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playing a sandlot game of baseball in a Kansas town and a pickup game of soccer on a Mexican beach are engaged in sports? Their activities are quite different from what occurs in connection with Major League Baseball games and professional soccer matches. These differences become significant when parents ask if playing sports is good for their children, when community leaders ask if they should fund sports with public money, or when school officials ask if sports contribute to the educational missions of their schools.

Students ask me if jogging and jump roping are sports. How about weight lifting? hunting? scuba diving? darts? automobile racing? ballroom dancing? chess? professional wrestling? skateboarding? the XGames? paintball? a piano competition? Should any or all of these activities be called sports? In the face of such a question, many scholars feel that we should think about the social organization, social dynamics, and social implications of certain activities to determine which ones are similar enough to be grouped together when we do sociological research. For this reason, many people in the sociology of sport have decided that a precise definition of **sports** is needed. Then we can study sports as distinct from other activities, which may have different social dynamics and social implications, and we can share our research with others who have similar interests.

### A Traditional Definition of Sports

Although definitions of *sports* vary, those who offer definitions tend to emphasize that *sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards*. Parts of this definition are clear, but other parts need explanations.

First, sports are *physical activities*. Therefore, according to the definition, chess probably is not a sport, since playing chess is more cognitive than physical. Are billiards and pool physical

## WHAT ARE SPORTS?

This question may seem elementary. We certainly have a good enough grasp of the meaning of sports to talk about them with others. However, when we study sports, it helps to have a precise definition of what we're talking about. For example, can we say that two groups of children

enough to qualify as sports under this definition? Making this determination is arbitrary, since there are no objective rules for how “physical” an activity must be to qualify as a sport. Pairs ice dancing is considered a sport in the Winter Olympics, so why not add ballroom dancing to the Summer Games? This question was asked by members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in connection with the 2000 Games in Sydney, and ballroom dancing was included in the Olympics as a demonstration sport.

Second, sports are *competitive activities*, according to this definition. Sociologists realize that competitive activities have different social dynamics from cooperative or individualistic activities. They know that, when two girls kick a soccer ball to each other on the grass outside their home, it is sociologically different from what happens when the U.S. women’s soccer team plays China’s national team in the World Cup, so it makes sense to separate them for research purposes.

Third, sports are *institutionalized activities*. **Institutionalization** is a sociological term referring to the process through which behaviors and organization become patterned or standardized over time and from one situation to another. Institutionalized activities have formal rules and organizational structures, which people use to frame and guide their actions from one situation to another. When we say that sports are institutionalized activities, we distinguish what happens when two skiers decide to race each other down their favorite ski slope while vacationing in Colorado from what happens when skiers race each other in a World Cup giant slalom event, which has been highly organized according to strict rules laid down by the International Federation of Skiing. When it comes to defining *sports*, many sociologists would say that the process of institutionalization includes the following:

1. *The rules of the activity become standardized.*

This means that sports have rules that are not simply produced by a single group getting together on an informal basis. Rules

in a sport are based on more than spontaneous expressions of individual interests and concerns. In sports, the rules of the game define a formal, official set of behavioral and procedural guidelines and restrictions.

2. *Official regulatory agencies take over rule enforcement.* When the physical performances of teams or individuals are compared from one competitive event to another, it is necessary for a regulatory agency to sanction games and meets and to ensure that standardized conditions exist and rules are enforced. Regulatory agencies can include everything from a local rules committee for a children’s softball league to the highly organized central office of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).
3. *The organizational and technical aspects of the activity become important.* When competition is combined with external rule enforcement, an activity becomes increasingly *rationalized*. This means that players and coaches develop strategies and training schedules to improve their chances for success within the rules. Additionally, equipment and technologies are developed and manufactured to enhance performance and to maximize the range of experiences available through participation.
4. *The learning of game skills becomes formalized.* This occurs for two major reasons. First, as the organization and the rules of the activity become more complex, they must be presented and explained to people in systematic ways. Second, as the stakes associated with competitive success grow, participants at various skill levels begin to seek guidance from experts. Teaching experts or coaches are often supplemented by others, such as trainers, dietitians, sport scientists, managers, and team physicians.

