Chapter 7

Sociology of Physical Activity

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What Is Sociology of Physical Activity?

• Sociology of physical activity focuses on the shared beliefs and social practices that constitute specific forms of physical activity (such as sport or exercise).

• Sociological information adds to the breadth of knowledge of a well-educated kinesiologist.
What Does a Sociologist of Physical Activity Do?

• Teach
• Research
• Service
Goals of Sociology of Physical Activity

• To look at physical activity with a penetrating gaze that goes beyond our common understanding of social life
• To identify and analyze patterns of change and stability in physical activity
• To critique physical activity programs in order to identify problems and recommend changes leading to the enhancement of equality and human well-being
History of Sociology of Physical Activity

• Early beginnings: Late 19th century to mid-1960s
• Identifying the subdiscipline: Mid-1960s to early 1980s
History of Sociology of Physical Activity (continued)

Expanding the subdiscipline: mid-1970s to present

- Socioeconomic inequities in sport
- Gender inequities in sport
- Racial and ethnic inequities in sport
- Global, national, and local relations in sport
- Exercise and societal conceptions of human bodies
- Disabilities and abilities
- Obesity
Research Methods in Sociology of Physical Activity

Methods

• Survey research
• Interviewing
• Thematic analysis
• Ethnography
• Societal analysis
• Historical analysis

Research in sociology of physical activity involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data using a variety of methodologies. – Mixed method
Overview of Knowledge in Sociology of Physical Activity

- Power relationships
- Gender relationships
- Sexuality and sports
- Participation patterns
- Leadership roles

(continued)
Overview of Knowledge in Sociology of Physical Activity (continued)

- Cultural differences
- Ethnic (cultural heritage) and racial relations
- Sport and politics (local, national, international, and transnational)
- Mass media (e.g., television, newspapers, magazines, the Internet) and sport
Power and Power Relationships

- Power: The ability to do what you want without being stopped by others.
- Power relations underlie social inequalities.
- Power relations affect people’s quality of life and their chances for a better life in the future.
Gender Relations and Physical Activity

Gender: A set of norms or expectations about how we should behave that are linked to societal understandings of sexuality and procreation

(continued)
Gender Relations and Physical Activity (continued)

• Participation
  – Title IX legislation
  – More girls and women participating
  – Societal perceptions of gender-appropriate physical activities

• Leadership
  – Decrease in percentage of women coaching girls’ and women’s teams
  – Reasons for the decrease
Gender Relations and Physical Activity (continued)

• Expression
  – Sport and heterosexual manhood
  – Less coverage of women’s sport
  – Themes in media coverage of men’s and women’s sport
  – Sports as symbols of male superiority
  – Conceptions of beautiful bodies

(continued)
Gender Relations and Physical Activity (continued)

- **Popular media representations**
  - Disparity in coverage
  - Women: focus is on artistic qualities
  - Men: focus is on movements, skills, and strategic knowledge

- **Giving privilege to masculinity**

- **Body culture**
  - Outward appearance
  - Disordered eating: anorexia and bulimia
  - Bodybuilders and steroid use
Socially Appropriate Sports

- Although many more girls and women are participating in physical activities today compared with several decades ago, they tend to participate in sports that are considered socially appropriate, involving less body contact, prominent aesthetic dimensions, and less extreme strength development.

- Many sports serve as vehicles for exploring, celebrating, and giving privilege to masculinity; because of this they express ideas that are problematic for girls and women as well as for boys and men who are not athletically inclined.
### Table 7.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports and physical activities</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercising walking</td>
<td>95,803</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising with equipment</td>
<td>55,286</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>51,943</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle riding</td>
<td>39,789</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowling</td>
<td>38,980</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobic exercising</td>
<td>38,541</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiking</td>
<td>37,704</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working out at clubs</td>
<td>36,278</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running/jogging</td>
<td>35,524</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
<td>31,480</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top 10 activities listed in thousands (95,803 = 95,803,000).
Ethnic and Racial Relations

• Ethnic group: A group of people who share important and distinct cultural traditions
• Race: A group of people who are defined by society as different from others on the basis of genetically inherited traits
• Participation
  – African American overrepresentation among athletes in popular male team sports
  – Access to facilities and coaching
Leadership

- Low proportion of African American coaches at elite levels, relative to the number of players
- Several reasons for this low proportion

Expression

- “Cool pose”
- Deception of African American boys concerning likelihood of becoming a professional athlete
- Media portrayals of white and African American athletes: brains vs. brawn
- Racial identity
- Stereotypes
Socioeconomic Relations

• Socioeconomic status: Social position based on wealth, education, and occupational prestige

• Participation
  – Types and amounts of physical activity among people at different socioeconomic levels
  – Likelihood of becoming a professional athlete is very slim

(continued)
Socioeconomic Relations (continued)

• Socioeconomic status influences the types of physical activities to which people have access.

• Physical activities requiring expensive equipment, facilities, and coaching are generally beyond the reach of people at lower income levels.
Socioeconomic Relations (continued)

• Leadership
  – People who control elite sport are very wealthy.
  – Top collegiate athletic directors and coaches are well paid.
  – Less affluent people have opportunities for leadership in grassroots sport.
• Expression
  – Expensive sports
  – Lean, taut bodies
  – Sport expresses messages about the importance of winning, discipline, obedience, and hard work, suggesting that the rich and poor both deserve whatever wealth they have.
Sociology of Physical Activity

- Illuminates societal patterns of change and stability in physical activity
- Helps us understand our physical activity experiences and others’ experiences
- Identifies social problems and urges modifications aimed at enhancing equality and human well-being
- Primarily focused on sport, but interest in exercise, fitness, and societal conceptions of the human body is increasing
Thinking About Inequality

• What inequalities do you notice in sport and physical activity?
• How can these inequalities be changed to enhance equality and overall human well-being?
Study Guide - Quiz

• Sociologist of kinesiology – what they know
• Race and ethnicity the same?
• Sociologists of physical activity – work primarily in lab setting?
• Exploitation of student-athletes
• American Indian mascots
Study Guide - Final

- North American Society for the Sociology of Sport
- Societies ideas of women’s bodies
- Title IX
- Gender – definition
- Research methods of sociology
- Main goals of sociology of physical activity
- Focus of sociology of physical activity