

Theoretical Dilemmas in the Sociology of Sport

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Abstract

The article presents an overview on the development of the sociology of sport and the importance of the ICSS, describes the relationship of the sociology of sport to kindred disciplines and presents three different models of the sociology of sport. Finally the theoretical orientation and the relationship of theoretical and applied dimensions of sport sociology are discussed.

When the term "Sociology of Sport" first appeared in Poland during the second half of the 1950s, it was viewed with a certain amount of skepticism within the academic community and in professional circles. One of the major reasons, of course, was that few believed that sociology had attained a sufficiently high degree of differentiation to support such an apparently esoteric area of specialization. In addition, many doubted that sport, and above all spectator sport, was of sufficient social significance to merit special attention within the parent discipline of sociology despite the fact that many recognized that spectator sport was a significant phenomenon in a world wide perspective.

As a result of this early indifference, Antonina Kloskowska (1981, 11) could correctly note more than twenty years later that "research and observation has revealed that only an insignificant number of men are not interested in sport and an increasing number of women are beginning to show interest in it. Thus, a remarkable segment of the population – more than half of it – is interested in sport. This suffices to substantiate that sport is a subject of theoretical interest and practical significance."

Interest in sport is not, of course, confined to the post 1950 period although the extent of interest in sport as a sociological phenomenon has grown dramatically over the post-war period in general and since the late 1960s in particular. Thus, many of the "classical" sociologists such as Spencer, Taylor, Weber, and Znaniecki wrote about sport or sport-like activities within their larger sociological endeavors. Despite such early interest in sport, it is clearly in the post-war period that sport has become a major social institution and hence the majority of work has grown during this period.

If, for example, one uses Lueschen and Sage's *Handbook of Social Science of Sport* as an indicator of the growing interest in the sociology of sport, one would note that up to 1978 there were as many as 2,458 articles and 711 books dealing with sport from a sociological perspective. Among the books Lueschen and Sage mention only 17.4 per cent date prior to 1945 thus substantiating the claim that the preponderance of sport sociology belongs to the post-war period. During the post

war period the number of publications on sport doubled almost every decade which means that sport sociology was one of the fastest growing sciences during this time period.

Despite this growth, however, sport exists as the principle or sole research preoccupation for only a small number of sociologists. In the Lueschen and Sage collection, there are only one hundred sociologists who are the authors of five or more works devoted to sport. Thus the overwhelming majority of work in the area appears to be undertaken as only one part of a larger research agenda.

Sociological works about sport are issued by a variety of publishers while essays and articles can be found in over a hundred different scientific journals ranging in specialization from sociology as a general discipline to the journals of physical education and sport science. Lueschen (1981), who is critical of this wide dispersal of material in sport sociology, has attributed this problem to the absence of a well defined theoretical and methodological framework for sport sociologists. In many comments on the state of the field, attention is drawn to the wide spectrum of research efforts in sport sociology despite the fact that the International Committee for the Sociology of Sport has existed since 1965 and it has supported the periodical, the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* since 1966.

It is quite possible that the lack of cohesion in the field of sport sociology may not stem from a state of "underdevelopment" and the inability of the sub-discipline to settle upon a unified theory and methodology. The current diversity in the sub-discipline could also be due to the "birth" of sport sociology as a sub-discipline during a period in which the mainstream consensus in the social sciences was under attack and a variety of new theories and methodologies were being put forward by numerous people interested in sport and sociology. As a result, the diversity reflects the current state of all of sociology where debate and diversity have characterized the post 1960s period and is not a symptom of underdevelopment, arrested development or pathology.

Sociology of Sport and Kindred Disciplines

Sociologists of sport, just like sociologists in other applied areas or sub-disciplines in sociology, employ a wide variety of technical terms, concepts, and categories which are drawn heavily from the parent discipline. General sociology and the state of its development also defines, to a considerable extent, the problems dealt with by sociologists especially in terms of its main trends and developments. Theories explaining general social phenomena and processes provide sport sociologists with hypotheses to be examined in the specific realm of sport. Finally, sport sociologists can employ the entire arsenal of research methods and techniques that are found in the parent discipline.

