

SPORTS ACTIVITIES VIEWED THROUGH THE SPECTRUM OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The subject of sport and physical activity in determining individual and social well-being, viewed from a sociological perspective, is highly relevant, especially for Romanian society, which faces numerous problems whose responsibility is seen as both individual and structural (economic-political and socio-cultural). However, unlike the general public, politicians, cultural figures, and especially the agents directly involved in the world of sport, sociologists who study sport seek to go beyond such general assessments and to analyze social causes and consequences in greater detail, which also involves revealing certain critical aspects. This paper proposes several theoretical-epistemological models for the sociological investigation of sports phenomena.

KEYWORDS: *epistemological foundations, investigation, sports phenomena, methods, theoretical models*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a complex social phenomenon, sport today acts as a spokesperson not only for individuals who adopt a healthy lifestyle or practice it professionally, but also for social groups marked by financial, power-related, symbolic, ludic, medical, or recreational interests. The presence of sport in the contemporary world goes beyond the obvious perceptions of common sense.

Numerous economic-political, socio-cultural, politico-ecological, and psycho-social aspects are highlighted in a series of scientific works (see George Ritzer, 2007). Themes such as

institutionalization, rationalization, legitimization and delegitimization, democratization, the globalization of sport, or reactions to the process of sportification represent only part of the topics addressed by the sociology of sport.

At the macro level, sociology and social psychology analyze the structural relationships and dynamics among a wide range of phenomena: sport and capitalism; sport as catharsis and spectacle; sport and urban space; sport and culture; sports subcultures; sport and the environment; sport in relation to ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and social class; sport and social capital; sport and social resistance; sport and the state; sport as profession and labor; sportization; sports heroes and celebrities; the sports industry; sport and mass media; sports stadiums as social phenomena; and sport as socio-cultural symbolism.

In what follows, we will attempt to provide a synthesis of the main theoretical-epistemological models addressing this subject, on the basis of which we have anchored our empirical research strategies.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

2.1 THE MAJOR THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

Exerted by the works of the founders of sociology - Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx - inherently extend to the sociology of sport as well. Thus, Durkheimian theses (cf. Richard Giulianotti, 2005; Stănciulescu, 1996) reinforce, among other aspects, the idea of sport's function in promoting social cohesion and solidarity through quasi-religious rituals (rules, myths, fandom, fanaticism-idolatry, the mystique of champions, ritually intensified collective behavior, etc.).

Sport can be seen as a promoter of social order at two levels:

- **the systemic level**, due to the structural-functionalist orientation, through the harmonious connection between sport and other institutions;

- **the everyday level**, as highlighted by Erving Goffman, through particular interaction rituals that protect the real and concrete identity of social actors, drawing on transpersonal symbols.

The Weberian paradigm facilitates a deep understanding of interpretative and rationalizing aspects. Interpretive sociology focuses on the complex and varied meanings and identities of social actors within sport. Weber, Guttman, and Ritzer advocate considering the impact of sport on a highly rationalized, stratified, and bureaucratized modern society. Despite their differences, both the Durkheimian and Weberian perspectives take into account the politico-economic factor that decisively influences social life and interpersonal relations.

Modern capitalism. For various neo-Marxists, sport reproduces the logic of industrial capitalism's inequalities, such as the exploitation of workers/athletes and the manipulation of consumers/spectators. However, such arguments tend to oversimplify the Marxist view by overlooking the complexity of power relations at any given historical moment.

The concept of "resistance" in the context of sport must be carefully detailed, taking into account notions of "transgression" (from one status to another, from one role to another, or from one social meaning/importance to another), associated with the carnivalesque (the value, appreciation, and function of spectacle). Contemporary authors (Mike Featherstone, 1995; Richard Giulianotti, 2005; Rotariu & Iluț, 2006; Robertson & White, 2003) emphasize the idea of structured, polyphonic research (multiple voices) in sociological investigations of, among other things, sports cultures.

