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Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Lifestyle Sport and Gender

Reflections on the Trajectory of the Sociology of Sport

In the general introduction to their *Handbook of Sport Studies*, Coakley and Dunning (2000) give an overview of the development of the sociology of sport, describing the main paradigms, theories, and topics discussed over the years. The authors list several theoretical positions which became central to the sociology of sport at the beginning of the twenty-first century, among which I will address the following two: social life is more open-ended and less determined than previously assumed by structural theorists (functionalists and some kinds of Marxists), and social processes are best understood in connection with various forms of power relations. Hence, an important question arises: what does open-ended mean relative to power relations? Taking this as a starting point I will highlight central aspects of lifestyle sports with particular reference to gender issues.

The term *lifestyle sports* is used to refer to activities like board sports (surf, skate and snow), rock climbing, kiting, BASE jumping, freestyle skiing, BMX cycling, and rafting among others. According to Wheaton (2004), lifestyle sport is an appropriate term since it is a concept which is commonly used by participants in these activities. Rinehart (2000) suggests the term *alternative sports* indicating a contrast to traditional or mainstream sports. Midol (1993) describes these sports as *whiz sports* which connotes a hissing sound or speed. Other terms are *risk*, *action*, *adventure*, *sub-culture*, *postmodern*, and *new sports*, which may reflect characteristics of the activities. Nevertheless, some commonalities appear with reference to organization, space of practice, performance, and not least values and the underlying philosophy of the sports (Wheaton, 2004).

Lifestyle sports emerged in the 1960-70s and the growth in activities as well as participants escalated before and after the millennium. The phenomenon has been examined from various perspectives. Firstly: interpretive approaches have informed a variety of studies since the 1970s, commonly referring to sport sub-cultures, but also including studies of more traditional sports like basketball, rugby, hockey, and golf (Donnelly, 2000). In these studies symbols and communication as well as aspects of socialization are highlighted (e.g. Donnelly & Young, 1988). Secondly, these activities have been linked with the cooperative new leisure movement in the 1960s. Central to this movement is artistic sensibility in terms of innovation, freedom of action and expression. Adherents to this philosophy reacted against the overarching conformity and stifling nature of society; the counterculture inspired people to

see themselves as individuals with their own needs and values who needed to express their true selves (Humphrey, 2003). Sports associated with the new leisure movement are characterized by creativity, acquisition of motor skills, or risk taking, with emphasis on fun and personal growth (Donnelly, 1988). In the 1970s and 1980s, the punk movement further influenced the artistic sensibility of the new leisure movement while retaining the countercultural critique of late capitalism, mass communication and mass consumption (Humphrey, 2003). The third approach may be traced to subculture studies, in particular the subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Its exponents were particularly interested in how youth, particularly working class youth, handle their subordinated position and creatively found solutions that allow them symbolically to resist and escape from their marginalized position through leisure activities and subcultural style. The CCCS tradition has, however, received numerous and wide-ranging critiques for overemphasizing the working class structural position of white males and the exclusion of gender and ethnicity as vital variables of analysis (Wheaton, 2007). Another critique of the CCCS tradition suggests that the approach is static and hence, overlooks the fact that youth cultures exist in a constant state of change and flux (Thorpe, 2006). In recent years the term sub-culture has rarely been employed, which may be seen as a natural consequence of the diffusion and mainstreaming of these activities as well as the reduced significance of the aspect of resistance with the continued growth of a plurality of choices of activities.

Assessing the Challenges of the Sociology of Sport

Studies of lifestyle sports have drawn on theoretical positions from Bourdieu and Foucault with a focus on power relations, to post-modern theories and studies on voluntary risk-taking in the context of risk society. Among the topics which have been examined are commercialization, mediation (ESPN/X-Games, video/film, social media etc.), identity development, and communities among the participants.

