RaY

Research at the University of York St John

RESEARCH REPORT

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'One more Knight'

An evaluation of a community project to combat loneliness

Executive Summary

Acknowledgements

About the Research

This research was commissioned by York St John University (YSJ), partners of York City Knights Rugby League Club (YCK). The aim of this research was to explore the social value of a community project aimed at combatting loneliness. This report provides insights from those directly involved and effected by Fish and Chip Friday, the community initiative. Through evaluating such insights, key characteristics of effective practice are identified and areas for possible enhancement are suggested.

The Literature

As inherently social beings (Travers and Milgram, 1969), humans need face-to-face contact and strong ties to thrive (Granovetter, 1973; Pinker, 2015). Despite this, there has been a growth in people feeling socially isolated (ONS, 2020). Therefore, a relationship-based approach to tackling loneliness is recommended (Cottam, 2018). One effective social glue is sport, which helps develop social bonds and meaningful relationships (Putnam, 2000; Taylor et al. 2015). Sport's function is recognised her HM Government (2018) who appointed to the world's first minister for Sport, Civil Society and Loneliness. In August 2020, 32 English professional football clubs unveiled 'Tackling Loneliness Together' projects. It is too early to evaluate the effects of such interventions. However, more broadly, literature reviews on loneliness interventions suggest that social support,

social skills, and opportunities for social interaction are essential (Cacioppo et al. 2015; Masi et al. 2011). the risk of diseases. Therefore, sport is being defined as a critical vehicle for improving the lives of people throughout the UK.

The Research Process

The research involved interviews with managers of the YCK foundation and YSJ Active Manager, and open-ended questionnaires completed by participants. These methods were used to capture the motivations, experiences and reflections of those directly involved in the project. Responses were themed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Key findings were evaluated and areas for enhancement suggested.

The Findings

The data demonstrates that the concept of Fish and Chip Friday was effective in meeting its desired aims. Up to 30 people who felt lonely or socially isolated regularly came together for some food, a drink and a chat. These accessible gatherings met the identity preferences of those involved and fostered positive nostalgic feelings. People were motivated to attend due to the home from home atmosphere created and their sense of loyalty towards YCK. Positive experiences were evident in the demand for more regular gatherings and shifts towards a participant-led initiative. Thus, this initiative increased participant's quality of face-to-face contact, helping them develop strong social ties. The sense of purpose and ownership this initiative provided participants illustrates sport's capacity to build cohesive community groups, offer social capital and contribute to social inclusion (Putnam, 2000). Given societal trends towards more insular living and working, this illustration highlights the need for professional sport clubs (YCK) and universities (YSJ) to continue their civic responsibilities through public engagement initiatives, such as Fish and Chips Friday, in the name of social justice.

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Introduction

General Overview

Formed in 1841, York St John University (YSJ) is centred on themes of opportunity, equality and social justice. Central to this mission are community partners, such as York City Knights Rugby League Club (YCK), who became official partners of YSJ in 2014. Established in 1868, YCK also has a long-standing tradition of community engagement. At the heart of this work is the YCK Foundation, a registered charity, whose mission is to support communities and change lives.

Centred on health, community and education, YCK Foundation's work impacts over 10,000 people per year. One outreach project is Fish and Chip Friday, started in 2017. Regular social gatherings take place where people who may feel lonely or socially isolated come together for some food, a drink and a chat. These events are sponsored by the national award-winning Millers Fish & Chips and hosted at YSJ's multi-million-pound Sports Campus.

YSJ's sports campus is home to YSJ Active, who offer an inclusive range of opportunities for sport, exercise and recreation for students, staff and the wider community. YSJ Active embody the World Health Organization's (1946) definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This holistic approach recognises the importance of social support, human connections and meaningful relationships in measuring national and personal wellbeing.

The Government (2018, 18) defines loneliness as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.' In Britain, human connections have become harder and more difficult to maintain in an increasingly digital age, where work and leisure habits have changed. Meaningful relationships are also affected by life transitions such as relocating, divorce or bereavement. People can go for days, weeks or even a month without seeing a friend or family member. This research project evaluates the social value of a community project aimed at combatting loneliness.

Key information

- In 2018, then Prime Minister Theresa May situated loneliness alongside childhood obesity and mental wellbeing as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time (HM GOV, 2018).

- Loneliness indiscriminately effects people from all walks of life, although it is more pronounced in people who are widows, have poor health or a long-term illness or disability, and have caring responsibilities (ONS, 2018).

- Loneliness is as damaging to our physical health as smoking and obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Valtorta et al. 2016).

- 5.0% of people in Great Britain (2.6 million adults) reported that they felt lonely "often" or "always" between 3 April and 3 May 2020, about the same proportion as pre-Covid19 lockdown levels. Those feeling lonely "often or always" and in the past seven days had lower personal well-being scores including higher anxiety scores than the Great Britain average (ONS, 2020).

- 30% of Britons surveyed said they would be embarrassed to say they felt lonely, making it more difficult for people to seek support (Griffin, 2010).

What does the literature say?