Another fertile direction in studies of the socio-psychology of sport is the perspective of Michel Foucault. The celebrated author's theories regarding the "disciplining" of populations in both bodily and spatial terms are prominent in subsequent (constructivist and postmodernist) interpretations. While modern sport facilitates certain bodily developments, the risk of injury and the demand for constant effort remain connected, as a background, to models of social inequality. Participation in the world of sport generates strong emotional bonds at both individual and collective levels, while also contributing significantly to rationalization and spatial valorization (through reciprocal adjustments of the meanings assigned to performance in terms of

the importance allocated to time and distance, quantified in achievements/records).

2.2 MODERN SOCIOLOGY

Has introduced further nuances in the study of social phenomena. Representative figures include Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu (1986 and 1979 – cf. Stănciulescu, 1996).

Elias's processual-sociological perspective examines society as a game in which participants - spectators and players alike - are "interdependent" and engaged in a continuous flow of play. His theory of the civilizing process has been applied to the interpretation of the social history of sport and, more controversially, to the explanation of violence in sport.

Pierre Bourdieu, adopting a structuralist-constructivist approach, offers a starting point for a more critical yet complex analysis of social phenomena, linking themes from the world of sport to inter-group constraints. Bourdieu's later work became more politicized, sharply criticizing social inequalities and the policies of "neo-liberal" governments. Additionally, the renowned author critically highlights concepts such as conspicuous consumption, symbolic violence, and the background dominance of interest groups behind the scenes in activities that appear open (such as sport), which hold strong appeal for the general public.

The symbolic interactionism paradigm, which includes several distinct theoretical variants, considers individual characteristics (even formal ones) not only as statuses but also as "social symbols"- symbolic constructs that help organize and structure social experiences and determine a range of meanings, evaluations, value judgments, or myths.

Supported by American sociologists such as George H. Mead, W.I. Thomas, Charles H. Cooley, and Herbert Blumer, the study of social interaction rests on three main premises:

- a. Human beings act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them;
- b. Meaning is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that an individual has with others;

c. These meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process used by people when dealing with the things they encounter. Although symbolic interactionism has been criticized for overemphasizing the role of symbols and intersubjectivity in social life, it has become a powerful source of inspiration for contemporary sociology, particularly within social constructivism.

Social constructivism encompasses a range of sociological and social-psychological perspectives, including phenomenology (Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann), symbolic interactionism (George Herbert Mead, Charles H. Cooley), and ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel). These perspectives are not adopted as causal explanations of the social world but have the advantage of highlighting the importance of meanings in everyday life.

As theoretical perspectives (rather than formal theories), they provide broad guidance on the socially constructed features of experience, including the experience of living one's life according to values centered on health and psycho-physical balance.

The starting point of constructivism is that, while theory must serve as a reference for perspectives, these perspectives involve the concrete study of how (not why) ordinary people themselves "theorize" the world they inhabit and justify their own actions.

Clifford Geertz (1983) emphasizes the "achieved" aspect of culture rather than the "given," describing participants in this process as continuously modifying the "web of significance," thereby providing culture with a wide variety of meanings.

2.3 POSTMODERNISM

According to postmodernists, unlike the early period of modernity, our lives are increasingly characterized by a weaker adherence to the structural values of family, class, community, and nation, or to social expectations related to gender, age, class, or race status.

The postmodernist current and globalization have sparked some of the most significant debates in the social sciences over the past three decades. The postmodern orientation is largely

based on the idea that certain classical roles and statuses have become irrelevant in contemporary society (a concept introduced by Neugarten in 1982).

These ideas have been presented (Mike Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991) as an ideal to which the social sciences should relate through a significant shift in perspective compared to classical theories (structural - functionalist) and even compared to the paradigms of symbolic interactionism or constructivism.

However, while traditional values (family, work, religion, the military) remain relatively stable, new values have emerged and spread exponentially over the last four to five decades worldwide. These include a lifestyle perceived as healthy and “successful,” the appreciation of youth, and individual physical well-being. As a consequence, an entire industry has developed around preserving youth, health, and well-being at all ages (hence the expression “successfully aging”), directly associated with healthy eating and engaging in physical exercise across all ages and, naturally, differentiated among social categories.