Despite the potential diversity in theories and methods, one can conclude, on the basis of the results of research projects carried out in the field of sport sociology in various countries as well as numerous comparative projects of an international scope, that there are distinct preferences for particular theories and methodologies. In this way, it is clear that the parent discipline of sociology establishes a significant and dominant environment in terms of language, research methods and techniques, problems, and theoretical conceptions for

sport sociology (see Dunning 1972; Loy, McPherson, and Kenyon 1978; Heinemann 1983a).

While the parent discipline in general exercises an environmental influence on sport sociology, the sub-discipline also draws creatively from other sub-sociologies. Thus sport sociologists adapt research problems, strategies and methodologies from sub-disciplines such as the sociology of education, political sociology, the sociology of science, the sociology of leisure and cultural studies.

Part of the reason for such interaction between sport sociology and the various sub-sociologies is that during the same time period in which sport sociology formed as a sub-discipline, other sub-disciplines were also being established. During the growth of the so-called "knowledge explosion", researchers specialized their areas of interest and expertise but at the same time the need for interdisciplinary study became apparent. Thus throughout the world, institutes were established which focused upon particular subject areas, such as sport, from an interdisciplinary perspective. With respect to sport study, individuals specifically trained in sociology played an increasingly significant role since they could focus upon sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon and this is, after all, one of sport's most dominant aspects.

The evolution of sport sociology depended upon, and still is dependent upon, the transformations of sociology in general and on the development of the various sub-sociologies that currently exist. Within Poland, while such developmental trends are important, of additional significance is the development of the scientific discipline of physical culture and institutes for physical culture. Part of the reason for the importance of these two elements in Polish sport sociology is attributable to the trend towards "disaggregation" apparent in sport in the modern period. That is, "sport" has, over the last couple of decades, moved from a narrow, competitive form of physical activity to one that now encompasses an increasingly broad range of physical activities which range from competitive sport to sport for all.

This trend of disaggregation has lent to greater support for the term physical culture and invested institutes of physical culture with greater importance and significance. As a result, the sociology of sport as a sub-discipline is gradually being broadened and expanded from within as it is subsumed under the rubric of physical culture. This trend also prepares the way for an eventual re-integration in sociology where the sociology of sport would become a part of the broader field of cultural studies and this too would be just one part of a general concern within the parent discipline of sociology (see Krawczyk 1984).

Three Models of the Sociology of Sport

When considering the state of sport sociology past and present, one could argue that it has appeared in a threefold form – historical, analytical, and empirical. The first two approaches actually appeared simultaneously during the first stage of the development of the sub-discipline and acted as a foundation for ensuing developments. An empirical sociology of sport began essentially in the post

World War II period and spread extremely rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. During a certain period it seemed that this form of sport sociology would monopolize all approaches to sport sociology. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1980s, one could observe a certain dissatisfaction with the predominance of empirical sport sociology. During this time there was a renaissance in socio-historical research in sport as well as in-depth analytical reflection upon sport as a socio-historical phenomenon.

The criteria which differentiate the three forms of sport sociology relate to differing theoretical assumptions, methodologies, data collection processes, descriptive techniques, and the treatment of empirical material. Adherents of the historical approach maintain that if one does not penetrate to the "roots" of phenomena and examine the processes that are central to its development then genuine knowledge is unattainable. "Analysts" maintain that it is necessary to establish a set of categories and notions and to present a hypothetical model of the interaction between phenomena and processes before moving to study the empirical world. Empiricists, on the other hand, maintain that the time of speculative, social knowledge belongs to the distant past and that in all areas of social study, including sport, research must entail first and foremost an honest description of reality based on the entire wealth of concrete reality in order that one can understand the relationship between structures and functions in the social reality of sport.

