

SOCIOLOGY OF SPORTS

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MEANING OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

- ◉ **Sociology of sport**, alternately referred to as **sports sociology**, is a sub-discipline of **sociology** which focuses on **sports** as social phenomena. It is an area of study concerned with various socio-cultural structures, patterns, and **organizations** or groups involved with sport.
- ◉ There are many perspectives through which **sport** can be viewed. Therefore, very often some binary divisions are stressed, such as: professional vs. amateur, mass vs. top-level, active vs. passive/spectator, men vs. women, sports vs. play (as an antithesis to organized and **institutionalized** activity). Following **feminist** or other reflexive and tradition-breaking **paradigms** sports are sometimes studied as contested activities, i.e. as activities in the centre of various people/groups interests (connection of **sports** and **gender**, **mass media**, or state-politics).
- ◉ The sociology of sports also referred to as sports sociology, is the study of the relationship between sports and society. It examines how **culture** and values influence sports, how sports influences culture and values, and the relationship between sports and the media, politics, economics, religion, race, gender, youth, etc. It also looks at the relationship between sports and **social inequality** and **social mobility**.

Gender Inequality

A large area of study within the sociology of sports is [gender](#), including gender inequality and the role that gender has played in sports throughout history. For example, in the 1800s, the participation of women in sports was discouraged or banned. It was not until 1850 that physical education for women was introduced at colleges. In the 1930s, basketball, track and field, and softball were considered too masculine for proper women. Even as late as 1970, women were banned from running the marathon in the Olympics—a ban that wasn't lifted until the 1980s.

Women runners were even banned from competing in regular marathon races. When Roberta Gibb sent in her entry for the 1966 Boston marathon, it was returned to her, with a note saying that women were not physically capable of running the distance. So she hid behind a bush at the start line and snuck into the field once the race was underway. She was lauded by the media for her impressive 3:21:25 finish.

Runner Kathrine Switzer, inspired by Gibb's experience, was not so lucky the following year. Boston's race directors at one point tried to forcibly remove her from the race. She did finish, in 4:20 and some change, but the photo of the tussle is one of the most glaring instances of the gender gap in sports in existence.

However, by 1972, things began to change, specifically with the passage of Title IX, a federal law that states:

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

Title IX effectively makes it possible for female athletes attending schools that receive federal funding to compete in the sport or sports of their choice. And competition at the college level is very often a gateway to a professional career in athletics.

Gender Identity

Today, women's participation in sports is approaching men's, though differences are still present. Sport reinforces gender-specific roles beginning at a young age. For instance, schools do not have programs for girls in football, wrestling, and boxing. And few men sign up for dance. Some studies have shown that participation in "masculine" sports creates gender identity conflict for females while participation in "feminine" sports creates gender identity conflict for males.

The problem compounds when dealing with athletes who are transgender or gender neutral. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Caitlyn Jenner, who, in an interview with "[Vanity Fair](#)" magazine about her transition, shares how even when she was achieving Olympic glory as Bruce Jenner, she felt confused about her gender and the part it played in her athletic success.

Media Revealed Biases

Those who study the sociology of sports also keep tabs on the role various media play in revealing biases. For instance, viewership of certain sports definitely varies by gender. Men typically view basketball, football, hockey, baseball, pro wrestling, and boxing. Women on the other hand tend to tune in to coverage of gymnastics, figure skating, skiing, and diving. Men's sports are also covered more often than women's sports, both in print and on television.

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

- The sociology of sport began to emerge as a formally recognized subdiscipline of sociology in the second half of the twentieth century. There were a number of earlier examples of sociological attention to the field of sport. In the United States, Veblen (1899) referred to **sports** as “marks of an arrested spiritual development” (1934:253) and to college sports as “manifestations of the predatory temperament” (p. 255) in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. W. I. Thomas (1901) and G. E. Howard (1912) dealt with “the gaming instinct” and the “social **psychology** of the spectator,” respectively in articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Spencer, Simmel, Weber, Piaget, Hall, Sumner, Huizinga, and Mead all made reference to play, games, and/or sport in their work, but it was probably the German, Heinz Risse (1921) who first characterized sport as a sociological field of study in his book *Soziologie des Sports*.
- Following World War II, there was growing interest in sport from a sociological perspective. By the 1960s, television was beginning to devote significant amounts of time to sport, professional leagues were developing and expanding, organized **youth sports** in communities and educational institutions were beginning to proliferate, and the Cold War was being fought at the Olympics and other international competitions. In the United States, social scientists such as Gregory Stone, David Riesman, Erving Goffman, Eric Berne, James Coleman, and Charles Page all produced works referring to sport. Their interests were reflected internationally in the emergence of the first academic association in the field in 1964. The International Committee for the Sociology of Sport (now named the International Sociology of Sport Association) was comprised of both sociologists and physical educators from East and West Germany, France, Switzerland, Finland, England, the Soviet Union, Poland, the United States, and Japan. The Committee/Association, which is affiliated with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization through the International Council of Sport Sciences and Physical Education and the International Sociological Association, has held annual conferences since 1966 and began to produce a journal (the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, now published by Sage) in that same year.
- The first English language books in the field also began to appear in the 1960s (e.g., McIntosh 1963; Jokl 1964). Kenyon and Loy's (1965) call for a sociology of sport is considered to be a key programmatic statement, and the same authors produced the first anthology in the field, *Sport, **Culture**, and Society: A Reader on the Sociology of Sport* (Loy and Kenyon 1969).

