

OLDER PEOPLE AND SPORT, LOOKING BEYOND THE HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores some important theoretical questions on the relationship between sports and older people, beyond the health perspective. Sport has been attributed numerous social functions and meanings. Also policymakers have experimented with the use of sport for social purposes. However, both research and policy initiatives are in general considered from a functional and instrumental point of view. Especially considering older people sport is mainly approached from a health perspective. A combination of insights from gerontology and sport sciences should help us gain a better view on how sport can contribute to the social integration of older people. This paper offers an extensive literature review focusing on formulating opportunities for further research about sport participation among older people.

Key Words: *sport, older people, social integration*

JEL Classification: I00

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past decades two social evolutions have occurred. First, the social value of sport has increased strongly (Elling, 2001). It used to be an almost marginal social phenomenon, but now it has shifted to the centre of the social, political and economic life (Scheerder, Van Aken & Vervaeke, 2006). Sport has developed into socially accepted behaviour; it has almost been set as the norm (Tamboer & Steenberg, 2004). Taking part in sport activities is a facet of being involved in society. This implies that sport has been attributed numerous social functions and meanings for both the individual and society, which can be positive and negative. Sport is healthy, it increases self-esteem but simultaneously it can also create stress and frustration. Sport contributes to the social integration of social groups but at the same time it excludes minority social groups (De Knop, 1998; van Bottenburg, 2009). In other words, sport is deeply embedded in society.

Second, for the first time modern society has been confronted with a demographic phenomenon characterized by a strong increase of an ageing population. Older people will become increasingly important in society facing us with a whole new set of challenges, also in the field of sports (Verté, De Witte, De Donder, 2007). In English-speaking countries there is a tradition of extensive research with respect to sports involvement of older people. However, in the Netherlands and Belgium this is still at an early stage of development.

Among policymakers there is a growing recognition of the role that sports and physical activity can play in older people's lives. For example, the European Commission initiated the EUNAAPA¹ project to improve health, well-being, independence and quality of life of older people in Europe through physical activity (Bossaerts, 2008). Also policymakers develop promotional campaigns to encourage older people in having a more active lifestyle. Sport being a precautionary measure concerning health decline and its contribution to social integration of older people in society are two of the most important arguments used by these policymakers to increase sport participation of older people. Research still shows the social stratification of sports and a decreasing participation with age (Collins and Kay, 2003; Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2009; McPherson, 1986).

Literature clearly lacks a review of theoretical debates on the role of sports in older people's lives. Most debates are dominated from a health perspective. Other significant functions and meanings of sport, such as social integrative meaning, are less addressed in literature. In response to this lacuna, this article aims to offer such a critical review. In combining insights from gerontology and sports sciences several perspectives will be explored in order to formulate some challenges for future research.

2. SPORT ON DOCTOR'S ORDERS

During the past decades negative and medicalized understandings of ageing have dominated both the field of gerontology and ageing research (Phillipson, 2010; Dionigi, 2006; McPherson, 1986). The process of ageing is strongly associated with loss of independence, physical frailty and care. Similar understandings are found within in the field of sport research. Therefore it is considered as being a burden on society (Phillipson, 2010; Tokarski, 2004).

¹ European Network for Actions on Aging and Physical Activity

Tulle (2008) identified four types of literature dealing with exercise, sports and ageing: (1) the impact of elite sports among master athletes on ageing processes, (2) the impact of ageing on athletic performance, (3) reviews of existing knowledge in the field and (4) the importance of physical activity in reducing and preventing functional declines such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, obesity and diabetes, which is particularly focused on (Cardenas, Henderson, Wilson, 2009; McAuley, 1993; Phoenix-Grant, 2009; Tulle, 2008).

Physical activity and sports are seen as an adequate tool to accomplish healthy ageing (Tokarski, 2004; Tulle, 2008). The importance of physical activity as an element of healthy living for older adults has been widely addressed in scientific literature. (Cardenas, Henderson, Wilson, 2009). Sport and exercise are then reconstructed in a manner to prevent these problems opening the potential to reconstruct the ageing body as fit (Tulle, 2008).