Fourth, according to the definition, sports are *activities played by people for internal and external rewards*. This means that participation in sports

involves a combination of two sets of motivations. One is based in the internal satisfactions associated with expression, spontaneity, and the pure joy of participation; the other motivation is based in external satisfactions associated with displaying physical skills in public and receiving approval, status, or material rewards in the process.

When *sports* are defined precisely, we can distinguish them from both play and dramatic spectacle. **Play** involves expressive activity done for its own sake; it may be spontaneous or guided by informal norms. An example of play is three four-year-olds who, during a recess period at preschool, spontaneously run around a playground, yelling joyfully while throwing playground balls in whatever directions they feel like throwing them. Of course, it makes sociological sense to distinguish this type of behavior, motivated almost exclusively by personal enjoyment and expression, from what happens in sports.

**Dramatic spectacle**, on the other hand, involves performances to entertain an audience. An example of dramatic spectacle is four professional wrestlers paid to entertain spectators by staging a skillful and cleverly choreographed tag-team match in which outcomes are prearranged for audience entertainment. It also makes sociological sense to distinguish this type of physical activity, motivated almost exclusively by a desire to perform for the entertainment of others, from what happens in sports.

Does this mean that sports do not involve elements of play and spectacle? No, it means that sports involve combinations of both intrinsic enjoyment and extrinsic rewards for performance. The challenge faced in some sports is to preserve a relatively even balance between these two factors. People who use a precise definition of *sports* generally do not spend much time studying playlike physical activities or activities that are “staged” for entertainment purposes.

*In summary*, many sociologists feel it is important to define *sports* in order to distinguish them from other activities that are sociologically dissimilar. This is a practical approach, but it has

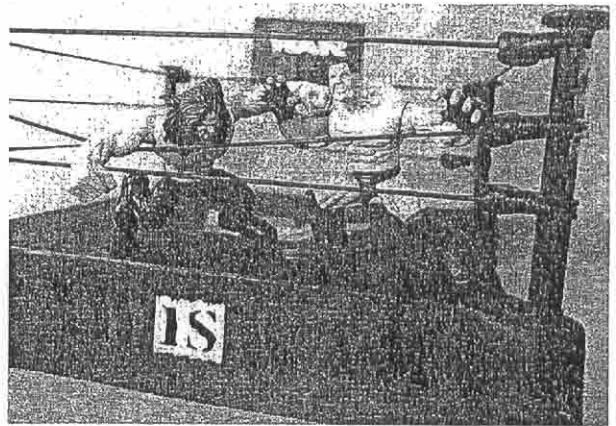
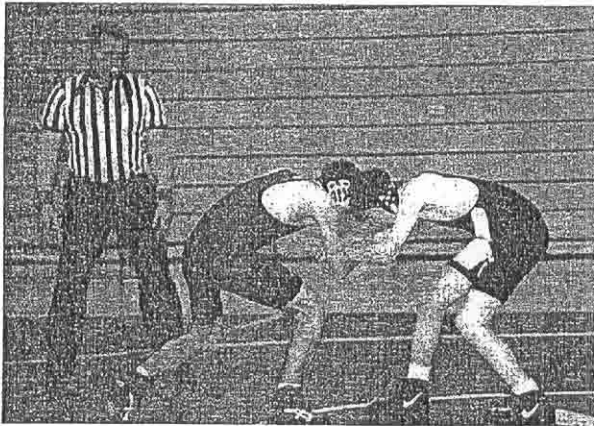
potentially serious problems associated with it. For example, when we focus our attention only on institutionalized competitive activities, we may overlook physical activities in the lives of many people who have neither the resources to formally organize those activities nor the desire to make their activities competitive. In other words, we may spend all our time considering the physical activities of relatively select groups in society, because those groups have the power to formally organize physical activities and the desire to make those activities competitive. If this happens, we can create the impression that the activities of these select groups are more important parts of culture than the activities of other groups. This, in turn, can contribute to the marginalization of groups who have neither the resources nor the time to play organized sports or who are not attracted to competitive activities.

