

Sociology of Sport: Conceptual and Topical Issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to encourage students and readers in general to think more critically about sports and how they are related to contemporary society. We emphasize socialization impacts of sports as well as increasing process of organization, commercialisation, and globalisation of sports. Sports are social constructions and particularly in a form presented in mass media are an integral part of modern way of life. It carries pleasure as well as sadness for millions of people. Sports are institutionalised competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participant motivation, by personal enjoyment and external rewards. Global aspects of contemporary sports are discussed from the point of view of their technological, economical, medial and ideological dimensions.

KEYWORDS

sport, socialization, culture, leisure, globalisation, top sport, mass media

Sociology is the systematic study of social behaviour and human groups. It focuses primarily on the influence of social relationships upon people's attitudes and manners and on how societies are established and how they change. One major goal of sociology is to identify the underlying, recurring patterns and influences on social behaviour. In contrast to other social sciences, sociology emphasizes the influence that society has on people's attitudes and demeanour and the ways in which people shape society. *Sociologists* are concerned with social issues, social relationships, social organizations, and social change. Their overall goal is to enable people to understand, control, and change their lives and human needs among all categories of people to be met at both individual and group levels (Yiannakis, Melnick 2001).

Sociology is very helpful when it comes to studying sports as *social phenomena*. It provides concepts, theoretical approaches, and research methods to describe and understand behaviour and social interactions as they occur in particular social and cultural contexts. It enables us to "observe" conducting social groups and how this is connected with history, politics, economics, and cultural life.

Sport is a part of social and cultural life and helps us to describe and understand social issues in a given cultural, social and political context. When people are asked, "What is sport?" they say: "Well, that depends on whom you ask, when you ask, and where you ask". They explain that not everyone has

the same way of looking at and defining sports and that ideas about sports *vary over time* and from *one place to another*. In cultures that emphasize *cooperative relationships*, the idea that people should compete with each other for rewards might be defined as disruptive, if not immoral. For people in cultures that emphasize *competition*, physical activities and games that have no winners may seem pointless. This means that any definition of sports *reflects the structure and organization of relationships and social life in a particular society* at a particular point in time.

Social science faces a plurality of *conceptual spectrum* relating to sports, physical culture and kinetic activities. Qualitative changes in sports alone have updated new concepts such as physical recreation, sport management, professional sport, high performance sport, elite sport, etc. Given that conceptual plurality is rooted in a different theoretical attitude toward sport as a social phenomenon, this reflects contemporary changes in value orientation, the nature of the socialization process, operation and behaviour of the mass media, system of sponsorship, new aspects of marketing communication, attitudes towards violence in sports, relation to race, ethnicity, money, politics and family life. Children all around the world grow up with vivid images of televised sports and sport figures, they play video games based on these sports, and they are encouraged to participate in sports by their parents, teachers, and the elite athletes who are often presented in their lives as a new sort of admired celebrity.

Each *sociological theory* provides a framework, which can be used to help us understand sports as social phenomena. For example, the functionalist theory offers an explanation for the positive consequence associated with sporting involvement in the lives of both athletes and spectators. The *conflict theory* identifies serious problems in sports and explains how and why players and spectators are oppressed and exploited for economic purposes. The theory of *social interaction* suggests that an understanding of sports requires an understanding of the meanings, identities, and interactions associated with sporting involvement. The *critical theories* suggest that sports are concerned with social relations and culture in complex and diverse ways and that sports change as power and resources shift and as these changes take place in social, political and economic relations in society. The *feminist theories* have taken a critical approach that emphasizes gender as a category of experience and sports as sites for producing, reproducing and transforming ideas about gender and the structure of gender relations in society. The *figurational theory* identifies the complex and long-term social processes through which modern sports have emerged and have changed in various contexts, cultures and societies (Coakley 2001, p. 30-54).

