Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies

Chapter 4

Sports and Socialization: Who Plays and What Happens to Them?
Are children influenced more by athletes they see only in the media, or by those who play with them every day? Research shows that people choose role models they know and with whom they interact on a regular basis.
Socialization: Main definition

Socialization
- Is an *active* process of learning and social development

- Occurs as we
  - Interact with others
  - Become familiar with the social worlds in which we live
Socialization is an active process

It occurs as people

- Connect with others
- Synthesize information
- Make decisions that influence their lives and the world around them
Defining socialization as an active process involves using a combination of theories and an *interactionist model* in which it is assumed that

- Processes of social learning and development occur through social interaction
- Social interaction is the basis for creating and maintaining the
  - Organization of our social worlds
  - Cultural frameworks that we use to give them meaning
Past research on socialization and sports was often based on structural theories and a *personal internalization model* in which it was assumed that

- Social learning occurs as people internalize the rules of society as they
  - Grow up in their families
  - Attend school
  - Interact with peers
  - Receive images and messages through the media
Structural theories focus on the influence of *significant others* in socialization processes.

“I know this is starting early, but I can’t let him get too far behind the other kids if he’s going to succeed in life.”
Becoming and staying involved in sports

Research based on a personal internalization model of socialization found that sport participation is related to:

- A person’s abilities, characteristics, and resources
- The influence of significant others
- The availability of opportunities to play and enjoy sports
Recent research is based on an interactionist model

- It uses qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, fieldwork, participant observation, and strategic conversations).
- It focuses on relationships and decision-making processes that occur over time.
- It recognizes that reasons for participation change over time.
Becoming an elite athlete involves:

- A process of introduction and involvement
- A process of developing commitment
Significant others are important, but continued participation involves processes of social involvement and continuously making a commitment to be an athlete.
Donnelly and Young’s findings

_Becoming an athlete occurs in the context of sport subcultures and it involves_

- Acquiring knowledge about the sport
- Interacting with people involved in the sport
- Learning how participation occurs and what is expected of athletes in the sport
- Being recognized and accepted as an athlete by other athletes in the sport
Deciding to play sports depends on:
- Sport’s connection with other interests and goals
- Desires to develop and display competence
- Social support and access to resources
- Memories of past experiences in sports
- Sport-related images and meanings in relevant social worlds
Summary

The process of becoming and staying involved in sports involves decisions influenced by

- Self-reflection
- Social support and resources
- Social acceptance
- Cultural images and messages
- Meanings attached to gender, class, skin color, ethnicity, age, and physical (dis)abilities in connection with sports and sport participation
Changing or ending sport participation

Past research indicates that

- People don’t drop out forever or cut all ties with sports; they often move into other sport roles
- Dropping out is tied to other changes and transitions in a person’s life
- Dropping out isn’t always due to negative experiences
- Dropping out may cause problems among those who
  - Have identities grounded totally in sports
  - Lack social and material resources
Sometimes people end sport participation due to unfortunate experiences; but most often they alter what and when they play in connection with other changes in their lives.
Ending sport participation in high school or college does not mean that participation is over forever; these 70-year olds went to a national tournament.
Coakley’s findings (1992)

Burnout among elite adolescent athletes was most likely when:

- High-performance sports were organized so that athletes had little control over their lives
- Sport involvement was perceived to interfere with accomplishing important developmental tasks
Koukouris’ findings

Ending or reducing sport participation is associated with:

- The need to obtain a job and become independent
- Realistic judgments about sport skills and chances for future success in elite sports

After ending elite training, most people sought other ways to stay physically active and connected with sports.
Wheeler’s findings (on Athletes with Disabilities)

When competitive sport careers ended, the main challenges faced by athletes with disabilities were:

- Reinvesting time and energy into other activities and relationships
- Reconnecting with family members and friends
- Returning to school or initiating/continuing occupational careers
Summary

Changing or ending competitive sport participation is related to:

- Decision-making processes in people’s lives
- Identity issues and developmental issues
- Life transitions
- Self-reflection related to the role of sports in one’s life
Being involved in sports: What happens?

In some cultures people mistakenly believe that playing sports automatically builds positive traits (character) among all participants.
Factors often overlooked in research on character building in sports (I)

1. Sport participation offers diverse experiences, both positive and negative.

2. Selection processes in organized sports favor some characteristics over others.

3. Meanings given to sport experiences vary by athlete; lessons learned and lessons applied vary widely.

(continued)
Factors often overlooked in research on character building in sports (II)

4. Meanings given to sport experiences change over time.

5. Social relationships mediate sports experiences and the meanings given to them.

6. The socialization that occurs in sports may also occur in other activities.
Sport participation produces positive effects when it provides (I)

1. Opportunities to explore and develop non-sport identities

2. Knowledge-building experiences that go beyond the locker room and playing field

3. New relationships with people who are not connected with sports

(continued)
Sport participation produces positive effects when it provides (II)

4. Explicit examples of how lessons learned in sports can be applied in non-sport situations

5. Opportunities to develop and display competence in non-sport activities and become linked with mentors and advocates in the process
General summary

- **Negative socialization effects** are most likely when playing sports *constricts or limits* a person’s identities, relationships, and experiences.

