Theoretical Conceptions in Sport Social Sciences

Zbigniew Krawczyk

Almamer Economic University in Warsaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

In the presented study we assume, after Piotr Sztompka that a sociological theory is every set of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, abstract notions and general propositions concerning social reality which is to provide with explanation of existing descriptive knowledge about it and orient future research (Sztompka 1985, p. 12). In the discussed theory there have developed hitherto the following orientations: the systemic-functional one, the ethnomethodological one, symbolic interactionism, theory of conflict, socio-historical theory and positivist theory. They have together shaped theoretical conceptions in sociology of sport and – indirectly – in other social physical culture sciences.

Interpreting the issue in a prospective way, it can be assumed that in the future there will appear other theories, such as the theory of behaviour, the theory of rational choice, the sociobiological theory, the theory of power, the theory of neo-institutionalism and others.

Sociology, however, need not to be the only source of inspiration for socio-humane sports sciences. An equally important role can be played there by philosophy and psychology. Moreover, that thesis can be referred to other humanities, especially to history and pedagogy, as well as to philosophical, sociological and pedagogical versions of theory of physical culture – or to multidisciplinary theories, as e.g. postmodernist and globalist ones.

KEYWORDS

paradigm, theoretical orientation, sociological theory, sport social sciences

Social sports sciences – similar to all other sciences – do not constitute a simple reflection of objective reality. Quite the opposite: they are both its reflection and reconstruction. That situation is a consequence of numerous circumstances. We will mention only those of them which have fundamental character.

What probably comes to the fore here is the **paradigm** which has been assumed by the researchers – that is, a general theory of science which provides model interpretative solutions in a given field and a given time. Some kind of a derivative of the assumed paradigm is constituted by a definite **cognitive perspective** – that is, some system of assumptions, hypotheses and directives concerning conduct during the research process. The abovementioned factors, on the other hand, determine choice of research methods and techniques, and the way the obtained empirical material is

analysed. Finally, the data which have been established that way are submitted for **interpretation**, which requires the using of proper language – that is, some system of categories, notions and terms, which we use to define phenomena and processes while simultaneously making an attempt to explain them; namely, to highlight definite connections and regularities.

This all means that it is impossible to understand and acquire achievements of a given scientific discipline (subdiscipline) – including those in social sciences – without at least elementary knowledge about theoretical-methodological conceptions or – in other words – cognitive perspectives preferred and applied by a given academic milieu.

Contemporary theoretical conceptions in sociology of sport

A variety of theoretical-methodological orientations which are characteristic for contemporary sociology of sport is extremely difficult to systematize or, the more so, classify or even typologise. Such a state of affairs is constituted by at least some circumstances.

Firstly, authors of most of the empirical research in the field we are interested in do not explicitly formulate their own theories; nor do they always connect their explorations with a definite sociological theory (Heinemann 1990, pp. 10-11). They usually refer to general sociological categories and notions, and they consider selected problems of sport as a social phenomenon from their perspective. Hence even synthesizing works, including academic handbooks (which, anyway, are usually collective works) rarely subordinate their conception or subject structure to a definite sociological theory.

Moreover, the very notion of the theory – including the sociological theory – has, as is well known, many meanings and all attempts to reduce them to a “common denominator” produce, as a consequence, definitions which are so general that it is difficult to use them for analysing various texts which can be classified as dealing with issues of sociology of sport. Thus, for example, one of the experts in world sociological theory, M. Francis Abraham, says that a theory is a conceptual scheme which is useful for explaining regularities or dependencies which are observed between two or a greater number of variables (Abraham 1982, p. 3). Robert K. Merton, on the other hand, remarks that a sociological theory can be understood as: 1/ methodology, 2/ general sociological orientations, 3/ analyses of sociological conceptions, 4/ *post factum* sociological interpretations, 5/ empirical generalizations in sociology and 5/ sociological theory in the general sense (Merton 1972). Hence, without going into detailed considerations on that complicated subject, we assume after Piotr Sztompka that *"a sociological theory is every set of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, abstract notions and general propositions concerning social reality which is to provide an explanation of existing descriptive knowledge about it and orient future research"* (Sztompka 1985, p. 12).