Ironically, this outcome would reinforce the very ideas and organization that may have disadvantaged these groups in the first place, and we would be doing this in the name of science. But, if we are aware of this potential problem, we can continue to ask critical questions about how sports have become what they are in particular societies and what social purposes they serve. We also can ask questions about how sports are connected to power, privilege, and social relations and about the changes needed to involve more people in the determination of what sports could and should be in society. However, when we ask such questions, we may begin to wonder if there is another way to deal with the definition of *sports*, a way that does not give priority to organized sports. This has led some scholars to seek an alternative approach to defining *sports*.

### **An Alternative Approach to Defining Sports**

Instead of using a single definition of *sports*, some scholars ask two definition-type questions about sports in a particular society:

1. What activities are identified as sports by people in a particular group or society?



Many sociologists define *sports* in precise terms, so that they can distinguish sports from other activities, such as informal play and dramatic spectacle. High school and college wrestling are sociologically different from wrestling that might occur in a backyard or in the televised spectacle *Raw Is War*. I used "action figures" to represent dramatic spectacle, partly because pro wrestling organizations exercise restrictive control over the images of their events and "dramatic personalities." (Jay Coakley)

involves a combination of two sets of motivations. One is based in the internal satisfactions associated with expression, spontaneity, and the pure joy of participation; the other motivation is based in external satisfactions associated with displaying physical skills in public and receiving approval, status, or material rewards in the process.

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1. What activities are identified as sports by people in a particular group or society?

2. Whose sports count the most in a group or society when it comes to obtaining support and resources?

Asking these questions does not limit the analysis of sports in ways that might happen when a precise definition is used. In fact, asking these questions leads researchers to dig into the social and cultural contexts in which ideas are formed about physical activities. The researchers must explain how and why some physical activities come to be defined as sports and then become culturally important activities in the social life of a particular group or society.

Those who use this alternative approach do not describe sports with a single definition. When they 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. For example, they might note that many people who grew up at the end of the nineteenth century in England would be horrified, confused, or astonished by what people in the United States today consider to be sports. Similarly, the people who watch NFL football games today would look at many activities that were considered sports in nineteenth-century England and say they were not "real" sports because participants did not train, compete according to schedules, play in leagues, or strive to set records and win championships. Maybe people in the year 2100 will define activities played in virtual reality as sports and see what we defined as sports today as backward, overorganized, and funless activities geared to the physical abilities of the few rather than the interests and fantasies of everyone.

Those who use this alternative approach to defining *sports* also note numerous cultural differences in how people identify sports and include them in their lives. 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. These cultural differences are important to understand. Instead of letting a definition of *sports* shape what should be studied, those who use this alternative approach do research based on what the people in particular cultural settings think is important in their own lives (see Martin and Miller, 1999; Rail, 1998; Rinehart, 2000).

The assumption underlying this approach is that sports themselves are "contested activities." In other words, there is no universal agreement about the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports; there is no universal agreement about who will participate in sports, about the circumstances under which participation will occur, or about who will sponsor sports or the reasons underlying sponsorship. All these things vary over time from group to group and society to society. The most important sociological issue to recognize when we use this approach is that people in particular places at particular times struggle over *whose* ideas about sports will count as *the* ideas in a group or society. A guide for thinking about these issues is in the box titled "Sports as Contested Activities."

Struggles over whose ideas count when it comes to the meaning, organization, and purpose of sports are much more common than you might think. Consider the different ways *sports* might be defined and the different meanings associated with those definitions in connection with decisions related to the following issues:

- Whether children younger than six years old should be allowed to play sports and how sports ought to be organized and what they ought to mean for young children
- Whether money from a local youth sports budget ought to be given to a program in which young girls are taught to jump rope or to a program in which boys and a few girls

# REFLECT ON SPORTS

## Sports as Contested Activities

When sociologists say that sports are contested activities, they mean that, through history, people have disagreed about what sports could and should be. These disagreements have led to struggles over three major questions about sports and a number of related questions. As you read the following questions, remember that there are many possible answers to each. Sociologists are concerned with how people in different groups and societies arrive at particular answers at various points in time.