We define **sport** as an institutionalized motoric activity requiring systematic physical exertion motivated through desire to improve physical shape, specific personal experience or intended result, performance, victory and reward (Sekot 2006, p. 23). It is evident that historical development for participation in organized, competitive sports has not been equally distributed by social class, gender, race, ethnicity, age or ability. In the most highly economically developed societies we now face rapid growth and popularity of high profile competitive sports, in nature predominantly secular, specialized, rationalized, with typical features of bureaucratization, quantification and intensive orientation on setting and breaking records. Organized sports in most developed countries have become a combination of business, entertainment, education, morality, training, masculinity rituals, technology transfer, professional mobility, declaration of identity, and endorsements of allegiance to nations, teams or corporate sponsors. However, sports are also leisure and recreational activities through which people seek physical challenges and exciting experiences, seldom available in the rest of their lives.

Becoming involved and staying involved in sports occurs in connection with the general *socialization* process in people's lives. The decision to play sports is influenced by the availability of opportunities, the existence of social support, the process of identity formation, and the cultural

context in which decisions are made. When we consider sports and socialization, we mean to respect the fact of various impacts of given different sports on different experiences and consequences. It is evident from the context of what occurs in connection with power and performance sports, that it is quite different from what occurs in connection with pleasure and participation in recreational sports. The former emphasise performances, winning, championships, records and rewards, while the latter derive pleasure from wellness and satisfaction of a magnificent physical and mental condition. The visibility and popularity of power and performance sports today in many societies are related to issues of power and ideology: These sports fit the interests of people who have the power and wealth to sponsor and promote sports.

Because popular beliefs have emphasized sporting participation as a character-building experience, it is for some people surprising that high performance sports are spoiled by an existence of brutality and doping substances used among athletes or spectators. So we speak about deviance based on ignoring or rejecting norms, and we face deviance based on the unquestioned acceptance of norms. Both attitudes are derived from the uttermost exertion of reaching the best results, of winning, of receiving the best imaginable reward. But we also face deviance off the field and away from sports.

Since the 1950s, an increasing amount of *free time* and sporting participation of children has occurred in organized programs supervised by adults. Both parents, working outside the home, believed in the positive impact of organized and adult-supervised after-school and summertime programs. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of elite sports training facilities dedicated to producing highly skilled and specialized athletes who can move up through increasingly difficult levels of competition. As organized programs have become increasingly exclusive, structured, performance oriented, and elitist, some young people have sought *alternatives*, which allow them to engage freely in physical activities on their own terms. Young people, playing on their own, are interested in action, scoring, personal involvement, and challenging or exciting experiences and opportunities to reaffirm friendship during games. The personal experience of children in these *two sport forms* are usually different. Informal sports are generally action-centred, while organized sports are rule-centred. Playing informal sports clearly involves the use of interpersonal and decision-making skills. Playing organized sports involves the personal ability of learning the rules and strategies used in activities that are highly visible and important within the given culture (Sekot 2006).

Sports and leisure are two phenomena of mutual dependence. Sociologists discuss the character and nature of leisure and mention the position of informal participant sports in the context of recreational activities and sport tourism. The position of sport in the context of structure of values is discussed too.

The phenomenon of sport has been strongly transformed during the past two or three decades, mostly as a consequence of the process of commercialization and medialization of elite professional sports. Sports nowadays are generally presented and deal with a consumer product in the course of the market regulated process. Executives of sponsor organizations use top sporting events as vehicles for delivering a cultural message they want people in the world to hear. They want people watching the Olympic Games to agree that competition is the best way to allocate rewards in life and that successful and powerful people (and corporations) really deserve their money and power. Marketing specialists of such global corporations also want to develop an approach to life that associates pleasure with consumption and social status with corporate logos. The market economy in such a context wants to establish consumption as a way of life, as a foundation for culture itself. Its profit and power depend upon it, and marketing strategies use it mostly in power and performance elite sports (Slack 2004).