Lifestyle sports are generally male dominated and commonly perceived as masculine in terms of clothing, styles, expressions and jargon (Anderson, 1999; Ford and Brown; 2006; Thorpe, 2011). In scholarly research gender issues are discussed with reference to masculinities and femininities and gender relations. For example, Thorpe (2010) analyzed masculine identities and interaction in snowboarding and suggested that several masculine practices, performances and identities associated with behavior, attitudes and

accomplishments, as well as age, can be observed in and across the global field of snowboarding. Studies of femininities mostly refer to resistance femininity, such as Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie's (2005) study on skateboarders revealing the skaters' perception of themselves as participating in an "alternative girlhood" distancing themselves from conventional femininity. Similarly, a study of professional Brazilian surfers discussed how this group of surfers represents a new site for the liberation of Brazilian women (Knijnik, Horton and Cruz, 2010). Studies on gender relations examine females' subordinated position and how women negotiate the situation. For example, Larendeau and Shara (2008) examined skydiving and snowboarding, exploring the construction of gender and the strategies that women employ to carve out spaces for themselves within these sporting contexts. A study by Kay and Laberge (2004) examined gender relations in the ultra-tough and endurance-based adventure racing (AR) which is a non-stop, multiday, multi-discipline, mixed-gender team competition. The AR discourse's emphasis on the value of teaming, and the comprehension of women's specific teaming ability, suggests that AR might constitute a site of subversion, and thus transformation, of the gender hierarchy sport traditionally helps preserve. However, the study indicates that AR as a symbolic system naturalizes women's weakness and hence legitimates masculine domination.

Future Directions for the Sociology of Sport: On Lifestyle Sport and Gender

As indicated above, lifestyle sports have been examined from different theoretical perspectives across various cultures. Hence, with reference to diversity and rapid changes in these sports, Thorpe (2006) has argued that a key aspect of future research should be to contextualize studies in order to examine multiple historical conjunctures and to take time and change more seriously into consideration. Taking account of Thorpe's advice I will emphasize the historical, global as well as national/regional conditions and focus specifically on snowboarding, one of the most "mainstreamed" lifestyles sports and one which has been on the Olympic program since 1998. I will draw attention to the sportification of snowboarding resulting in the development of snowboard organizations with particular focus on women's position exemplified by Norwegian studies.

In terms of the organization of snowboarding, internationally and nationally, some snowboard associations are associated to the World Snowboarding Federation (WSF) with no relationship to national sport organizations. In other cases, snowboarding is federated with national ski organizations associated to the Federation International du Ski (FIS). An example

of a third way of association is the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF), which is connected to WSF internationally and nationally as a member of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NOC), the umbrella organization for all sports federations in Norway. This means that an “alternative” sport, originally contrasting with a “traditional” sport, has been integrated within the established sports’ confederation. The incorporation into NOC is described by Steen-Johnsen (2008) as a process of establishing legitimacy within the snowboarding community while simultaneously adapting to the formal requirements of NOC.

NSBF (founded in 1987) is a relatively small federation compared to other federations in the NOC. Females comprise less than one third of the memberships. Being aware of women’s subordinated position in various snowboarding contexts (in 2003) a few enthusiastic women established a group called PowderPuffGirls (PPG) with the purpose of promoting women’s snowboarding in general and within NSBF. A study of PPG’s relatively short history reveals similarities as well as differences compared to women’s groups in more traditional sports (Sisjord, 2013). PPG aims to increase women’s participation at all levels of the organization (the board and various committees) and in “visible positions” like instructors and judges. PPG differs however in their way of organization. PPG does not operate with memberships rather the group is best described as a network around a core group with no formal leader. PPG has established a group on Facebook through which relevant issues are communicated and ideas for activities are exchanged which reflects the grass root engagement of lifestyle sports. Finally, while labelling the group the founders consciously picked something that disassociated from “traditional” women’s projects (Sisjord, 2013, 129). The name (in English, not Norwegian!) is derived from ‘PowerPuff Girls’, an animated television series showing young girls as active and capable heroines. The pun of ‘PowderPuff’ relates to powder snow however powder puff might also connote ‘make up’, and thereby a sign of the feminine *and* athletic, capable female snowboarders.

In conclusion, the rapid changes in lifestyle sports, including sportification and their organization calls for further contextual studies to develop a broader map of the sport(land)scape.

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