or fun, it is merely that such feelings alone cannot provide an adequate basis for justifying the value of sport nor explaining its contribution to well-being. A stronger case is needed, and perhaps this is provided by an alternative subjective account.

Desire-fulfilment theories claim that life goes well when one's desires are satisfied. A difficulty with this sort of perspective is that it is easy to conceive of an instance in which an individual's desires might not bear at all on their well-being; indeed, they might be harmful to it. Rawls (1971) famously imagined a person who, having reflected on alternatives, decides to spend as much time as possible counting blades of grass in city parks. If that seems implausible, consider, instead, someone glued to a television set, or to a computer game, or countless other activities that seem impossible to equate with a flourishing, fulfilling life.

Consider, too, the case of an individual whose desires lead to actions that are actually harmful to their well-being, such as those resulting in eating disorders or exercise dependence (Loumidis and Wells, 2001). Those who radically *misperceive* their body shape and or deny their exercise-dependency clearly act in ways that they subjectively deem contributory to their well-being. The palpable fact that we recognise erroneous misperception or judgement suggests something more objective, more super-personal, than the mere satisfaction of desires. This immediately raises another problem with desire fulfilment theories of well-being, at least with regard to its scope. Even if we are inclined to accept an adult's judgement about their interests, we would be foolish to extend this to children. Consider John O'Neill's sketch of the most defensible presentation of this position (1998: 47):

Well-being can be identified with the satisfaction of fully informed preferences. The position allows for error but still holds that whether something is good for a

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot (1974) offers a superb account of this process in relation to mathematical education.

person depends ultimately on what they would want or value. What is good for us is still determined ultimately by our preferences.

As this quotation makes clear, the desire fulfilment approach adopts the standpoints of a mature adult, looking competently and impartially at his/her or others' well-being. Can we really claim that schoolchildren's preferences and desires are 'fully informed'? Of course the concept of childhood is itself contestable but even if we extend our understanding to pupils, most people would disagree. Indeed, the whole rationale for compulsory schooling and generally adults' duty of care for young people is premised precisely on their inability to make such judgements (Noggle, 2002).

There is a further difficulty with desire fulfilment theories of well-being. Actual desires are highly malleable. This phenomenon, sometimes called 'adaptive preference' (Nussbaum, 2000), has attracted considerable attention from a range of social scientists from feminists to those studying international development. Amartya Sen (1988) has shown how people's assessments of the quality of their lives are mediated by identities, norms and institutions. Women in particular, often find their options constricted by notions of obligation and legitimacy, which affect the decisions they feel able to make. Thus it is that women's perceptions of themselves are largely constituted by the circumstances before them, and, as Julia Annas (1996) put it, in a society where women have fewer options, they settle for less. Thus, the less one desires in life the less one is frustrated. The adaptive preference is not necessarily or even typically a conscious act, as norms and expectations become internalised. The privileged quickly become accustomed to their wealth and opportunity; the marginalised frequently adapt their expectations and desires to the lower level of life they are accustomed to. How can they demand fundamental elements of well-being if they are unaware that they exist? (Nussbaum, 2000). Effectively this is a new twist on a very old idea: it is an analogue to Marx's original conception of ideology as false consciousness. In summary, relying on personal preference in judgements of well-being will, in contexts like these, simply reinforce dominant structures and stand in opposition to radical change (Nussbaum, 2000).

With these criticisms in mind, we are led, therefore, towards a conception of well-being that is substantially objective, rather than solely subjective. To be clear, it is not suggested here that objective and subjective accounts are mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible to envisage some sort of 'mixed' theory, such as where well-being could be equated with deriving or desiring pleasure from objectively valuable activities (Parfit, 1984). Nor is it necessary to go through the various criticisms that have been levelled at objective accounts, which focus primarily on the genesis of the elements on specific lists (White, 1986). The main point is simply that an account of well-being that is not grounded in objective, non-personal measures is necessarily inadequate, and in discussing sports supposed contribution to human flourishing, it is important to frame this with reference to objective measures of well-being.