Speaking in the *mass media* about sports means in most cases speaking and hearing about high performance elite sports. Forgoing facts reflect the value orientation of sport to commercialization and

changes in sport as a successive process of transition of sport into an entertainment domain of mass culture. It is steadfastly more and more evident that whilst mass culture adulterates an individual and societal process of spiritual development, top elite sports intensify consumable attitudes to sport and kinetic activities. The commercial frame of top sports has a negative impact on the general human ability to be involved, indulged and entertained in a complex of active spiritual and physical developments of the personality. Some scholars in this context openly discuss the “marriage between television and sports” (Cashmore 2003).

Sports have not only *grown in scale and popularity*, but have become modified into a virtual theatre. An effort by commercial TV stations to drag sports toward popular entertainment and record-breaking viewing figures is of great marketing importance. Both television and spectators of elite sports transformed each other: Television validating its place as a premier electronic medium and sports mutating into an entertainment medium on a market par with show business. The demographic profile of the viewers is attractive enough to a certain class of advertisers, whose willingness to pay some of the advertising fees in the industry has propelled the growth of network television revenues from the attractive sporting events. A futuristic scenario of commercial mass media means: When people refer to the spectators, they mean the people watching television at home. The commercial model of sport is very demanding on time, mostly absorbed not in active sporting activities, but in *passive watching* of these events (Jarvie 2006, pp. 131-150).

The colourful arena of sport is in some context connected also with phenomenon of *violence*: on the sports field as well as off it. This fact is undoubtedly directly or at least indirectly connected with the fact that professional top-performance sports often lay the emphasis on the difference in dimensions of strength and power, lays stress on control of other people and adore a status derived from victory over the opposition. In addition it tolerates behaviour and actions that are usually punishable outside the arena of sports. The growing existence of violence among spectators evokes a number of questions. The perhaps most cardinal one is: Does sport provoke violence in spectators/viewers? In this respect it must be pointed out that sports events attract hundreds of millions of spectators worldwide, in the medial form sport actually involves in some cases billions of viewers. From this point of view it is necessary to distinguish between TV viewers and the direct audience of a sporting event. Isolated cases of striking mass violence by sports fans are rather exceptional today. But if this occurs we usually face serious manifestations of social deviations. In this respect, also the possible limits of the systematic efforts of sporting events organizers and the police to prevent negative phenomena in the field of sports are actualized. But in many cases and in many places the existence of deviations in sports highlights the obvious or hidden problems of the respective sport branch and in a wider context also the limitations of the reference framework of relevant social, economic and political structures. The danger of sport brutality, especially in the form of sport sectarianism non-impartial mass behaviour of fans particularly on the part of “flag bearers” or “hoolifans”, suggest what practices a crowd bereft of rationality might use if they held real power.

Global aspects of contemporary sports are discussed from the point of view of their technological, economical, medial and ideological dimensions. This is the reason why we also discuss very important actual problems of given relations between sport and globalisation in the context of the newly emerged process of sport mobility. At that period of European history we have to remark an occurrence of sport labour migration and issue a reminder of related problems of production of indigenous sporting talent and respective exploitation of people from non-EU societies. This movement of people changing their professional place or even their place of residence involved athletes, but also included coaches, officials, administrators and sport scientists. We can postulate questions about attractiveness of given component sports for migrants, about what professional

athletes mostly experience along their journeys, and what the impact on the host and origin countries is. At the same time we are convinced that for most sport migrants their status and market value is derived from the ethos of hard work, differential rewards and win-at-all-costs approach. The crucial topic of mutual relations of sports in the context of globalization is discussed also from an political and ecological perspective. In such a context it must be reiterated that the media have a significant impact on our society and that they affect our emotions and create our admired *stars*, *icons* and *heroes* (Smart 2005, Sekot 2008).

Sociology is also concentrated on *future trends* of complex phenomenon of sport. The growing importance of sports in society makes it more necessary for us to take a closer and more critical look at how sports are defined, organized, played and presented. As we do this, some scholars will call for changes in dominant forms of sports or even reject those forms and call for new and alternative sports. But we should not expect widespread revolutionary changes in the near future. Changing sports remain a difficult challenge. Changes reflect the visions that people have about what they want sports to be in the future. Changes in sports can be made within sport itself, in connection with opposition groups, through efforts to create new and alternative sport forms, and indirectly by making changes in the society in which sports exist. Regardless of the vantage point, we must try to view the active recreational sports as an integral part of the all-around personality of modern society, and an integral part of one's leisure and structural values. We can also suppose gradual improvement of the European cooperation in multifarious levels of sports as a powerful phenomenon of intercultural cooperation.