### 1. WHAT IS THE MEANING, PURPOSE, AND ORGANIZATION OF SPORTS?

The struggles related to this question have raised other questions, such as the following:

- What activities will be defined as “official” sports?
- How are sports connected with social values and people’s ideas about each other, social relationships, and the social worlds in which they live?
- What will be the relative importance of different types of physical skills in those activities? Will strength, size, and speed, for example, be more important than flexibility, balance, and endurance?
- How will sports experiences be evaluated? Will emotional enjoyment be more important than competitive success? Will fun and physical pleasure be more important than performance outcomes? How will participants define *fun*?
- What types of performance outcomes will be important and how will success be defined, measured, and rewarded? Will external rewards go to the person who completes an event, the one who achieves a personal best, the one who outscored or dominates others in terms of scores

or another measure, or the one who lives through the experience without being seriously injured or killed?

- How will *excellence* be defined—in terms of one’s abilities to be tough, to be aggressive, and to dominate others; in terms of all-around abilities to do different things well; or in terms of being able to maximize enjoyment for self and others?

### 2. WHO WILL PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS AND UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS WILL THIS PARTICIPATION OCCUR?

The struggles related to this question have raised other questions, such as the following:

- Will females and males be involved in the same sports? Will they play at the same time or be segregated by sex? Will some sports be defined as girls’ and women’s sports, whereas others are defined as boys’ and men’s sports? On what basis will people make such distinctions? Will rewards for achievement be the same for females and males?
- Will sports participation be open to people regardless of their social class and wealth? Will the rulers and the ruled, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless play and watch sports together? Will they be segregated and for what reasons? Will participation opportunities be equal? Will sponsors support participation for some or all?
- Will sports participation be related to skin color or ethnicity? Will people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds be allowed or encouraged to play together? Will they be segregated? Will the meanings given to skin color or ethnicity influence participation patterns or access to participation?

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compete in a roller hockey league at a local skating rink

- Whether the state high school activities associations in the United States ought to include cheerleading as an official high school sport