As a result during the past decades many community programmes, intervention studies and social marketing campaigns have provided guidelines outlining the potential benefits of physical activity and sport in later life. (Grant, 2008; Phoenix-Grant, 2009). Despite all the well-known positive effects and many programmes, we cannot deny the fact that the majority of the older adults are under-represented in the field of sport (Tokarski, 2004).

Authors like Baars (2006) criticize this instrumental approach of these kinds of (sport) activities. The point of view of older people gets little or no attention in researching and theorizing these matters. 'Use it or lose it' is the biggest argument to engage older people in an active lifestyle. Staying young and the pursuit of eternal youth seem to be the challenge.

3. SOCIAL INTEGRATIVE MEANING OF SPORT

We use the theoretical frame of Elling (2001) to explore the possibilities of sport with respect to social integration. Based upon research she has concluded that social integration consists of three components: structural integration, socio-cultural integration and social affective integration.

Structural integration usually refers to the extent to which a social group or individuals participate in required and voluntary activities in society compared to the majority of the population. The degree to which structural integration in sports occurs for a specific group is marked by a continuum ranging from minimal integration implying that individuals of different social groups hardly mingle in the context of sport, over direct integration relating to the situation where a sports team consists of members representing various social groups, to inverse integration involving people with hegemonic social characteristics who participate in a minority group.

Research mainly focuses on the integration in a sports club, which is still considered as being the traditional setting for sport participation (De Knop & Elling, 2000). However, older people are confronted with structural constraints and mostly exercise in inner circle (minimal integration), which makes that they participate in sport and physical activity in other settings such as community activities and many social organizations. Policymakers consider direct integration as the ideal form of structural integration whereas other forms are seen as segregation.

Integration occurs not only at structural level but compasses also a socio-cultural process, which is the continuous combined action of confirming and challenging both dominant and marginal norms and values. The socio-cultural climate in most sports organizations is often considered as neutral although it is shaped by physically able, young, white and heterosexual men. How neutral can

sports organizations be when people who have alternative ideas are welcome as long as they assimilate within the existing situation (De Knop & Elling, 2000)?

Sports organizations often have a low opinion of older people (De Knop & Elling, 2000), which implies that processes of ageism are also embedded in the field of sport. Ageism involves the way of looking at older people that stereotypes them. On the one hand older people are often stereotyped as weak, frail, senile, disabled, slow, on the other hand trend watchers like to talk about masterboomers, grampies², yuppies³, woopies⁴ and create an image of older people who are fit, who have a sport-minded attitude, who travel a lot, who have sufficient income and savings and have the time to spend their money (Scheerder, 2006; Scheerder, 2004). Conveniently they forget the less fortunate ones.

A third component of social integration is social affective integration. Sport is a social meeting point gathering quite some people in leisure time. Putnam (2000) poses that sports can play an important role with respect to processes of bonding and bridging, especially in an organized context. Meaning that social networks are not limited to like-minded people; bridges are built between social groups with different social and cultural backgrounds. However, friendships tend to be homogeneous (Adams, 1993). The need for contact with like-minded peers can be an argument to practise a sport in inner circle (Elling, 2001; De Knop & Elling, 2000).

Friendship literature tells us that the characteristics such as community size or social characteristics (for example the density, which means the higher the proportion of people in a context who know one another, the closer they feel to one another) of specific leisure context can encourage or discourage participation in those activities (Adams, 1993). But little is known about the role of sports in friendships although social contact is one of the main reasons why adults, and especially older adults, are getting involved in sports. (Elling, 2001; De Knop & Elling, 2000).

4. FROM THE BENCH TO THE MIDFIELD

The seemingly difficult relationship between older people and sport is often attributed to processes of socialization.