The historical approach consistently reaches out for all the facts possible from the past and examines their influence on the current state of affairs in sport. The analytical approach is satisfied with a theoretical analysis of "typical" phenomena which produces an analysis that is very subtle and often detailed and which produces an understanding of the deeper structures of reality in a static manner. Finally, adherents of the empirical sociology of sport concentrate above all on the collection of data with the help of many complementary research techniques and upon the subsequent development of the most faithful "picture" possible of the reality of sport as it is approached from a structural and static as well as an evolutionary and dynamic perspective. As a rule, however, despite their attention to evolution and change, empiricists do not tend to make use of the category of the "long duration". What interests them above all is the current picture of reality and that is also the reason why they only reluctantly look ahead. Thus retrospection and looking forward to the future are not among the strongest points in the empiricist perspective. Most frequently, empiricists are satisfied with a diagnosis of the current state of affairs in sport.

One may expect that in the future these three models of sport sociology will appear side by side but not in opposition to one another. Instead they will complement each other. More and more researchers are of the belief that the three approaches throw different light upon sport and therefore each provides a partial picture which is made complete by the unity of the three. Nevertheless, despite the movement towards integration, the empirical approach will continue to predominate although this will not be the hyper-empiricism that has existed; instead it will be a more theoretically informed empiricism. This trend towards integration is, of course, already present in sociology as a whole (see Sztompka 1985).

Theoretical Orientations in the Sociology of Sport

The entire mosaic of theoretical assumptions that is found in contemporary sport sociology is exceptionally difficult to systematize or present in a typology. There are several reasons why this is the case.

First, the majority of empirical studies conducted in sport do not set forth explicit theories. Similarly, they do not always connect their research with a predominant sociological theory. Most often, empirical studies refer to general sociological categories and from this perspective they approach selected phenomena and problems which are typical of sport as a social phenomena. This is why even relatively comprehensive works, including university handbooks written frequently by more than one author, rarely present their contents explicitly within the framework of some specific sociological theory.

To determine how extensively particular theoretical perspectives are used in the sociological study of sport, one can use one of two different approaches. In the first, one begins with a well established theoretical and methodological position which is typical of contemporary sociology and then examines the literature in sport to see how often such a position is used in sport sociology. Alternatively, one can begin with a review of the more theoretically informed work in sport sociology and in an a posteriori fashion, construct an analysis of which theoretical frameworks dominate such works.

Using the second approach, I attempted to develop a typology of theoretical orientations which characterize the work of researchers tackling the relationship between sport and culture (see Krawczyk, 1983). Since I used a very broad conception of culture in that study, it seems safe to assume that the results of that research would also be informative for a commentary on the sociology of sport as a whole. Furthermore, since the dominant theoretical orientations in sport sociology have not altered significantly, if at all, in the years intervening between that study and now, it is safe to say that its results are still of relevance today.

Based on this earlier research, one can note the following characteristics about the theoretical frameworks that have dominated sport sociology. First of all, the theoretical and methodological orientations used to examine sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon are dominated by phenomenological, psycho-analytical, anthropological, semiotic, structural-functional and dialectical approaches. Today, taking into account these frameworks, I would note that particular importance should also be accorded to systemic theory, the theory of anomie and alienation, and the theory of symbolic interaction (see Eitzen 1985, Purdy 1985 and Snyder 1985).

Before leaving the topic of theoretical orientations, it is worth emphasizing that in general sport sociologists tend to deal with only fragments of theoretical frameworks. It seems that there is still the need for a more systematic study of the use of theory in sport sociology so that people in the discipline can assess more accurately its influence and significance in contemporary sport study.

The Relationship of Theoretical and Applied Dimensions of Sport Sociology

The former chair of the International Committee of the Sociology of Sport, Gunter Lueschen, expressed the opinion as early as 1968 (*Aspects* 1968, 4), and subsequently re-emphasized it 13 years later (Lueschen 1981) that from the beginning, sport sociology has had two separate orientations – a “Western” and an “Eastern” orientation. The Western orientation, according to Lueschen, favors independent theories of an interpretational nature while the sociology of sport in socialist countries is subordinated to ideological and practical purposes thus directly serving practical objectives in sporting activity.