### **Physical Education and Sport's Contribution to Well-being**

A plethora of objective lists of the elements of well-being have been published (Gasper, 2004). As we have noted, Nussbaum does not speak specifically of 'well-being', referring

instead to the idea of a ‘fully’ or ‘truly human life’. Her ‘Capabilities Approach’ (Nussbaum 1999, 2000), however, represents one of the best-known objective theories of the human good. According to Nussbaum<sup>2</sup>, certain ‘central capabilities’ are essential for a fully human life of dignity and value, including:

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|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Life                            | 6. Practical reason                |
| 2. Bodily Health                   | 7. Affiliation                     |
| 3. Bodily Integrity                | 8. Other Species                   |
| 4. Senses, Imagination and Thought | 9. Play                            |
| 5. Emotions                        | 10. Control over One’s Environment |

While Nussbaum fleshes, the aim, here, is simply to give some general sense of an objective theory. Other theorists offer their lists, with different elements and foci, but there are also reoccurring themes, related to things like physical and psychological health, education and opportunities for social interaction (Gasper, 2004; Saith, 2001; Qizilbash, 1998).

Whilst none of the cited theories include specific mention of ‘sport’, there are numerous references to related concepts within descriptions of well-being. For example, Robeyns talks about “being able to be physically healthy” (2006: 81) and “being able to engage in leisure activities” (2006: 82). Nussbaum explains well-being partly in terms of sport’s conceptual cousins: her ‘Play’ capability recognises the need to “enjoy recreational activities” (Nussbaum, 1995: 84), and she elsewhere writes of people’s need to “move from place to place...with their very own bodies” (Nussbaum, 1995: 77). Beyond these specific mentions, there is evidence that sporting activities can<sup>3</sup> contribute to other aspects of well-being through, for example: contributing to regular physical activity, and consequently, reduced risks of a variety of diseases and obesity (WHO, 1995); introducing a systems of values that seems to result in young people becoming sexually active later in life, have fewer partners, and, when sexually active, make greater use of contraception than non-sporting peers (Sabo, *et al.* 1999); supporting healthy psychological and affective development, by enhancing perceived physical competence (Dishman, 1995), and reducing problematic levels of anxiety and depression (Biddle and Mutrie, 2001); contributing to the process of inclusion and developing a sense of belonging by bringing individuals from a variety of social and economic backgrounds together in a shared interest in activities (Bailey, 2004); and even encouraging the development of relatively positive attitudes to schooling and educational achievement (Taras, 2005).

Taken together, evidence of this sort lends support to the frequent claims that sport can makes significant and distinctive contributions to the well-being of young people. Whether sport is seen as a necessary feature of well-being, in itself, or as one route to elements of well-being, it deserves to feature in discussions of the good life and the things that one can be and do, as part of a fulfilling and flourishing life.

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<sup>2</sup> Whose work develops and to some extent departs from that of the economist Amartya Sen (1998), as noted above.

<sup>3</sup> Although, clearly, do not necessarily (Bailey, 2006)

## **Conclusion: Objectivist Well-being, Agency and Advocacy**

Sport is a training ground where boys learn what it means to be men ... because sport is identified with men and masculinity, women in sport become trespassers on male territory and their access is limited or blocked entirely. (Griffin, 1998: 16)

I have always been astonished . . . that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural. And I have also seen masculine domination, and the way it is imposed and suffered, as the prime example of this paradoxical submission. (Bourdieu, 2001: 1–2)

It has been argued here that sport can make a significant and distinctive contribution to individual well-being. Beyond its frequently cited physical health benefits and its characterisation as a source of pleasure and enjoyment, appropriately presented sports experience can play a role as sources and features of a fulfilling life. We have questioned traditional associations of well-being with positive experiences and the satisfaction of desires, in favour of a more objective, supra-personal account. This account is based on a notion of capacities and capabilities which are universal and essential, and focuses on what is common to all. In Nussbaum's terms, "it begins with the human being: with the capabilities and needs that join all humans, across barriers of gender and class and race and nation" (1995: 61). There is little doubt that sport has yet to cross these barriers in many contexts.

Subjective theories of well-being offer neither cause nor method for change since individuals' (mis)perceptions of the sense of pleasure or desires in relation to sports are viewed as given or having primacy simply in virtue of the fact that they are the subjects'. As Nussbaum (2000) has shown, one's preferences are all too readily adaptive, and readily adjust, consciously or otherwise, to social norms and opportunities. Objective theories of well-being, however, offer support for those calling for change, not because of personal wishes, or local norms and values, but because they aspire for an account of well-being that is common to all human beings. Sporting activities, we contend, are plausible candidates for inclusion in such an account.

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