Despite the immense growth of opportunities in different levels and forms of sports in contemporary global context we face the fact that sport in general has never been equally distributed by social class, gender, skin color, ethnicity, age, or ability. In most Western cultures, the organizational sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon is usually associated with today's *high-profile organized sports*.

Sport participation is more likely to have *positive effects* on people's lives when it is associated with opportunities for testing and developing identities apart from playing sports, and contributes to formation of new relationships, challenges, competences and responsibilities including those outside of sports. Neither explicitly good nor bad socialization outcomes occur automatically in connection with sport participation. In fact, the impact of all our experiences in sports is mediated by the social and cultural context in which we live.

Playing sports is a social as much as a psychical experience. The socialization that occurs does so *through social relationships*. Sports come in many forms, socialization processes related to power and performance sports are different from experiences related to pleasure and participation sports. *Power and performance models of sports* are highly organized and competitive and emphasize:

1. Use of *strength, speed, and power* to push human limits and aggressively dominate opponents in the quest for victories and championships.
2. The idea that excellence is proved through *competitive success* and achieved through intense dedication and hard work, combined with making sacrifices, risking one's personal well being and playing even under the influence of pain.
3. The importance of *setting records*, defining the body as a machine, and using technology to control and monitor the body.
4. *Selection systems* based on physical skills and competitive success.
5. *Hierarchical authority structures*, in which athletes are subordinate to coaches and coaches are subordinate to owners and administrators.
6. *Antagonism* to the point where opponents are defined as enemies.

The pleasure and participation model of sports in accordance with its nature involves competition, but the primary emphasis is on the connection between people and personal expression through participation, emphasizing:

1. Active participation revolving around a combination of types of connections – connections between people, between mind and body, and between physical activity and the environment.
2. An ethic of personal expression, *enjoyment*, growth, *good health*, and mutual concern and support for team-mates and opponents.
3. Empowerment – not power – created by experiencing the body as a source of *pleasure and well-being*.
4. Inclusive participation based on an accommodation of *differences in physical skills*.
5. Democratic decision-making structures characterized by cooperation, the sharing of power, and *give-and-take relations* between coaches and athletes.
6. Interpersonal support around the idea of competing *with*, not against; opponents are not enemies, but those who *test* each other (Coakley 2001).

In fact, some people play sports that contain elements of *both forms* and reflect many ideas about what is important in physical activities. However, power and performance sports remain dominant today in the sense that they receive the most attention and support. *Not all sports are the same when it comes to socialization*. The emphasis on performance is also tied to the development of *elite, specialized training programs*. Organized programs in gymnastics, figure skating, ice hockey, football, tennis, and other sports now boast an explicit emphasis on making children into headline-grabbing, revenue-producing sporting machines. Children in these programs may become “symbols of striking consumptions”: for the parents, who pay the bills and brag to friends about the accomplishments of their children. And children of that sort become child laborers, because the livelihoods of coaches and other adults depend on their performances.

Increased interest in alternative sports reflects a liking for freely physical activities on boys or girls' own terms. Because organized youth sports are the most visible settings for children's sport participation, these unstructured and participant-controlled activities are referred to as alternative sports. *Alternative sports* encompass an infinite array of physical activities done individually or with groups. Their popularity is based, in part, on children's reactions against the highly structured character of adult-controlled, organized *sports*.

Playing informal sports clearly involves the use of “important civilizing functions” cultivating interpersonal and decision-making skills: children must be creative to organize games and keep them going. Informal sports provide experience involving cooperation, planning, flexibility, and improvisation.

