

The Meanings of Sport: Fun, Health, Beauty or Community?

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It is well known that sport and physical activity is important for medical health and subjective well-being and thereby functions as a kind of social good. How sport also operates as a social good in light of the meaning athletes attach to their activity is a much less analysed topic. Accordingly, this essay sets out with a theoretical analysis of which meanings people most commonly attach to their sport activity, and seven reasons are identified. Next, the essay interprets these reasons as part of a larger social setting including social background (age, gender, class) and characteristics of the sport activity (team sport versus individual sport, competitive level) itself. The empirical analyses, based on Norwegian data, give a rather complicated picture of how sport carries meaning to different group of people, but three findings stand out. First, social background is more important than aspects of the activity itself. Yet, for five out of seven ‘meanings of sport’, aspects of the sport itself also have significant implications for how the activity is experienced. Finally, the explanatory factors produce a rather complicated picture of how sport matters to people; gender and age are especially important, but also type of sport and competitive level have significant effects.

Introduction

People in late-modern societies are physically active at different social arenas. Some exercise ‘unorganized’: alone, with friends or family, often in their local communities. Others are active in voluntary sport organizations, while still others spend their time at commercial fitness centres. ‘National statistics’ show how general populations participate in these various activities. A different, though related, question concerning social researchers is how sport functions as a social good through assumed (positive) associations between physical activity and, respectively, medical health and ‘subjective well-being’ [1]. Yet, it is obvious that sport as a social good implies more than

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physiology, biology and the question of how various sport activities have certain psychological effects. Sport activities also have a direct and intrinsic social meaning for those involved, and this meaning is an important aspect of sport as a social good. Given that so many people are physically active today [2], a principal social welfare and inequality question should be: How do people actually experience their sport activity? Hence, the purpose of this essay is to study how different groups of people experience their sport activities and, thereby, to see what kinds of social good sport represents to various social groups. The central arena for sport activity in Norway is voluntary sport organizations, and a survey of members of voluntary sport organizations is, consequently, the basis of the subsequent empirical analyses (see sections on the Norwegian Case and Data and Methodology for more details).

Apart from this introduction, the essay contains six sections. Next, I will give a theoretical justification of the classification of ‘meanings of sport’ applied in the empirical studies, and then place this class of meanings in a larger social context to sketch relevant questions, assumptions and hypotheses. Thereafter, sections on data, methods and the Norwegian case follow. The empirical analyses include, first, the distribution of the basic dimensions of the study – why and how are people active in sports – and, second, explain variations on the scores on the various ‘meanings of sport’ based on social background and kind of sport activity. The essay ends with a discussion of a selection of empirical findings in light of the theoretical framework.

The Meanings of Sport: Theoretical Framework

An understanding of how sport functions as a social good depends on how sport activities are experienced. To study experiences of sport, one should take account of the fact that the field of sport consists of an increasingly diverse set of activities, and that a process of individualization probably results in more diverse experiences of sport [3]. This implies that similar activities might have various meanings to different people and that one person might attach different meanings to the same activity; one might play football both because it is fun and because it promotes health. This complexity and diversity in the phenomenology of sport illustrates the need for a theoretical framework comprising a diverse yet warranted spectre of reasons for being active in sport. To develop a fruitful classification of ‘meanings of sport’, I will draw on philosophy, history and sociology.

Sport psychologists have traditionally been concerned with motives and the rationale for these studies has mainly been to uncover success-formulas: motive has been the independent variable explaining failure or success as athletes [4]. I have chosen the term ‘meaning’ to establish some distance to this tradition and its understanding of social action. In the terms of Searle [5], motives (as in this sport-psychology-tradition) should be seen as ‘intentions prior to action’: first, a mental state of affairs of some kind, then, rather mechanically, some kind of action. Contrary to this idea, the purpose of this essay is to view the reasons people give for being active

in sport organizations as internal to the activity – in Searle-terminology ‘intentions in action’ – and to interpret (variations in) these meanings as part of a larger social context: as dependent variables [6]. So, the purpose is not to study the motives initiating people to be active or successful in sport, but to try to sort out how they experience their sport activity on an every day basis and, then, to see how these experiences in turn might be explained by social contexts.

