



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development



IJMIRD 2014; 1(6): 215-216
www.allsubjectjournal.com
Received: 06-11-2014
Accepted: 30-11-2014
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact Factor: 3.762

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The sociology of sports and physical education

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Abstract

Although sports sociology is a sub discipline of exercise science, it is also a part of the parent discipline of sociology, which is the study of human behavior and social interactions within particular contexts. Sports sociology examines sports as a part of cultural and social life, and adds a different dimension and perspective to the study of sports and exercise. More specifically, sports sociology examines the relationship between sports and society and seeks answers to many issues and questions regarding sports and culture.

Sports are a pervasive part of culture and are considered to be social constructions within society created by groups of individuals and based on values, interests, needs, and resources. Sport forms are created by groups of individuals. Each culture creates and uses sports for its own purposes; therefore, sports take different forms from culture to culture.

Keywords: Sociology, human behavior, social interaction

1. Introduction

Sociology of sport and physical education, 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 emergence of the sociology of sport (though not the name itself) dates from the end of the 19th century, when first social psychological experiments dealing with group effects of competition and pace-making took place. Besides cultural anthropology and its interest in games in the human culture, one of the first efforts to think about sports in a more general way was Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* or Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. In 1970, sports sociology gained significant attention as an organized, legitimate field of study. The North American Society for the Sociology of Sport was formed in 1978 with the objective of studying the field. Its research outlet, the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, was formed in 1984.

Today, most sports sociologists identify with at least one of four essential theories that define the relationship between sports and society, namely structural functionalism, conflict theory, critical theory.

Each culture creates and uses sports for its own purposes; therefore, sports take different forms from culture to culture. This directly relates to the concept of physical activity and exercise for different cultures. Because of various factors, such as religion, politics, and economics, certain groups of individuals may have limited access or be restricted or forbidden to take part in sports and/or exercise activities. Thus the value of sports takes on different meanings in different cultures. Other factors, such as which controls sports, what rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic) are received from sports participation and the status of the athlete, have some effect on the value and place of sports in a particular society. The purpose of this chapter is to familiarize the student with the social issues that permeate society and thus permeate sports.

It is only since 1970 that sports sociology has gained significant attention as a serious area of study.

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This is in part owing to the increasing major role sports play in our lives and the intellectual traditions in both physical education and sociology.

In 1978, the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport was organized as a professional association; and its scholarly outlet for research, the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, was established in 1984. The International Committee for Sociology of Sport is acknowledged within the International Sociological Association, and both groups co-sponsor the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. Another scholarly publication for sports sociology research is the *Journal for Sport and Social Issues*, thus confirming support for and the growth of this sub discipline of exercise science.

Ways to study sociologic phenomena in sports rapidly became an issue with scholars as sports sociology was striving for legitimacy within the academic community. Kenyon and Loy defined sports sociology as the "study of social order"; and in later works, Kenyon set the tone for sociology of sports to take a positive perspective, noting that sports sociology is a "value-free social science" in which the researcher is to describe and explain values and attitudes not shape them. However, value-laden research is also undertaken when various perspectives and theories are used to study sports. For example,

The feminist perspective as a part of critical theory is obviously a value-laden approach, as is the conflict theorist's approach; but bias is recognized, acknowledged, and analyzed carefully within these approaches.

Sociology of sports poses critical and controversial issues. Because sports are considered a microcosm of society, the same social issues that exist in larger society also exist in sports. Sociology uses critical and conflicting approaches that force us to explore alternative ways to view the place and organization of sports in our society as well as how issues and problems presented by sports in society affect individuals.

Historical Perspective in 1800's, historically, participation of women in sports was discouraged or banned. Starting around 1850, physical education for women was introduced at colleges. Sports included bowling; ice skating, archery, swimming, and equitation. By the 1890's, sports venues for college women expanded to include tennis, golf, baseball, track and field, field hockey, volleyball, and basketball. Basketball was particularly controversial. These sports were generally offered in the context of physical education NOT varsity sports.

Early 1900's, Collegiate sports opportunities for women grew in the 1920's and 30's, but opposition did not wane – National Association of Secondary Principals 1925 "sooner or later, the spectacle of interscholastic contests among girls gives rise to undesirable and even morbid social influences". Basketball, track & field, and softball were considered too "masculine" for proper women. By the late 1930's, many high schools and colleges eliminated these sports for women. Effect of WWII, WWII sent many women into non-traditional roles. The All-American Girls' Professional Baseball League was founded in 1943 and lasted until 1954. At the collegiate level, basketball, softball resurfaced, however coaching was less available and travel considerably more restricted than for men's sports. Recruiting of women athletes, were virtually non-existent, Ellie Daniel, 3 Olympic medals in swimming, 1968.

AIAW – Movement to keep women's athletics from becoming a copy of men's. Association for Intercollegiate

Athletics for Women (AIAW) founded 1971. It is wanted to prevent women's sports from becoming a copy of men's sports – "Must the Women's Rights movement demand for our young girls a share in the things that are wrong in sports today as well as a share in the rights in order fully to prove equality?" Outlawed athletic scholarships initially, but rescinded in 1973 due to pressure and Title IX – allowed 4 yr scholarships. It disbanded in 1982.

The NCAA incorporated women's sports and began offering women's championships in 1980. "Mainstreaming" of women's collegiate sports actually decreased coaching and administrative opportunities for women – in 1972 >90% of women's teams had female coaches, by 1998; this percentage had dropped to 47%. However, participation of women in sports increased, particularly at the High School level.

The effects on Men's Sports in 1992, Brown University tried to cut 2 women's varsity sports and 2 men's varsity sports. Members of one of the women's sports (gymnastics) sued under Title IX and ultimately, Brown was forced to reinstate the women's teams. This ruling (which took five years in the courts) came despite the fact that Brown offered more women's varsity teams than all but one other University in the country. There was no such option for the men's sports. Football, in particular, presents problems for equalizing participation numbers.

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