Playing organized sports, on the other hand, involves a different set of experiences. In improving their ability to manage their relationships with adult authority figures, children also learn the rules and strategies used in activities that are highly visible and important within the culture, and through their participation they often gain status, which carries over into the rest of their lives. When they play organized sports, they see bureaucracy and hierarchy in action, and they become acquainted with forms of rule-governed teamwork and adult models of work and achievement. But children may in that setting view the world in passive terms, as something that is given rather than created. If this is true, children may grow up thinking they are powerless to change the world in which they live.

Organized youth sports require *time, money, and organizational skills*, and these usually come from *parents*. Therefore, playing organized sports is often *a family affair*. Children make choices about playing sports, but they have little control over the context in which they make their choices.

Many factors, including parents, peers, and the general social and cultural context in which they live, influence the alternatives from which they choose and how they define and give meaning to their choices. For example, *athletic ability*, coolness, toughness, and being “smooth” in social relationships are mostly determinants of the popularity of the boys. Very high or very low academic performance often subvert popularity among them. The popularity of the girls depends primarily on their families’ social status, the freedoms granted to them by their families, their physical appearance and grooming behavior, their abilities to manage relationships with boys and female peers, and their grades in school.

Boys are more likely than girls to think they are better than they actually are when it comes to sport skills. This has an effect on their self-confidence and their willingness to use and test their bodies in active ways and voluntarily participate in physical activities. The girls drop out of sports at higher rate than the boys do.

Many of the worst problems in youth sports occur in high-performance programs. It seems to be useful to *change* their policies, procedures, and rules to account for the rights and interests of children and to create less controlling sport environments, designed to promote children’s growth, development, and empowerment (Coakley 2001, p. 109-133).

Sports have been used throughout history as forms of public entertainment. However, sports have never been so thoroughly *commercialized* as they are today. Never before have economic factors so totally dominated decisions about sports, and never before have economic organizations and large corporate interests had so much power and control over the meaning, organization, and purpose of sports. Sports are not simply another big business. They are one of the fastest-growing industries in the U.S.A. and many other economically highly developed countries.

Because of the importance of *economic factors* in sports, we face the following questions:

1. Under what conditions do commercial sports emerge and prosper?
2. How does commercialization influence the meaning, organization, and purpose of sports?
3. Who are the people who own, sponsor, and promote sports, and what are their interests?
4. How much money do athletes make, and what is their legal status in various sports?

Commercial sports grow and prosper best under certain social and economic *conditions*:

1. They are most prevalent in market economies, where material rewards are highly valued by those connected with sports, including athletes, team owners, event sponsors and spectators.
2. Commercial sports usually exist in societies with large, densely populated cities, because they require a large concentration of potential spectators.
3. Commercial sports require that people in society have time, money, transportation, and media connections to attend or to tune into sports events through the media (mass cultural in nature). Commercial sports are a luxury, and they prosper only in societies where the standard of living is high enough that people can afford to use the resources of playing and watching events that have no tangible products.
4. Commercial sports require *large amounts of capital* to build and maintain stadiums and arenas in which events can be played and watched.
5. They are most likely to flourish in cultures where lifestyles involve high rates of consumption and emphasize material status symbols.

The market economy always privileges the interests of those who have the power and resources to influence which sports will be selected for promotion and coverage. When wealthy and powerful people are interested in a sport, it will be covered, promoted, and presented as if it had cultural significance in society. When sports promote the idea that success is achieved only through hard work and dedication to efficiency, people have their beliefs and expectations reaffirmed, and they

are willing to pay for that reaffirmation. And this is why athletes make so much money today – *they reaffirm a success ideology*, which reproduces privilege among powerful people around the globe (Slack 2004).

Commercial sports have become *global in scope* for two reasons. First, those who control, sponsor, and promote sports are looking constantly for new ways to expand their markets and maximize their profits. Second, transnational corporations with production and distribution in multiple countries can use sports as vehicles for introducing their products and services all around the world: sport organizations look for a global market.