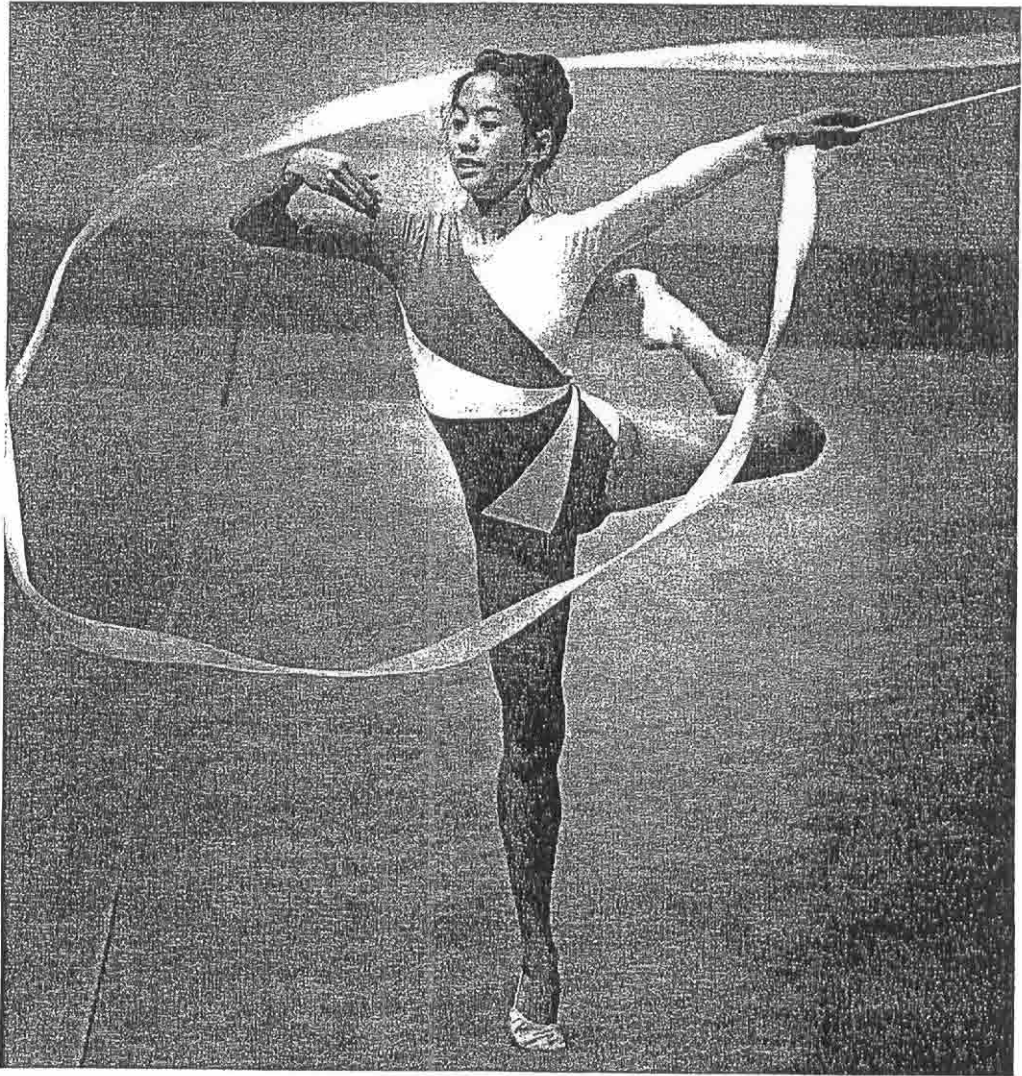
- Whether skateboarding and hacky sack ought to be funded through a university intramural sport program
- Whether tenpin bowling, darts, and men’s synchronized swimming ought to be recognized as Olympic sports

- Will age be a factor in whether people are encouraged or discouraged from participating in sports? Will expectations vary for people of different ages? Will older and younger people play sports together or separately? Will people of different ages have the same access to participation opportunities?
- Will people with able bodies and people with various types of disabilities have the same opportunities? Will they play together or be segregated? For what reasons will integration or segregation occur and who will benefit from what is decided? How will people define the accomplishments of athletes with disabilities?
- Will gay men and lesbians be included in sports in the same ways that heterosexual people are? Will homosexual persons be encouraged to participate in all sports?
- Will athletes be in control of the conditions under which they play sports? Will they have the rights and the power to change those conditions to meet their own needs and interests? Will they be paid? Will they be rewarded in noncash terms? How much will players be rewarded and how will this be determined?

### 3. HOW WILL SPORTS BE SPONSORED AND WHAT WILL BE THE REASONS FOR SPONSORSHIP?

The struggles related to this question have raised other questions, such as the following:

- Will sports be sponsored by public agencies and organizations for the sake of the “public good”?
    - Who will determine the public good and how is *public good* defined?
  - Will sports be sponsored by nonprofit groups and organizations? Will the reasons for their sponsorship be related to organizational philosophies? Will the reasons be related to the interests of all group members or to the interests of some over others?
  - Will sports be sponsored by private commercial organizations? To what extent will private sponsorships be designed for the benefit of athletes and communities or for the purpose of maximizing profits and increasing the power of private individuals and corporations in society?
  - To what extent will sponsors control the sports and the athletes they support? What will be the legal rights of the sponsors relative to those of the athletes and others involved in sports?
- As you can see, sports are indeed contested activities! They take many forms and have varying consequences in society, depending on how these questions are answered. Furthermore, answers to these questions are never permanent. New answers replace old ones as interests change; as power shifts; as the meanings associated with age, skin color, ethnicity, gender, and disability change; and as economic, political, and legal forces take new and different forms.
- 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. Of course, definitions can be helpful, but they should always be used with caution. *What do you think?*
- 
- Whether a permit to use a sport field in a public park ought to be given to a group that wants to throw Frisbees freely for a couple of hours or to a softball team that plays in an organized community league
  - Whether synchronized swimming events ought to be covered in the sports section of a city newspaper or in the lifestyle section
  - Whether wrestler “Stone Cold” Steve Austin can be nominated for a “sports person of the year” award