- **Positive socialization effects** are most likely when playing sports *expands or diversifies* a person’s identities, relationships, and experiences.
All sports are not the same when it comes to socialization experiences.
Some sports emphasize power and performance; others emphasize pleasure and participation.
# Power and Performance Versus Pleasure and Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Power and Performance Sports</strong></th>
<th><strong>Pleasure and Participation Sports</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Use power to push limits in pursuit of victories</td>
<td>1. Emphasis on connections between people</td>
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<td>2. Excellence proved through winning</td>
<td>2. Ethic of expression, enjoyment, concern, and health</td>
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<td>4. Competence-based inclusion/exclusion</td>
<td>4. Inclusion and accommodation of differences</td>
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<td>5. Hierarchical structures</td>
<td>5. Democratic structures</td>
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<td>6. Opponents = enemies</td>
<td>6. Compete <em>with</em> others</td>
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Sport participation and health

- The healthiest physical activities are rhythmic, noncompetitive exercises in which people control and regulate body movements.

- Health benefits decline in competitive sports.

- Health costs of competitive sport are due to:
  - Injuries (cuts, broken teeth, injured knees, broken bones, spinal cord injury)
  - Violence (when body is used as a weapon)
  - Risk taking (when athletes exceed limits)
  - Unhealthy lifestyles (disordered eating, drinking)
Sport participation and obesity

- Physical activity reduces weight.

- When people equate activity with competitive sports, activity rates often decline.

- Sports in which large bodies are valued encourage overeating and other unhealthy weight gain strategies—such as in the NFL where obesity rates are high.
Table 4.1  NFL players weighing over 300 pounds, by selected seasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Players</th>
<th>Percent of All Players</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986:</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996:</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006:</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
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Studies of sport experiences

The voices of sport participants indicate that

- People define and give meaning to sport experiences in connection with their social relationships.

- Meanings given to sport experiences are grounded in cultural definitions about gender, race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and other characteristics defined as socially important in a social world.
Fine’s findings

The moral socialization that occurs in little league baseball

- Depends on how the boys “hear” and apply the moral messages from adults
- Emphasizes masculinity as involving toughness and dominance
Theberge’s findings

The locker rooms of women’s ice hockey teams are key places where

- Women bond with each other and form a sense of community

- Players develop meanings for their sport participation through their relationships with each other and apply those meanings to their lives
Woog’s findings

The personal stories of gay male athletes in the U.S. indicate that

- Combining a gay identity with an athletic identity is a challenging process.
- Individual, non-contact sports are more gay-friendly than team sports and heavy contact sports.
- Being out in sport is liberating, but it can also be dangerous.
- Being out is easier when friends, teammates, and organizations provide active support; institutionalized forms of support are very helpful.
Studies of the social worlds of sports

- **Social world** refers to a way of life and an associated mindset that revolves around a particular sport and the people associated with it.

- **Sport experiences** and the actions of people in sports can be understood only when placed in the context of the social worlds in which they occur.
Adlers’ findings

Some athletes in high-profile sports experience “role engulfment” that

- Deeply affects their identities and how they make decisions about their academic, athletic, and social lives
- Separates them from relationships and experiences they require if they are to learn lessons from their sport experiences
- Influences how other people define and respond to them
Klein’s findings

The lives of bodybuilders revolve around issues of gender and sexuality

- Bodybuilders learn to project images of power while often experiencing doubts about their identities and self-worth.
- The social world of bodybuilding fosters a need for attention and approval.
- Ideas about masculinity are so narrow that male bodybuilders develop homophobic attitudes and express self-presentations based on caricatures of manliness.
Crosset’s findings

The lives of women athletes in the LPGA were influenced by gender relations in U.S. culture

- The women developed an “ethic of prowess”—a mindset highlighting a commitment to physical competence as a basis for evaluating self and others on the tour.
- This ethic existed to neutralize the negative effects of traditional ideas about femininity.
- Conformity to the ethic helped the women legitimize their roles as professional athletes.
Wacquant’s findings

The social world of the boxing gym

- Was created in connection with the social forces in the black ghetto and its masculine street culture
- Sheltered black men from the full destructive impact of social and cultural forces in their lives
- Provided a disciplined regime of body regulation that established a positive identity and separated the men from the negative influences of a chaotic environment.
Sports as sites for reaffirming ideology

- **Sports** are sites for struggling over how we think and what we do.
- **Sports** are sites where people create and learn “stories” they use as they give meaning to and make sense of the world.
- **Sports** consist of vocabularies and images (discourses) that often support dominant ideologies.
Socialization as a community and cultural process

Hegemony is the process of maintaining leadership and control by gaining the consent and approval of other groups, including those who are being led or controlled.

Sports are important sites for hegemonic processes because they provide pleasure and excitement for people.

Corporate sponsors use sports to establish “ideological outposts” in people’s heads; this defuses resistance to corporate power and policies.

Gramsci: It’s difficult to fight an enemy that has outposts in your head.
Corporations pay to have their names, logos, and products associated with sports. If people believe that their pleasure depends on corporations, they’ll be less likely to interfere with corporate interests.
Nike and other corporations worked hard to sever the “Jordan persona” from African American experiences. The French liked this image on a Paris building because they could identify with Jordan without acknowledging the legacies of African colonialism and racism that are part of their culture.

This allowed them to see Jordan with colorblind eyes—and allowed white French people to deny racism in their society.
The bodies of athletes with disabilities challenge expectations in the *Empire of the Normal*. Athletes with disabilities are expected to have stories that explain “why my body is different from your body.”

This influences their socialization experiences and their identities as athletes.
The meanings given to sports vary by person and situation.

“I think these guys give different meanings to their boxing experiences.”
Sport, socialization, and ideology

- Research shows that none of us lives outside the influence of ideology.

- The stories that emerge in connection with sports and sport experiences generally reproduce dominant forms of ideology, but they also can challenge and even transform dominant ideology.
The most informative research on what happens in sports deals with

1. The *everyday experiences* of people who play sports

2. The *social worlds* created around sports

3. *Community and cultural processes* through which ideologies are created, reproduced, and changed