Within this same value-oriented, attitudinal, and behavioral trend, there is also a growing awareness of environmental issues and ecological nutrition (the so-called “spiral of public concern”). Mass media plays a major role in reinforcing these trends, making them fundamental components of our daily lives.

Thus, postmodernism introduces, to some extent, a different kind of “value homogenization,” encompassing a distinct configuration of values. Of course, the concentration of attitudes and concrete concerns regarding a healthy lifestyle is strongly linked to an individual’s standard of living, education, and cultural background.

Interest in the issue of self-identity has been extremely high in recent decades within psychology and social psychology (Christopher Phillipson, 1998; J. Simons et al., 1994), aiming to explain the relationship between what an individual does and what they believe about themselves. Regarding age identity, social category, or the adoption of a leisure framework, the tension emphasized is that between the individual’s internal identity and the identity imposed by

society. From the perspective of postmodern theorists, all kinds of identities - within Western societies - become relative, with the normative prescriptions of industrial (post-industrial) society becoming largely irrelevant.

Concerning the empirical understanding and treatment of social construction, there are some differences among postmodernists, highlighted by American authors Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1999). Although the debate only marginally addresses lifestyle issues, it has implications for how such topics can develop both analytically and empirically.

The controversy revolves around the following dilemma: if the social world is analytically open to subjective formulations and leads to a free empirical “game,” how can we nonetheless extract models of social life for sociology? The answers appear to cover a continuum, from advocates of free-form research to proponents of directed research, sharpening differences regarding the execution of qualitative studies. This tension was already foreshadowed four decades ago by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), who, while promoting a new perspective on social inquiry - one with integrative and interpretive emphases - also drew attention to its numerous pitfalls and challenges.

3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANCHORS

In the conceptual framework of our empirical approach, we take into account certain theoretical interpretations of social phenomena in general and sports phenomena in particular, in order to later ground our research epistemologically by specifying the type of activity targeted by the study - namely, why, how often, and in what manner our subjects engage in various forms of physical activity. Additionally, we aim to determine the concrete and symbolic functions that sport fulfills in the lives of these individuals.

The epistemological taxonomy of the types of phenomena to be explained (**explanans**) and the types of explanations for these phenomena (**explananda**) can serve as a starting point for systematizing modern sociological theories about various societal phenomena. These categories can be analyzed according to major types of explanations of social life influences and life-cycle

phenomena, as proposed by Derek Dannefer and Paul Uhlenberg (1999, pp. 313–314): one **personological**, and the other **sociological**.

Personological analyses (Kohli and Meyer, 1986; Elder, 1998; Clausen, 1993) and sociological analyses (Jaber Gubrium, James Holstein, and Buckholdt, 1994) focus on three levels of analysis:

- **Individual level** – tracking the structure of discrete human lives, from birth to death, and the characteristics of these particular life courses.
- **Social or population aggregation level** – mapping the collective patterns of individual life course structures within a given population.
- **Cultural or symbolic level** – studying broad societal representations of the life cycle and the roles prescribed for each age stage, derived from shared social knowledge and experience, including the nature of life-event boundaries and the socially recognized roles, norms, and meanings.

Each of these levels of analysis targets important phenomena that require careful description and examination. For example, at the **individual level**, key points of personal transition and the direction of trajectories based on their significant characteristics must be identified. At the **population or collective level**, the challenge lies in aggregating these individual characteristics into a collective framework. At the **socio-cultural level**, the focus is on the social structuring of roles attached to various statuses (age, gender, education, etc.) and on defining and evaluating specific life elements within the context of a given social system.