There are two ways of looking for theoretical entanglements of results of sociological studies and research in the field we are interested in: 1/ either we may come from existing theoretical-methodological orientations on contemporary sociology and try to find out if, among the hundreds of books and papers dedicated to the discipline we are interested in, there are such which, without much hesitation, can be attributed to one of them; 2/ or, reviewing and critically analysing theoretically more “ambitious” works of sociologists of sport, we may somehow *a posteriori* try to construct types of theoretical-methodological attitudes characteristic for particular sets of authors.

Applying the first attitude, we are going to try to typologise theoretical-methodological orientations characteristic for authors dealing with relations between sport and society.

1. **Systemic-functionalist orientation.** Its proponents, referring to classics of sociology, such as H. Spencer, E. Durkheim, B. Malinowski, T. Parsons and R. K. Merton, perceive society as a system – that is, an entirety separated from social environment and constituted of mutually connected relatively autonomous elements. Those elements (subsets, subsystems) perform definite functions for the entirety. Some of them may be dysfunctional, which usually leads to restructuration of the system, that is – in other words – to its modernization. Sport regarded from that perspective is usually interpreted as a subsystem of global culture, which is constituted of: ideologies, values, patterns, norms, institutions and behaviours regulating human movement activity (Loy, McPherson, Kenyon 1978; Heinemann 1990; Giulianotti 2005).
2. **Ethnomethodological orientation.** Sport, regarded from that cognitive perspective, is a varied entirety developing on the ground of tradition and contemporary ethnic and national experiences. Hence, it is understood and perceived in multiple ways and has different meanings and functions depending on the “roots” it grows from. As such, it is internalised and experienced by individuals from a given ethnic or national group contributing to building a feeling of identity and autonomy. However, intercultural comparative studies on physical patterns point out that ethnically determined basic somatic values have universal character (Kew 1986, Taylor Cheska 1988, Bradley 2002, Lipoński 2004).
3. **Symbolic interactionism.** Representatives of that theoretical-methodological orientation treat society as a group composed of individuals who refer to social environment they act in in a reflexive and creative way. Thus, activity is a complex process and its essence is determined by meaning which is attributed to it by particular human individuals. On the other hand, deciphering meanings of other people’s activities consists in capturing sense (interpretation) of those activities as a symbol of acting subjects’ intentions. In the process of social activity there is created a network of symbolic interactions, which interweave constituting a particular tissue of social life. Thus, sport (and, first of all, spectacular sport) – if analysed from that viewpoint – appears to be a system of meanings co-created, and mutually communicated and interpreted, by individuals taking part in it (Tyszka 1973; Leonard, Schmitt 1987, Lipiec 1994, Krawczyk 2006 a).
4. **Conflict theory.** Proponents of that orientation, referring to classics sociology such as K. Marx, G. Simmel, M. Weber, interpret society not with categories of harmony, but – quite the opposite – of antinomy resulting from opposite interests, aims and aspirations of particular individuals and social groups. Those contradictions are nothing unique, they are a rule of human relations in an individual and collective sense and, as such, they play a role as the main factor of social change. Thus, they also include all historical and contemporary manifestations of sport, and especially achievement-oriented sport, where existential conflict constitutes its essence (Eitzen 1988, Dziubiński 2007).
5. **Socio-historical orientation.** This derives from assumptions of historicism and assumes that social reality is an entirety constituted of interconnected elements. Thus it is impossible to understand any segment of social reality, including sport, without referring it to that entirety constituting a particular social context. Society, which is a stream of events, should be regarded with dynamic and historical categories; the present results from the past and somehow includes germs of future forms of existence. The success of the individual’s activities depends not only on the very activities, but – first of all – on structural conditions of objective character. All those qualities have universal character; hence they should also be perceived and highlighted in the field of sport, which is just a manifestation of historically changeable and socially determined, particular cultural reality in the global sense (Wohl 1979-198, Krawczyk 2006 b).
6. **Positivist orientation.** Nowadays it exists in the form of the so-called third positivism and aspires for justification of the possibility of building sociology as patterned on natural sciences. Society is shaped here as an expression of evolution of the homo species and should be regarded, first of all, in

connection with natural environment. In science proponents of that standpoint prefer description of facts, which are analysed mainly in quantitative categories. Consequently, that theory – when applied to the reality we are interested in – emphasizes first of all the necessity of description and measurements of facts from the realm of human physical activity, and of correlation between them and so-called independent variables (Edwards 1973).

