


Assessing the sociology of sport: On sport participation and disabilities in France

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Stéphane Héas

Rennes 2 University, France

Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Stéphane Héas, a leading French scholar on sport participation and the rights and opportunities of people with disabilities and minorities to engage in sporting activity, considers the trajectory and challenges of sociology of sport in France with special reference to the needs of these populations. It is noted that while studies of sport and physical activity that engaged “a sociological gaze” were relatively late in coming to France, research engaging socio-cultural understandings of sport has accelerated in recent years. A key challenge to research in this area has been to redress the relative neglect of studying the opportunities and participation of people with disabilities and other minorities in sport and physical activity. In the future, the sociology of sport holds the promise of being able to support meaningful policy changes to enable equity and opportunity for these populations.

Keywords

disabilities, France, social research, sociology of sport, sport participation

Reflections on the trajectory of the sociology of sport

Before the 1980s, and even moving into the 1990s, the sociology of sport in France was characterized by meagre and chequered development. Nevertheless, an area of research emerged within sport and physical education (in French: Education Physique et Sportive, E.P.S.), a disciplinary area that had become required in private and public school education in France.

Research in this developing field was of at least two minds. On one hand, it was radical in its criticism of sport, and on the other, it was also apologetic. Radical critics were concerned about the increasing capitalistic tendencies of society and the pressures of instrumentalization on human agency (Brohm, 1993; Brohm, 1996). Indeed, much work

Corresponding author:

Stéphane Héas, Rennes 2 University, Avenue Charles Tillon, Rennes 35044, France.

Email: stephane.heas@univ-rennes2.fr

in scientific scholarly journals, such as *Quel corps? (What Body?)* and *Pretrontaine* (an old French Word to say “wander, roam”) was very critical of sport as an institution and the nature of sporting competition. Stimulated by the notion that cultural notion of sport may be an illusion, this radical tradition remains strong today (with e.g. Vassort, Perelman or Ollier). Inspired by the work of Bourdieu, other sociologists (e.g., Faure, Clément, Pociello and Louveau) have focused on sport and physical education as a social and cultural practice that is very much intertwined with power.

Yet, even though work of this nature was increasingly evident in scholarly publications, the sociology of sport as an academic discipline did not gain any real visibility until the end of the 20th century (Collinet, 2002). Indeed, for most scholars, sport was not an integral factor to be considered in casting a “sociologic gaze” (Hughes, 1996). However, despite having a poor reputation in some quarters of socio-cultural inquiry, there has been growing and active interest in the sociology of sport in France since the end of the 1990s. Collinet (2002) distinguished several analytical themes: sport as a spectacle, sporting cultures, the modifications of sport, traditional physical activities and reflections on the sociology of sport itself.

In France, these sociological perspectives have essentially been developed from the Sport and Physical National Institute (INSEP) and from academic departments of sport in several universities around the country (named UEREPS, and then UFR STAPS). Notably, few sport sociologists are working outside these two principal domains even today (Beaud, 2014, is one of significant exceptions).

While between 1960 and 1985 there were few scientific publications that focused on sport, scholars over the last 30 years have produced hundreds of theses from diverse academic domains. Yet when one assesses how many of these theses on sport actually use a sociological lens, the total number dwindles to a little more than 80 that can be classified as sociological or that more generally feature social scientific inquiry about sport. Still, this figure is a conservative estimate, as, of course, there may be many theses that do not have the words “sport” or “sociology” in their titles, but indeed feature sociological analysis of sport. Nonetheless, if one assesses the more “clearly marked” 80 or so theses, it is clear that the pace of defended theses has accelerated: only three theses appeared before 1990, then 23 between 1990 and 1999, 46 between 2000 and 2009 and more than 10 since 2010.

In addition, a National Academic Commission (CNU, in French) annually certifies the validation of the number of titles of Lecturer (referred to in France as “Maîtres de Conférences des Universités” or “MCU”) and for the higher level of Senior Lecturer (“Professeur des Universités” or “PU” in French). Since 2008, 66 sociologists have been certified in sport and physical activities as MCU, and 10 as PU. Thus, during these last six years, several dozen sociologists have been recruited by universities or other high-level research institutions. Recently, the CNU established a commission to regulate the ethical behaviour of researchers: CERSTAPS (Ethical Committee of Sport and Physical Activities Research).

Today, there are several French scientific societies that specialize in sport at different levels (National, European and International). Two journals in particular are publishing many sociological papers: *Science et motricité* and *STAPS*. Several “savant” societies exist: 3SLF, AISLF, AFRAPS, ACAPS. During the 2013 ACAPS congress, for instance,

where disciplinary concerns relating to biology and biomechanics are dominant, of the 216 oral communications presented, more than 20 were sociological (about 10%). At the 2012 congress of AFRAPS (which is largely organized by scholars in the humanities and social sciences), of the 68 paper presentations, more than 11 were strictly and explicitly sociological (16%); if we add anthropological and psycho-sociological inquiry, the proportion grows to nearly 25%, and would be even higher if psychological research was included.