INTERDISCIPLINARITY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

- The sociology of sport provides a large social scientific umbrella and may be one of the more interdisciplinary, or at least multidisciplinary, subdisciplines in the social sciences.
- In addition to sociology, researchers whose work is perhaps more recognized as belonging to other mainstream social science disciplines such as political science, economics, political economy, social psychology, cultural anthropology, history, human/cultural geography, and religious studies have all published in sociology of sport journals and presented papers at sociology of sport conferences.
- Thus, the sociology of sport is, in many ways, a shorthand term for the social science of sport.
- The sociology of sport has also experienced the same type of fragmentation as mainstream sociology in the last 30 years. The emergence of departments such as “policy studies,” “gender studies,” “media/communications studies,” and “race and ethnic studies,” many employing individuals trained as sociologists, produces another layer of social sciences. Scholars in these departments are also carrying out sport-related research and presenting and publishing work in the sociology of sport.
- A third area of interdisciplinarity involves the relationship of sociology of sport to both sociology and physical education (now sometimes called kinesiology or human kinetics).
- Sage (1997) provides a detailed account of the relationships between sociology and physical education in the sociology of sport. He points to examples such as the following:
- Sociology of sport courses, required by physical education departments, being taught by sociology departments
- Physical education graduate students specializing in the sociology of sport taking course work in sociology departments
- Sociologists serving on thesis and dissertation committees for such graduate students
- Professors employed by sociology and physical education departments being cross-appointed to the other department

RESISTANCE/CULTURAL STUDIES

- ◉ The reproduction thesis describes a dynamic, but one-way relationship between sport and society. If the status quo was effectively reproduced from generation to generation, no changes in the relative power of social groups, and their social and cultural relations, would occur. Individuals are rendered as passive agents, falsely conscious consumers of the new “opiate of the masses” (sport), and unaware of the forces involved in producing and reproducing inequality and maintaining their subordinate status. As Coakley (1993) notes (see also Wrong 1961), structuralist views of socialization (both functionalist and critical/ social reproduction) see individuals “as passive learners ‘molded’ and ‘shaped’ by ‘society’” (p. 170). If individuals are believed to have some part in understanding, giving meaning to, and shaping their destiny, it is necessary to reintroduce agency. The resistance thesis attempts to capture the two-way process in which reproductive forces are resisted—in which agency articulates with social structure.

THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

- ◉ Making predictions about the future is always risky, and the best that can be achieved is to attempt to “divine” the future from current events. Although the types of research outlined previously are continuing, there is also evidence that some changes are occurring. For example, there appears to be an increasing level of theoretical and methodological sophistication in analyses of the following:
- ◉ Sport and globalization: There are an increasing number of studies of the local-global nexus and an emerging area of research deals with sport and social development in developing nations.
- ◉ Sport and social class: This has reemerged as an area of study, employing both qualitative and quantitative data and theoretical approaches that are shedding new light on the relationship.
- ◉ Community studies: These are beginning to explore issues of sport and social capital, and to compare and contrast Bourdieu and Putnam in their approaches to the issue of community.
- ◉ Sport and identity issues. These are being problematized and theorized in new and interesting ways.
- ◉ Race and ethnic relations: Recent studies employing critical race theory and postcolonial theory suggest potential theoretical breakthroughs.
- ◉ Democratization studies: Issues of participation in sport, and barriers to participation, are being examined again in terms of, for example, social inclusion/exclusion.
- ◉ Sport media studies: In addition to ongoing content and textual analyses, there are an increasing number of audience and production studies.
- ◉ Sport spectators: There has been a reemergence of interest in spectators, using both survey and ethnographic methods.

ROLE OF SOCIOLOGY: IDENTIFY PLAY, SPORTS AND GAMES

- ◉ Play, games, contests, and sports have crucial and quite specific roles in the general socialization process. The sense of self is not natural; it develops through childhood socialization as a result of role-playing. Influenced by George Herbert Mead and Jean Piaget among others, sociologists have identified two stages in childhood socialization: a “play stage” and a “game stage.” In the play stage (more accurately, the stage of noncompetitive games), children play the role of a father, mother, teacher, firefighter, or athlete. Children learn the difference between their real selves and the parts they are playing. As they grow older, children shift from noncompetitive games (such as peekaboo and playing house) to contests (such as footraces and ball games). In the game stage (more accurately, the stage of competitive games), children encounter stricter rules and regulations. They develop a reflexive conception of the self and its position in relation to others, and they learn to see themselves as others see them. Through socialization with “significant others” and with the “generalized other,” children develop their sense of identity and self. They become self-conscious social actors.
- ◉ In most premodern societies, boys were encouraged by their families to compete in sports, which were presumed to prepare them for their adult roles as warriors and workers, while girls were encouraged to continue to play noncompetitive games that prepared them for motherhood. In modern societies, boys and young men continue to outnumber girls and young women involved in sports competition, but the gender gap has narrowed considerably. This has been true for the private clubs that organize European sports as well as for the interscholastic and intercollegiate teams that are a prominent feature of the North American sports landscape.

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ACHIEVEMENTS/WINNING “RESPECT”

- ◉ Some 30 years ago, Gunther Luschen (1975) argued that the sociology of sport could serve to (1) contribute to sociological theory; (2) contribute to the body of knowledge of physical education, physical culture (or sport science); (3) contribute to public policy problems; and (4) provide sport personnel with a better understanding of their own status and role within society (cited in Loy 1996:959). Since that time, while there is some question as to whether sociology of sport has contributed to sociological theory (although sport has provided an ideal forum for testing theory), it has certainly contributed to the body of knowledge in both sociology and physical education, contributed to public policy, and provided many sport personnel with “a better understanding.” In parallel with the previous section, the following provides a brief overview of the research accomplishments of the sociology of sport in each of the periods identified above, and concludes with an examination of recent developments and gaining respect.

THANK YOU