Theoretical orientations which are synthetically described above – and which manifest themselves in the field of sociology of sport – have the character of model constructions, since in reality they are not encountered in the so extremely pure form and they are not always explicitly formulated. Very often they are only vaguely outlined.

Potential theoretical conceptions in sociology of sport

The theoretical orientations reconstructed above are based on those conceptions of sociological theory which developed at the end of the 20th century. We find them, among others, in the fundamental work by Jonathann H. Turner *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (1978). In the discussed work the author enumerates the following sociological orientations which have developed in sociology: functional theory, conflict theory, theory of social exchange, interactionist theory, phenomenological theory and ethnomethodological theory.

However, that typology of sociological theories has to a considerable degree – and similar to other typologies – conventional character, because editors of another fundamental work including a selection of classic texts of contemporary sociological theory (Jasińska-Kania, Nijakowski, Szacki, Ziółkowski 2006) mention – besides those pointed out by Turner – a number of other sociological theories. They are the following: the theory of behaviour, the theory of rational choice, the theory of linguistic structuralism, the theory of power and the theory of neoinstitutionalism. It should be assumed that the abovementioned editors do not treat that enumeration of sociological theories as complete, and they also treat their nomenclature as disputable. Nevertheless, new cognitive perspectives which were noticed and articulated by them could be used to shed light on and interpret various manifestations of sport. Thus, these could be acquired by those scholars who deal with social aspect of physical education, sport, tourism, recreation and rehabilitation – those exploratory fields which are usually thought about when we use the category of physical activity. However, in order to find out if those newly distinguished cognitive perspectives are applied and useful in the subject area we are interested in we would have to analyse the content of those theories thoroughly and to “confront” them with numerous phenomena of bodily culture. Then, maybe, the language of particular theories would have to be adapted to the peculiarity of the socio-cultural reality we deal with.

Alternative theoretical orientations

Against the title of the presented study, which points out that we are dealing with theoretical conceptions within social sports sciences, we have hitherto remained in the field of sociology as a scientific discipline. We have done so because we assume Znaniecki's model of culture sciences (that is, socio-humane sciences), which resembles the solar system model, where the place of the Sun is occupied by sociology and those of particular planets by other social sciences (Znaniecki 1971). That situation means that fundamental theories characteristic for social sciences are born on the ground of sociology as the mother discipline, and that only secondarily are they modified in the field of particular social sciences. This happens – in our opinion – also in the area of social sports sciences, which influence each other in that respect in a rather unidirectional way: from general sociology to specialised sociologies and secondarily to other social sciences, like e.g. social economy, political science, social psychology, social pedagogy, etc.

Coming back to the issue we are basically interested in – that of genesis of theory in social sports sciences – it should be added that sociology need not constitute the only source of inspiration in that respect. Probably an equally important “theory-creative” role is played there by philosophy and psychology – with a significant advantage for the first. They both – although on different levels of abstraction and using a different mode (a priori – a posteriori) create statements of hypothetical or verified character, and – as such – they build theoretical-methodological foundations of social sports sciences. That thesis can probably also be referred to other disciplines of the humanities in the area of research we are interested in – for example, in history or pedagogy – although not with equal certainty, because the very disciplines we have mentioned look for theoretical-methodological support from philosophy, psychology or sociology.

Conclusion

Hitherto we have been focusing our attention on the role of sociological theory in coming into being and development of social sports sciences and – although only sketchily – on the influence of other humanities, mainly philosophy and psychology, on those sciences. However – as is well known – the present structure of sociological theories cannot be reduced to the role of particular socio-humane disciplines in that respect, because more and more often there appear paradigms – or only cognitive perspectives – which have multidisciplinary character and, as such, are rooted in many scientific disciplines. Theories of postmodernism and theories of globalisation – which seem very important for explaining contemporary sport and tourism – may serve as examples (Giulianotti 2005, Cynarski 2002, Krawczyk 2008). The last statement can be the more so referred to the “queen” of sport sciences – theory of physical education – and especially to its philosophical, sociological and pedagogical version (Pawłucki 1996, Grabowski 1997, Błajet 2006, Demel 2008, Zuchora 2009).

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