Pinker (2015) draws on psychological, sociological and social neuroscience studies to illustrate how face-to-face contact is crucial for happiness, resilience and longevity. Therefore, Pinker (2015) is sceptical of the effectiveness of virtual connectedness offered by new technologies. Instead, she argues that to survive and thrive we need close physical social bonds akin to those in traditional villages. Similarly, through evidencing experimental ways of organising living, Cottam (2018) maintains that human connection is at the heart of relationship-centred approach to tackling loneliness. This approach is needed, Cottam (2018) argues, because the welfare state is not able to meet new challenges within 21st century Britain. For example, many current health services are designed to manage needs but do not effectively build people's capabilities (Cottam, 2018).

Humans' needs for close physical social bonds have been academically analysed. Travers and Milgram (1969) seminal examination of social networks questioned the probability of any two randomly selected individuals knowing each other, or how many acquaintances might connect them in a chain of people. This became the well-known 'Six degrees of separation' experiment. Advancing this Small World Theory, Granovetter (1973) differentiated between strong and weak ties as social contacts. Weak ties referred to contacts less likely to be socially involved with each other. Focusing on American society, Putnam (2000) argued that since the 1970s there has been a gradual decline in strong ties experienced through traditional civic, social and fraternal organisations. However, Putnam (2000) suggested that sport could be a tool to (re)build community ties, enabling people to (re)develop strong ties and acquire what he referred to as social capital.

These arguments are evident in Her Majesty's Government, who in 2018 launched A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change. Tasked with leading this strategy was Tracey Crouch MP, the UK's first

Minister for Sport, Civil Society and Loneliness. This role endorses Putnam's suggestion that sport can bring people together and help develop meaningful relationships, regardless of people's background, age, gender, ethnicity or religion. In August 2020, 32 English professional football clubs launched 'Tackling Loneliness Together' projects (EFL Trust, 2020). There is vast literature on the efficacy of professional sports clubs' community projects aimed at tackling social ills such as crime, poverty and substance abuse (Taylor et al. 2015). However, comparable research evaluating loneliness-based interventions is yet to be published.

That said, literature reviews on interventions for loneliness offer several conclusions. Firstly, there is a need for increased public and professional awareness that loneliness is a condition that is largely indiscriminatory (Cacioppo et al. 2015). Secondly, interventions focused on addressing social support, social skills, and opportunities for social intervention have proved effective, but not as effective as those that address deficits in social cognition (Masi et al. 2011). Thirdly, given rises in technology, there is some evidence that computer and internet-based interventions can decrease loneliness in older populations. Fourthly, older adults were more likely to use the computer and the internet for communication to strengthen existing social networks with family and friends, develop new social activities and enhance social support for those with mobility or activity limitations (Choi et al. 2012; Poscia et al. 2018).

Key Points for Consideration

- Humans are socially hard-wired. Opportunities for strong social ties are diminishing among certain populations. Sporting communities offer one vehicle to promote social inclusion.

Findings

The analysis of data is separated into four themes, presented in chronological order: (i) the concept, (ii) motivations to attend, (iii) experiences of attending, and (iv) opportunities for development..

The concept

The simplicity, accessibility and relatedness of Fish and Chip Friday was cited as being effective. As initiator Neil Gulliver put it, "what better way to spend Friday evenings than socialising whilst eating a quintessential British dish". For £5, all attendees received national award-winning Fish and Chips and a drink. Participants particularly liked the intimate round table room set-up, which overlooked sport fields and offered a wide screen television for watching iconic Rugby matches. The effectiveness of this concept lies in tradition, nationalism and social identity. Since 1860s, Fish and Chips have become a much-loved British dish. Dickens (1838; 1859) and Orwell (1937) portrayed them as 'home comforts' for the working classes, whilst British Governments used them to boost morale during both World Wars (Walton, 2000). Winston Churchill was reported as calling them 'good companions', and they are alleged to be Queen Elizabeth II favourite take away meal. With religious origins, Fish and Chip Friday suppers have become customary amongst many British families. Therefore, it seemed that this supper offered more than just delicious cuisine, but met those involved identity preferences, whether national or social class-based, and offered nostalgic feelings of stronger social ties.

Motivations to attend

Started in 2017, Fish and Chip Friday's were set-up as an antidote to the cold, wet and dark November month. They were advertised by in Matchday programmes, social media sites and word of mouth. Alongside the food, other reasons why participants attended this initiative, and not others, is epitomised in the following participant quotes:

"This is like my family; they are like a family to me. I used to look at my mother, but I lost my mam"

"I come to support the club. It is supporting the club isn't it."