The last congress of the French Association of Sport Sociology (3SLF 2013) featured 134 paper presentations (selected from an original group of 352 submissions). Here, it was clear that some themes have increased in popularity, such as research on “sport, work, and professions”, while others have decreased including those focused on gender, colonization and the sociology of Sciences and Technics of Physical and Sport Activities (S.T.A.P.S. in French). As we stand today, there is much interdisciplinary focus on French sport and the vitality of French sport sociology is considerable.

Assessing the challenges of the sociology of sport

Curiously, few investigations into the sociology of sport concern the techniques of the body. Marcel Mauss’s pioneering insights have rarely been used to better understand how sports techniques can be learned, transmitted and sometimes formalized in education and training programmes (Héas, 2010, 2011a; Le Breton, 1990, 1991; Tourre-Malen, 2011).

In France, figurational sociology, in the Elias tradition, and, more prominently, Bourdieu’s theoretical perspectives have been used to analyse the reduction and regulation of violence, to determine social tastes and hence social judgments, and to analyse the opposing forces at play as social groups for control of sports organizations and sports events. These major theoretical frameworks have been used to better understand the martial arts, other contact sports such as rugby, judo, boxing and sailing (Audiffren and Cremieux, 1996; Clément, 1994; Héas et al., 2003; Mennesson, 2005; Wacquant, 2002), and to examine extreme or high-risk physical activities, such as around-the-world yacht racing, extreme ski formats, sky-diving, urban caving and Parkour (in which you climb on or jump from urban environment) (Lebreton, 2009; Routier, 2011; Soulé and Corneloup, 2007). In addition, much analysis of gender in the context of sport draws on these theoretical traditions (Davisse and Louveau, 1998; Mennesson, 2005, etc.).

Surprisingly, at the turn of the 21st century, the participation of minorities in sports has been largely overlooked by sport sociologists. For example, a cursory look indicates that sport participation by people living with disabilities, the Paralympics games (Marcellini, 2005), homosexual and gay games (Ferez, 2007; Liotard, 2008), sport activities among minorities (Gasparini and Cometti, 2010; Héas, 2011b) and participation by people living with HIV (Ferez and Thomas, 2012) have not received the scholarly attention in France that they have elsewhere, where sociologists have tried to understand the factors and conditions that enable and constrain how people participate in sports and other physical activities. In those studies, it is clear that the stigma associated with disability is significantly impacting the participants’ everyday lives, and their engagement in sport as well. The barriers are not only material and economic but more

deeply symbolic, and related to cultural and social representations. Passivity and fragility are two enduring qualities attributed to or experienced by these vulnerable (and “vulnerabilized”) populations. These effective, but also assumed, forms of vulnerability reinforce other obstacles that must be overcome for better inclusion of these people who need and deserve to be helped.

Future directions for the sociology of sport: on disabilities, sport and social participation

In France, as in other parts of the world, interdisciplinary analyses are often touted as an ideal and promoted as good practice, but, in reality, interdisciplinary research has been very limited (Colinet, 2002; Collinet and Taleb, 2007). Most research draws upon a monodisciplinary process of scientific investigation: physiology, biomechanics, psychology, anthropology, history or sociology. Attempting to connect these sciences is rarely rewarded within contemporary academic institutions. Most researchers who are promoted are very specialized and few try to diversify their research through collaboration with scientists from other disciplines (e.g. Andrieu, 2013).

Yet, when we attempt to answer questions about the inclusion of minorities in sport and about how people living with disabilities (broadly interpreted) transact with sport, the need for interdisciplinary approaches that meld diverse sciences is evident. Indeed, consideration of the stigmatization of various oppressed populations simultaneously concerns the body, soul, interaction, self-esteem, social representation and reputation. However, the scholarly analysis of people with disabilities and other disadvantaged minorities can be subject to power relations. For instance, medical practitioners or other social or professional groups such as the military have tended to monopolize power within sports disabilities associations and federations (Ruffié and Ferez, 2013). Over the last few years people who live with permanent disabilities or with chronic diseases seem to be increasingly organized autonomously. They gain some power in the eyes of medical institutions and sport institutions. Over time, this mobilization of power can activate changes in the perspectives in a majority of the population and may enable minorities and their rights to be taken more seriously. Assessments of the more limited opportunities for social and sportive participation for disabled people needs to be taken into account in companion with their desire to engage themselves through sport and leisure.

New legal frameworks are now being incorporated into sport and physical activities. Several political initiatives have helped to develop a more inclusive approach to sport, including reports such as the 2013 Legal Guidance on the Prevention and the Fight against Antisocial Behaviour, Violence and Discrimination in Sport; the 2008 Action against Discrimination in Sport from the Department of the Seine Maritime; and Sport and Discrimination: the Gaze of the Media (Council of Europe, European Center of Youth). However, only a few of these proposed changes from these reports have been realized: Le Trimaran, 2013; DRJSCS Aquitaine, 2011. All of these studies confirm, for instance, the prevalence of homophobia in sports. Socialization through sport seems to reinforce the problem of social exclusion. As we move ahead, the sociology of sport has to continue to analyse the challenges for people with disabilities and other minorities to

integrate and participate in sports and physical activities. In tandem with this, it will be important to study the socio-cultural dynamics at play as political initiatives in select regions of France take hold and to measure their impacts in the educational and sporting spheres.

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