There seems little reason to question the first half of Lueschen’s assessment of sport sociology in the West. There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of West-European sociologists, as well as the Americans, irrespective of their theoretical and methodological perspective, give top priority to interpreting the phenomena and processes which comprise sport. They do this on the basis of the belief that only after knowledge has been obtained in this way can one proceed to its practical application and implications.

It is difficult, however, to agree with Lueschen’s opinion regarding the exclusively applied nature of sport sociology in the socialist countries. Lueschen derived this assessment from reflections contained in Erbach’s (1966) article which perhaps overstates the applied nature of sport sociology in the Eastern Bloc. While it is true that sport sociology is of an applied nature in the Eastern Bloc countries, it is not true that all sport sociology is of an applied nature. On the contrary, from the very beginning there has been great care in developing the interpretative dimensions of sport sociology. This emphasis has extended across the range of theorizations extending from broad theoretical generalizations through theories of middle range to more specific, concrete and historically determinate features of sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The interpretative trend in sport sociology within the Eastern Bloc countries is especially pronounced in Poland where sport sociology has enjoyed particularly energetic support and diversity. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that within Poland the interpretative emphasis is dominant while the practical application of a particular sociological assessment of sport is of only secondary importance. In fact, within Poland, those who are engaged in the sociological study of sport consider themselves to be specialists in a particular field of sociology and thus prefer the interpretative and theoretical perspective and it is mainly those who identify more strongly with the sciences of physical culture who tend to emphasize the applied aspects of the sociological study of sport.

As a result, rather than dividing the sociology of sport into Eastern and Western orientations as Lueschen has done, one is further ahead to emphasize the growing development of a scientific approach to the study of sport in both the East and West and to applaud such a development while simultaneously seeking to help further stimulate the development of what C. Wright Mills termed the “sociological imagination” in the study of sport within both Eastern and Western scholarship.

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Dilemmes théoriques dans la sociologie du sport

Résumé

Cet article présente un aperçu du développement de la sociologie du sport et de l'importance de l'ICSS, il décrit la relation de la sociologie du sport avec des disciplines apparentées et présente trois modèles différents de la sociologie du sport. Enfin, l'orientation théorique et la relation entre les dimensions théoriques et appliquées de la sociologie du sport sont discutées.

Theoretische Dilemmas der Soziologie des Sports

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag liefert einen Überblick über die Entwicklung der Soziologie des Sports und die Bedeutung des ICSS, beschreibt die Beziehungen der Soziologie des Sports zu angrenzenden Disziplinen und stellt drei unterschiedliche Modelle einer Soziologie des Sports zur Diskussion. Schließlich werden theoretische Orientierung und Formen der Anwendung der Sportsoziologie diskutiert.

Dilemas teóricos en la Sociología del Deporte

Resumen

El artículo hace una revisión del desarrollo de la sociología del deporte y de la importancia del ICSS, describe su relación con las disciplinas afines y presenta tres modelos distintos que aparecen en su seno. Finalmente se discuten las orientaciones teóricas de la sociología del deporte y la relación entre la teoría y sus ámbitos de aplicación.

Кравчик

Теоретические дилеммы спортивной социологии

Статья дает обзор о развитии спортивной социологии, и о важности Международного Комитета Спортивной социологии, рассматривает отношение спортивной социологии к знаниям родственного характера, и предоставляет три модели спорт-социологии разного характера. В окончательной части разбирает вопрос теоретической ориентации спортивной социологии, а также ее теоретическую и применяемую димензию.

スポーツ社会学の理論的矛盾

〈抄録〉

本論文はスポーツ社会学の発展の概観と、ICSSの重要性について紹介し、スポーツの社会学と関係科学との関連を検討し、スポーツ社会学の3つの異なったモデルを紹介する。

最後に、スポーツ社会学の理論的方向性についてと、理論と応用の関係について考察する。