What activities are counted as sports in society? Discussions of this question emphasize that sports cannot be understood apart from cultural values and power relations in a society. As ideas about gender have changed over the past three decades, physical activities such as rhythmic gymnastics have come to be considered sports, despite resistance from some who believe that “real” sports must reflect “manly” attributes. Women athletes and spectators have more power in society today than they have had in the past. (*Colorado Springs Gazette*)

How these issues are resolved depends on what activities are counted as sports in certain societies at certain points in time. These issues also raise questions about the usefulness of a single definition of *sports*. For example, if sports are

institutionalized competitive physical activities played to achieve internal and external rewards, then why aren't competitive dancing, aerobics, jump roping, and cheerleading counted as sports? They fit the definition. The fact that they

are not considered sports when it comes to important issues such as sponsorships, funding, and formal recognition raises two questions: (1) what is identified as a sport in a society and (2) how do people determine what is identified as a sport? Answering these questions requires a careful analysis of the social and cultural context in which decisions are made in everyday life. Critical issues are raised by asking what activities are identified as sports. These issues force us to look at the cultures in which people live their lives and make decisions about what is important.

## SUMMARY

### WHY STUDY THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT?

Sociology is the study of social life, including all forms of social interaction and relationships. Sociologists are concerned with social issues, social organization, and social change. Their goal is to enable people to understand, control, and change their lives, so that human needs are met at both individual and group levels.

Sociologists study sports as parts of culture and society. They look at sports in terms of their importance in people's lives and their connections to ideology and major spheres of social life. Research in the sociology of sport helps us understand sports as social constructions created by people for particular purposes. As social constructions, sports are related to historical, political, and economic factors.

When sociologists study sports in society, they often discover problems based in the structure and organization of either sports or society. When this happens, the recommendations sociologists make may threaten those who want sports and sport programs to remain as they are now. Therefore, sociology sometimes creates controversies.

Continued growth of the sociology of sport depends primarily on whether those in the field do research and publish books and articles that

make meaningful contributions to people's lives. Complicating the issue of future growth is the fact that not everyone in the field agrees on how to "do" sociology of sport. Some use a professional expert model to guide their work, some use a critical transformation model, and some use a knowledge-building model. Differences among these three approaches raise important questions about the production and use of scientific knowledge (see chapter 2). Many scholars in the field are currently debating these questions.

Some scholars in the field define *sports* as activities involving (1) the use of physical skill, prowess, or exertion; (2) institutionalized competition; and (3) the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for participation. Such a definition is problematic if it leads us to ignore or devalue the lives of people who do not have the resources and the desire to develop formally organized and competitive physical activities. For this reason, many scholars now recommend that, instead of using a single definition of *sports*, we should ask what activities are identified as sports in different groups and societies at different points in time. This question forces us to recognize that sports are contested activities. This focuses our attention on the relationship between sports and power and privilege in society and leads more directly to concerns for transforming social life, so that more people have the resources they need to control their lives and make them meaningful.



### SUGGESTED READINGS

- Andrews, D. L., and S. J. Jackson. 2001. *Sport stars: The cultural politics of sporting celebrity*. London/New York: Routledge (sixteen articles focusing on the cultural, political, economic, and technological factors that together influence sport celebrity around the world and how sport celebrities influence the everyday private lives of people around the world).
- Brownell, S. 1995. *Training the body for China: Sports in the moral order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: