

Aging, older adults, and anthropology of sport: a brief review

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Abstract

In this review, the problematic relationships between older individuals and the aged, as a social group, and sports are discussed. To begin, the significance of sports in social theory and anthropological sciences is underlined. The important scientists who contributed theoretically to the knowledge of sports in the social arena are then featured, as well as their perspectives. It should be highlighted that in today's societies, the elderly's lack of participation in physical exercise and sports is due to social stereotypes and biases, rather than physical causes. It may be claimed, however, that sports should not only be important to young people and children, but should also be popular among the older adults.

Anthropology of sport

Sport has long been overlooked by social scientists, despite the fact that it is an important instrument for studying and describing social structure and social relations. The situation in anthropology is no different. There are a number of reasons why anthropologists overlooked sport and failed to recognize its social importance. The most important explanation appears to be the study's boundaries established during its formation as a scientific discipline. The founders of anthropology focused their research on non-modern or "primitive" tribes and cultures, leaving the study of "modern" society to other social sciences. This has naturally hampered the development of sport as a subject of anthropological study.

Sport, being one of the most important activities in modern societies, is seen by many anthropologists and sociologists as a process of socialization and enculturation. This conviction applies to both people who participate in sports and those who watch them. The first question to address in terms of social theory in this regard is where to seek for the origins of sport. Anthropologists who studied historical records and contemporary societies who live in close proximity to nature agree that the origins of sport must be considered in terms of "play" and "rituals" (e.g., Blanchard and Cheska, 1985).¹ These activities, however, have evolved into more contemporary and complex sports as a result of modernization and the growth of capitalist societies, in tandem with the emergence of a competitive culture.

Of course, the overt and covert functions of sport in the social arena are not limited to the framework indicated above. On the other hand, two major thinkers who examined generally ignored social concerns such as the function and position of sport in society should be considered. Sports and sports-related practices are not taken into account in anthropological methods to analyzing rituals, identity construction, and bodily performances (Archetti, 1998). This could be due to a variety of factors. The most likely answer is that sport only originated in highly competitive industrial societies.

The impact of Norbert Elias on the importance of sport in social theory is largely responsible for the attention paid to it. Sport was regarded as a significant area in the development of the civilizing process of European societies, according to Elias (1986). Civilization, he defined, is the steady increase in the continuous regulation of legal use of authority, the management of conflicts between social groupings through social organizations, and self-control over individual behaviors. In this way, sport performed some of the necessary roles for civilization to be accepted by society and individuals, according to Elias. Sport, for example, according to Elias, is critical in helping people acquire self-control. Sport later became a tool of modernization, particularly in the colonies, where it was institutionalized as part of British-style education (Carter, 2002).

Bourdieu (1996) has also contributed significantly to our knowledge of the role of sport in modern societies. Bourdieu took a critical approach to demonstrate the hidden roles of sport in society. Sport, he believes, is an important vehicle for maintaining the present social structure and relationships. He connects the physical characteristics of particular sporting activity to social status. Sports like football (i.e., soccer), for example, express "the instrumental relation to the body itself which the working classes express in all the practices centered on the body" (Bourdieu, 1999). Middle-class sports like tennis and jogging, on the other hand, foster a "body-for-others" mentality. Sport serves to legitimize nationalism, fanaticism, irrational violence, the fetish of competition and performance, and capitalist values in society without requiring any critical examination. It also allows these values to be passed down from

¹ Although Blanchard and Cheska (1985) define games and rituals in non- and pre-capitalist societies as "primitive sports," Besnier et al. (2018) interpret such categorizations through the histories of Eurocentric, colonialist, and European expansionism.

generation to generation. Bourdieu also claims that viewers of sport become customers of the product.

All of these anthropological viewpoints, particularly those of Elias and Bourdieu, show that sport is an important subject of inquiry for gaining a deeper knowledge of how human societies work in the proper or contradictory ways. In this way, sport has the potential to contribute significantly to social theory by showing both micro-level interpersonal relationships as well as macro-level social and cultural relationships. Despite these analytical characteristics, there is a bias in the social and cultural analysis of sports towards young and middle-aged populations. In fact, it appears to be implicitly acknowledged that in this sector, middle-aged individuals and the elderly do not exist. As a result, we might suggest that these age groups, who have been overlooked in the anthropology of sports study agenda, should be addressed.

Sport in elderly people

Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that sport and sports-related concerns have grown in popularity in recent years. If this observation is correct, and the above-mentioned facts are taken into account, we can conclude that capitalism's globalization has played a key part in current developments. Despite these advancements, the population referred to as "the elderly" continues to have a tense relationship with sports. It is a reality that as people age, their physical and physiological capacities deteriorate. This is without a doubt one of the most important reasons why elderly individuals stop their regular activity and sports engagement. However, declining physical capacity is not the main reason why the elderly avoid sports engagement. Another, more significant cause for this widespread occurrence among the elderly exists. This is due to widespread preconceptions. This is due to widespread societal preconceptions regarding the elderly's physical activities (Duyar, 2008). According to research, both society and senior people believe that the elderly should engage in less physical activity and not participate in sports (Harootyan, 1982). Some research backs up this claim, showing that after the age of 40, participation in sports and athletic activities drops by 60% (Zborowski, 1962). These findings reveal that the cause for the "elderly's" diminishing participation in sports and physical activities has less to do with their age and more to do with the normative norms and expectations associated with specific age groups.

Most modern societies, particularly Western countries, hold the view that competitive sports are not the domain of the older people. In these societies, preconceptions exist that older people are frail, socially withdrawn and dependent on health and social welfare (e.g., Dionigi, 2004). Competitive sports are considered the domain of youth, adolescents, and children in such countries. Older adults are apprehensive that if they participate in sporting activities, they will not act in an age-appropriate manner and will be shunned by society.

Most likely, the belief that elderly people should minimize their physical activity and participation in sports stems from the widespread association that sports have with play in the past. We have already established that socialization and enculturation are the primary functions of play in social theory. When we consider human cultures as a whole, we can observe that games are mostly a childhood and adolescent pastime. In other words, play is regarded as a child's, adolescent's, and adolescent's activity. As a result, older adults and elderly people are not expected or welcomed to engage in "play" and sports as its related activity.

This viewpoint on the relationship between play and sport may have been correct in the past in civilizations where the elderly was not as prominent and the average life expectancy was much shorter than it is now (e.g., Duyar, 2005). Daily living routines and life history were backed by such conviction in these communities. On the other hand, the average life duration of both women and men has increased significantly in modern societies, particularly in

industrial economies. Parallel to these improvements in life expectancy, there is a need to engage in physical activities in general, and sports in particular, in order to maintain a fit body during retirement and beyond. To reach this goal, however, one must first fight the generally held belief, particularly among the elderly, that they should live a sedentary lifestyle.

Socialization/enculturation and physical activity

Physical activity and participation in sports in older individuals has been demonstrated in studies to reduce the risk of numerous diseases and improve physiological functions in older adults (e.g., Hopkins et al., 1990; Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, physical activity has been shown to decrease depression, anxiety, and stress among older adults, while also improving cognitive skills, self-confidence, and life satisfaction (Dustman et al., 1994).

McPherson (1984, 1994) stated that the elderly's participation in physical activity influenced their socialization processes near the end of the twentieth century. With the introduction of this viewpoint, it has been demonstrated that evaluating the physical activity-socialization relationship primarily in children and adolescents is inappropriate. Despite these improvements, the elderly's contribution to their "socialization" (also known as "re-socialization") has not been fully examined. A small number of research focusing on this issue (e.g., Chogahara, 1998; Martínez del Castillo et al., 2010) have found that those who perform sports or engage in other physical activity programs at an older age have more social contacts and social support. Family members and friends and acquaintances, in particular, support the elderly in participating in physical activity (Ostir et al., 2003). Thus, in fact, the process of socialization is completed at an advanced age (Chogahara and Yamaguchi, 1998).

As a conclusion, in fact, sports or physical activity should be considered as a "socialization agent," because sedentary persons who did not participate in sports as children become physically active and re-socialize as seniors. For this reason, it is necessary for middle-aged and older persons engage in physical exercise and are encouraged to participate in all sports, particularly competitive sports.

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