European statistics show that the lowest sport participation is found among retirees (Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, 2009). We also see that sport has a social stratification concerning age, gender, level of income and education (Collins and Kay, 2003; Van Tuyckom and Scheerder, 2009, McPherson, 1986). This is often ascribed to the diminished sport socialization of today's older people. Members of older cohorts had less opportunity to practise sport in comparison to younger cohorts (Scheerder, 2004; McPherson, 1986; Scheerder, 2006). Until the sixties sports were mainly reserved for young, competitive, middle-class or high-class men (Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, 2009; Scheerder, 2006). Because of this a lot of older people do not have a sports identity or they have a negative one (De Knop & Elling, 2000). They grew up in a time where rest was being considered as the virtue of old age. But time shifted to a new cultural period where old

² Growing retired active monied people in excellent state

³ Young energetic elderly people

⁴ Well-off older people

muscles are supposed to move (Grant, 2001). And then again a lot of older adults underestimate their own physical possibilities (Grant, 2001).

Nevertheless some researchers have explored the manner in which the concept of continuity in sport involvement is seamlessly woven into the fabric of the overall life course and how this contributes to the quality of life in late adulthood (O'Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1995; O'Brien Cousins & Keating 1995; Langley, 1999). They conclude that continuity theory constitutes an interesting theoretical frame. Continuity theory refers to a consistency of patterns of action across different stages in life. In making adaptive choices middle-aged persons and older adults attempt to preserve and maintain previous patterns of ideas and actions (Atchley, 1993, 1989). Older people who were physically active throughout their lives stayed active after retirement. Continuity in sport and physical activity can be a primary adaptive strategy for coping with the ageing process (Langley, 1999).

This implicates an increasing heterogeneous composition of the (older) adult population. Some will take up exercise after retirement, others will take their first steps in the world of exercise and sport, some will stay sedentary, others will keep up the physical active lifestyle they have always had. There will even be high-risk athletes (Bossaerts, 2008).

5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The instrumental approach of sport contained in both arguments considered above is criticized severely. Sport considered as tool takes precedence over sport viewed as aim. However, sport philosophers like Tamboer and Steenbergen (2004) envisage this as being intrinsic to sport. They talk about the double character of sport. In relevant literature one tries to define sport a number of times, using an essentialistic approach or following a more operationalistic point of view. The former emphasizes the characteristic property of sport, the 'Eigenweltlichkeit', disconnecting sport from its social context in which it is embedded whereas the latter focuses on this social context. Sport is then considered as tool to achieve external aims. But according to Tamboer en Steenbergen both viewpoints are inextricably interwoven. Sport is always a game and an instrument at the same time. However, Baars' criticism remains pertinent. Too little attention is paid to what elderly persons themselves consider as meaningful and significant.

A great deal of responsibility is put on the older people themselves. They need to be encouraged to take care of their health to minimize costs for society. They need to be stimulated to participate in several domains of society, such as sports. But few times the characteristics of these social contexts are questioned. As mentioned earlier in this paper sports organizations (clubs) are considered as being the traditional sport setting. But we must look further. Van Bottenburg (2009) states that the social effects and meanings of sport are not universal. It depends on how sport is used, in which social environments sport is set in. In other words these effects vary according to circumstances and do not create the same effects for society and the older individual. Hence, more research has to be done outside the sport organization context. Questions need be asked about how other social contexts, which are significant in the lives of older people, such as community centres, social centres and homes for elderly can play a role in creating social value through sports.

Another research gap is how sport can play a role in the informal networks of older people. As stated before social contact and social encounter are the main reasons for older people to get involved in sport and physical activity. But how are these friendships constructed? Is sport an

interesting tool to meet new friends or is it a typical activity practised by older people with already existing friends? And are these friendships only in the context of sport or do they go beyond the sport setting?

We can conclude that context dependency constitutes an important factor that needs to be further explored. Theeboom (2009) states that taking into account existing participation thresholds, flexible organization, quality of guidance, accessible infrastructure can have a significant influence on the degree to which social added value is created in specific contexts. This applies to both the individual and society.

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