A first answer to the question of how to assign meaning to sport activities is central to sport philosophy, but appears in historical and sociological studies as well [7]. The core idea is that the value of sport is intrinsic to the activity, and there are, basically, two versions of this argument [8]. The first is known from Huizinga’s seminal study *Homo Ludens*, and claims that sport is, or should be, similar to play: voluntary, set off from daily or ‘real’ life, taking place at particular arenas, both with respect to time and space. If one dimension of play seems important here it should be that ‘Nevertheless it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play’ [9]. And even though a most common critique insists that modern sport is so thoroughly rationalized that this dimension is about to lose its significance [10], it seems reasonable – especially when focusing not only on elite sport, but also on organized mass sport – to assume that (1) *fun and joy* are weighty reasons for being active in sport.

Suits states succinctly that ‘People play games so that they can realize in themselves capacities not realizable . . . in the pursuit of their ordinary activities’ [11]. That sport might have an expressive dimension is old news [12]. Yet, in light of recent theories on postmodern society and modern individualism [13] and particularly because of the emergence of certain new sports [14], it seems increasingly appropriate to study (2) *sport as expressive action*.

Historically and sociologically, these intrinsic and ‘disinterested’ meanings of sport are often presented as antagonistic to more instrumental reasons. Of historical interest, mostly, we find sport as part of military strategies and class struggles. However, a traditional reason (for example, in German and Swedish gymnastics) which is still very relevant for public funding of sport is *physical health*, and, at an individual level, the aim (3) *to keep fit*. Although physiological concerns have been the common focus when talking about health, for many sport probably also gives a feeling of mental and psychic surplus; sport is an arena for (4) *mental recreation*.

Another challenge reflecting a more individualized society where the self increasingly comes into focus is the need to stage a self, and as part thereof, the body, in ways that gain social recognition, and so, add to an identity [15]. Accordingly, taking part in sport activities with the aim of improving one’s (5) *body*, or more generally, one’s *appearance*, is, possibly, an important reason for being active in sport.

There are several attempts to describe the development of sport as an autonomous social system, and the criteria for succeeding in this endeavour is to find, in a Luhmannian vocabulary, the codes and programmes that co-ordinate communication within a sport system. Whereas Cachay and Thiel, in line with the above discussion,

emphasize health, medicine and ‘Bildung’ [16], Stichweh and Tangen have put more weight on the fact that modern sport is communication oriented towards competitive achievements [17]. This is obviously also a central feature of other discussions of the constitutive essence of sport [18], and (6) *sport as competition and achievement* is probably a widespread motivation for sport activity.

In this essay the focus is on sport as it takes place in voluntary sport organizations. Followed by an increased scepticism towards state and market as the foundational principle for societal organization, there has been an increased focus on (and belief in) civil society [19]. Civil society is seen as an arena hosting a potential for developing social networks and building communities of importance for individuals, local institutions and society writ large. The same questions and hopes are also set forth more specifically when it comes to sport [20]. A central question then is the extent to which activity in voluntary organizations actually fulfils this (7) *social integration* function; whether people take part in sport because of social relations resulting from the activity.

Based on philosophical, historical and sociological arguments, seven ways to attach meaning to sport activities are outlined: fun/joy, expressivity, to keep fit, mental recreation, body and appearance, competition and achievements and social integration. Although there probably are more reasons for taking part in sport than those listed above, the seven dimensions emphasized here are important to understand both what kind of activities sport as a social good represent for those involved in these activities, and, not least, to understand the culture of sport as part of a larger social and historical context.

Sport and Social Inequality: Social Background and Sport Activity

The purpose of this essay is to describe how people experience their sport activities and to study these ‘sport meanings’ in light of the contexts of the activities. In this section, I will discuss the seven meanings of sport introduced above in light of a larger social setting and delineate the questions and hypotheses guiding the empirical analyses. Two approaches are central. First, I assume that social background – age, gender and social class – influences experiences of sport activities. Second, it seems reasonable that people experience their sport activity distinctively because of differences in the activities themselves: individual sports versus team sports and competitive level.

For social background there is, with respect to age, a strong normative view and an explicit policy that youth sport should not be too competitive and that the fun-element and social relations should be in focus. If these aims really are prioritized, one could assume that competitive reasons are less common among young athletes and that fun and social relations are more important in this group. There is also the possibility of non-linear (inverted-u-shape) correlations with respect to age, where the eldest part of the athletes together with the younger part perhaps is less competitive than the middle-aged. Moreover, it also seems reasonable to assume that some of the

more instrumental aspects – for example, to keep fit and mental recreation – are more central to older people.