The orientation associated with many spectator sports today has shifted from the aesthetic to the heroic. *Aesthetic orientation* emphasises beauty and pleasure of movement, mastery of technical skills, willingness to explore limits, commitment to staying active and involved as a participant; *heroic orientation* emphasises danger and excitement of movement, style or mastery of dramatic expression, willingness to go beyond limits, a commitment to victory and success of the team or sponsor.

At the present time in many affluent countries recently-built stadiums resemble *shopping malls*, and some fans define their attendance as a shopping opportunity. The people who attend games are a captive audience, and team owners want to capture as much of their entertainment money as possible. This fan has fallen for the lure of consumption to the point that he or she is less interested in the game than in buying products to prove his or her attendance at the game (Sekot 2008, 121-135).

When sports become popular community activities, government involvement often increases. Many sports require sponsorships, organization, and facilities – all of which depend on resources that only few individuals possess on their own. For this reason many people see government involvement in sports as a necessity. The nature and extent of *government involvement in sports* vary from one community and society to the next, and government involvement occurs for one or more of the following seven reasons:

1. To safeguard public order;
2. To maintain fitness and physical abilities among citizens;
3. To promote the prestige and power of a group, community, or nation;
4. To promote a sense of identity, belonging, and unity among citizens;
5. To reproduce values consistent with the dominant ideology in a community or society;
6. To increase support for political leaders and government;
7. To promote economic development in the community or society.

Some governments have attempted to safeguard the public order by sponsoring sporting events and programs for at-risk youth. Sport, it is argued, can be used to keep them *off the streets* and thereby control crime rates, vandalism, loneliness, and alienation. And: Sports have often been used in *military and police training*, so that soldiers and police will be more effective protectors of public order. Nations with government-funded health insurance programs often promote and sponsor sports to improve physical health in the general population and thereby *reduce the cost of health services*. Many people believe that sport participation improves fitness, fitness improves health, and good health reduces medical costs and improves professional and personal achievement. Government officials use international sports to establish their nation's legitimacy in the international sphere, and they believe that, when athletes from their country or nation win medals, their national image is enhanced around the world. This belief is strong and many governments now offer their athletes financial rewards for winning medals in the Olympics. Many government officials are convinced that sports create more than temporary good feelings of togetherness, trying also to maintain the idea of loyalty, discipline, determination, and the ability to keep working in the face of hardships and bad times.

Sports are social constructions, they change as ideas and relationships change in sports and in society. Regarding the future development of sports we believe power and performance sports will continue to be the most visible and publicized sport forms in the near future. The sponsors of these sports know very well that it is good for them to be associated with people and activities that stress efficiency, organization, competition, hard work, and the endurance of pain for the sake of progress. As long as the rewards of sponsorship go to those who are successful in power and performance sports, these sports will continue to thrive, and the athletes who play them will continue to be cultural *celebrities* who are paid to endorse the values of the sponsor. Power and performance will remain *dominant* in most cultures for many years to come, those with power and influence want it to be so. Spectators will again be encouraged to identify with sporting celebrities and their teams and to express their identification through the consumption of licensed merchandise and other products. Questions will be raised about using *technology* and pushing the *limits* in sports. Using technology means that athletes reach their potential, so they become machinelike. But this ultimately subverts natural creativity, freedom, spontaneity, and expression among athletes: some athletes resist in performance sports (Coakley 2001, Sekot 2006, 2008).

Entertainment and consumption will be the major organizing principles for the future. Financial profits and economic expansion will be the goals of most sports. The emphasis on entertainment will fuel the success of professional sports in forms of “*sportainment*”. Corporate conglomerates will buy teams and link them to their media, entertainment, and Internet divisions. Sport equipment manufacturers will continue to sell the idea that involvement in sports requires highly specialized and expensive equipment and clothing. Wealthy people will use sports as contexts for announcing their *status* and identities through appearance and visual display as much as through their physical abilities. But despite all such predictions it is to be believed that leisure pleasure sport will be an integral part of the lifestyle of masses of people to improve human wellbeing and quality of life as a form of everyday healthy activity compensating the demanding goals and objectives of our lives.

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