Inspired by D. Dannefer's (1999) classification of explanatory types (personological and sociological) and by the identification of specialized sociological studies as belonging to the level of analysis (in assessing consequences and outcomes for the life course - including the adoption of a healthy lifestyle and sport as a way of life - at either the individual or population level), we have developed the following general framework in Table 1:

Table 1: *Types of explanations and levels of analysis in modern sociology*

Level of Analysis of Life-Course Outcomes (Consequences)	Personological Type of Explanation	Sociological Type of Explanation
Individual	Personological Explanations for Individual Outcomes	Sociological Explanations for Individual Outcomes
Population	Personological Explanations for Population-Level Outcomes	Sociological Explanations for Population-Level Outcomes
Symbolic Construct	Life Course as a Personal Symbolic Construct	Life Course as a Shared Social Symbolic Construct

In most studies, the **personological type of explanation** is included both for the personal conduct of the subjects themselves and for the population as a whole. This approach also seeks to capture the subjects' perspectives on the population's adoption of a balanced life, in which sport represents a constant.

One of the methods employed (the **multiple case study**) will use **in-depth interviews** and **observation sheets** as central techniques. The figure below illustrates the **epistemological framework** within which the research can be conducted. The study will focus on the two levels, and the methodology will be constructed from both **functionalist** and **constructivist** premises.

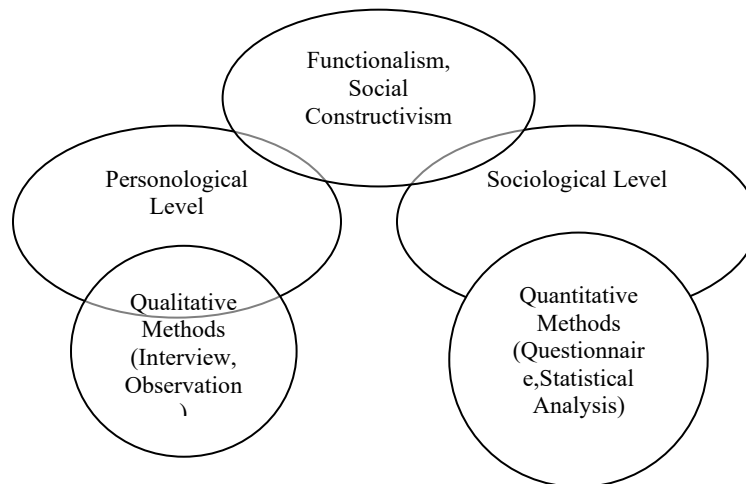


Figure 1. *Methodological dimensions of the empirical Theoretical-approach*

This allows us to observe the specificities of the Romanian context regarding the perception of sport in general, as well as the practical engagement in sports (various physical activities) during leisure time.

The theoretical premises we start from are related to global trends, the differences observed between various categories of individuals, and largely align with the research questions:

- To what extent is there a positive association between standard of living and the regular practice of physical activities
- To what extent is there a positive association between education level and a favorable opinion of sport in general and its practice in particular
- What are the associations between age, gender, and marital/family status and the regular practice of physical activities
- What are the reasons (both objective and subjective) that led to the decision to engage in the respective physical activity
- What differences (types of leisure activities – TV, rest, walks, meeting friends, hobbies, sport) exist between those who, in the past and presently, have had practitioners of physical activities in their close social circle (family, friends, colleagues) and those who do not have such a context
- To what extent has mass media contributed to a healthy lifestyle through public appeals emphasizing the importance of sports activities?

- Is there a difference in life philosophy or value adherence to a healthy lifestyle between those who practice physical activity and those who do not

As previously mentioned, the following research methods can be used:

- **Multiple case study** (using **in-depth interviews** and **observation**) on a sample of subjects selected according to diverse sociodemographic criteria.
- **Standardized questionnaire** administered to theoretical samples from fitness centers and sports clubs.
- **Secondary analysis** of statistics and results from research conducted at the national level (opinion polls).

Following the pilot studies (consisting of preliminary interviews with practitioners and managers of the respective centers), the research hypotheses can be constructed, primarily linking them to **functionalist** and **constructivist** assumptions. Of course, the value, attitudinal, and behavioral framework of individuals can be interpreted through a much broader theoretical lens. Depending on the results, researchers may expand the explanatory scope where appropriate.

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