Participants intrinsic motivations were based on the need to break the home routine and wanting to feel warmth from intimate face-to-face contact (Pinker, 2015). For some, these close social bonds took the role of a surrogate family. Participants extrinsic motivations centred on feelings of loyalty towards the club, embodied by their wearing of YCK rugby shirts. This selfless reasoning illustrates the broader sense of worth and purpose participants attached to this initiative. Collectively, the emotional capital (Putnam, 2000) available through this initiative was strong enough for participants to overcome the stigma attached to expressing feelings of loneliness (Griffin, 2010). Their motivations also managed to break the cycle of social isolation for those involved in sometimes difficult to reach groups (ONS, 2018). The chance to meet like-minded people who shared a likening for a hearty meal and a passion for rugby league prompted the development of stronger ties of social contacts (Granovetter, 1973), which offered participants what Putnam (2000) referred to as bonding capital. More broadly, this represents the social capital attainable within sport-based communities based on common shared interests and mutual levels of understanding.

Experiences of attending

Due to popular demand, November meetings became monthly gatherings throughout the calendar year, indicating participants general positive experiences. Due to capacity, gatherings were capped at 30 people. Get-togethers became so vibrant that sessions often overran in duration to the extent that volunteers would politely usher folks out. That said, organiser Neil confessed, "these events are the highlight of my month". Neil found pleasure in helping others, whilst also benefitting from the relaxing atmosphere events offered. This raises the broader question, 'who is looking after those looking after others' (Grey-Thompson, 2017). Despite being initiator, Fish and Chip Fridays served as a release for Neil, partly due to how they developed, as discussed below.

Like in any community, trends and changes occurred within Fish and Chip Fridays. By the end of the first year, there had been a shift from a service provided by YCK & YSJ Active to a participant-organiser led event. Neil commented, "It was really pleasing to see, and helpful, when Fred [pseudonym] started ringing up to order fish and chips, and John [another participant] collected them on his way to the Sports Park". Embodying a sense of a home from home, participants undertaking of active roles were largely based on their appreciation for those who started the initiative and their willingness to contribute to its continued success. Again, whilst centred on extrinsic motivations, these participants contributions offered them a sense of purpose and they developed a clear sense of shared ownership over the community initiative (Cottam, 2018). Furthermore, the gatherings grew organically to encompass more than just lonely people, but also carers or those who suffer from dementia (ONS, 2018).

Opportunities for development

These following opportunities were generated from responses offered and the author's evaluations.

1. Covid-19 restrictions stopped these events. To erode time, place and human contact, virtual means could be used. Whilst these methods have proved effective in loneliness interventions (Choi et al. 2012; Poscia et al. 2018), technological capability would need to be considered and regular phone-calls may be a more suitable alternative, as per Age UK's Volunteer as a telephone befriender initiative. Volunteers need not be YCK staff but could be the participants themselves (Cottam, 2018). This would maintain strong social ties and meaningful relationships, aiding the continuity of the community cohesiveness (Pinker, 2015).

2. Given the broader health issues of some participants, the initiative could partner with similar sport-centred initiatives. The Sporting Memories Foundation use physical activity to tackle loneliness, low mood and dementia. Equally, YSJ Active also host Active Life, Active Mind aimed at those with dementia, as well offering allotments and green spaces, enabling capacity for a Men in Sheds style initiative.

3. Partnerships offer greater staff capacity, pooling of resources and more funding capacities. However, it would be important to not lose the identity associated with Fish and Chip Fridays by involving regular participants in proposed developments.

4. The opening of the York Community Stadium Leisure Complex alongside York's hosting of the 2021 men's and women's Rugby League World Cup could be used as platforms to develop the size and scope of these gatherings by trying to reach additional members from further hard to reach groups effected by loneliness (ONS, 2018).

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Conclusion

It should be noted that the scale of this research project was affected by Covid19 restrictions. However, in many respects, the preliminary qualitative findings suggested that this initiative was effective in decreasing people's feelings of loneliness. This effectiveness was centred on the simplicity, accessibility and relatedness of Fish and Chip Fridays and the jovial, cohesive and caring atmosphere which was enabled. In this environment, loneliness was de-stigmatised, whilst enablement was promoted and witnessed in displays of autonomy, empowerment and ownership. Over two years, the initiative has become more popular and regular, which is impressive. However, Covid-19 and forthcoming infrastructure developments offer challenges and opportunities for maintaining and enhancing this initiative. If co-constructed with those centrally involved, this initiative has the capacity to expand, become far-reaching and essentially more effective. Future research could seek to quantify the effectiveness described here by measuring loneliness pre, during and post the intervention.

More broadly, whilst preliminary in its nature, this research project demonstrated that sporting communities continue to offer social capital (Putnam, 2000). This function is needed now more than ever in an increasing disconnected social world (ONS, 2020). This societal trend has significantly contributed to increased levels loneliness, which is damaging people's mental, physical and emotional health (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Valtorta et al. 2016). Therefore, predating Her Majesties Government (2018) strategy and the EFL Trust (2020), YCK Foundation and YSJ Active should be applauded for seeking to offer a localised intervention to combat this social ill. The efficiency of co-ordinating such an initiative highlights the ability and need of key city stakeholders, i.e. professional sport clubs and universities, to continue their public engagement work in the face of public sector cuts. However, these organisations often face mounting financial pressures, possibly impacting their civic responsibilities. The next decade will challenge the resolve of such initiatives and test ideological notions of 'the big society'.

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