With respect to gender, sport could be seen, even today, as a social arena where rather traditional sport values as strength, endurance and competitiveness have a strong hold [21]. At the same time, Norway is a country with relatively small gender inequalities, and over the last decades there has been, in general, a substantial development with respect to women's situation within the sport arena [22]. Furthermore, it also seems important to remember that the recruitment to sport operates through two stages: a severely skewed recruitment into the sport arena (only one third of members of Norwegian sport organizations are women) is followed by a sport-specific-socialization operating within the arena. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that many of those not fancying sport and its traditional values either do not enter the sport field at all, or do not endure the life in the sport arena. This selection process would probably weaken the gendering effect of traditional sport values. Against this background, I will simply question whether remnants of the traditional and rather masculine sport culture still has a hold, and, if so, the underlying assumption should be that men on average are more competitive than women, and that women are most concerned with the social relations within the sport arena. Other studies have indicated that women are more worried about a healthy lifestyle [23]; hence they could be expected to be more concerned with some of the instrumental meanings of sport as keeping fit and mental recreation. Regarding 'appearance' and the values intrinsic to the sport activity – fun/joy and expressivity – the analyses will remain rather open.

Today there is wide spectrum of class perspectives available; from writers working with classic (though reformulated) class concepts [24] via those still concerned with class based on relations within the labour market, but claiming that a stronger focus on occupations is needed [25], via a third group of researchers insisting that culture is somehow becoming the decisive class marker [26], to those proclaiming the death of class [27]. For sport, Veblen showed as much as seventy years ago how various classes assigned different meanings to sport activities: leisure as conspicuous consumption [28]. Later, Marxist class perspectives and more general studies of social inequality have been central to the sociology of sport [29]. Combining insights from these two perspectives, the most influential contribution to this debate recently is Bourdieu who has been concerned precisely with the topic of this essay, 'questions not only about the relationship between the practices and the variables, but also about the meaning which the practices take on in those relationships' [30]. Based mostly on historical data, Bourdieu states that the higher classes have had a more distanced and less utility-oriented posture towards their sport activities than the lower classes. Thus, I assume that high-class sport participants have a more playful and less instrumental relation to sports, whereas lower classes probably emphasize the social and instrumental aspects – in particular competition – of their sport activity. More recent studies of class and lifestyles complicate these assumptions. Sugden and Tomlinson show how the higher classes today systematically pay more attention to health issues that include sport [31]. The two approaches taken together then suggest that the upper classes today

emphasize both some intrinsic values and certain instrumental values as keeping fit and mental recreation more than lower classes which, on their side, are more competitive and concerned with social relations.

Beside social characteristics, it also seems pertinent to study whether and how various forms of the sport activities themselves influence experiences of sport. I will consider two topics. First, there could be differences between those active in individual and team sports, where team sports might have stronger social relations than individual sports, and where individual sports might stress competition to a further degree. Team sports might also give room for a more playful kind of competition than individual sports, and could thereby be experienced as more joyful than individual sports. Second, one of the most debated public questions with respect to sport concerns the relation between mass sport and elite sport [32]. Emphasizing competition on the one hand obviously leads to exclusions of groups of people from the activity, and might also produce negative experiences for some participants. On the other hand, these competitive experiences could also be seen as positive, a prerequisite for generating fun and strong social relations. All in all, from a theoretical point of view, competitiveness appears as an ambiguous factor; it might both nurture and hamper various experiences connected to the sport activity, and I will, consequently, leave the effect of competition as an open question.

The Norwegian Case

The history of Norwegian sport and its voluntary organizations share many characteristics with other Western nations [33]. The starting point for sport as an organized activity was the rifle associations operating in close connection to the military forces around 1860. Thereafter, inputs influential in most other western countries are essential: German and Swedish gymnastics, 'English sports', promotion of health and sanity and a period marked by class conflict. The post-war period is characterized, first, by an enormous growth in both the number of sport organizations and level of activity, and second, by a differentiation within the field of voluntary sport organizations [34]. Looking for Norwegian peculiarities, three factors stand out. First, a relatively large proportion of the Norwegian population – around 30 per cent – is a member of a voluntary sport organization [35]. Among the most central characteristics of these organizations is their size: they are small, 36 per cent of them have less than 50 members, 54 per cent have less than 100 members, and no more than 3 per cent of the clubs have more than 1,000 members. In two thirds of the clubs, all work is done voluntarily; in only ten per cent of the clubs is less than 90 per cent of the work done by volunteers [36]. Second, it seems important to point out how geography and climate has made certain sport disciplines, such as skiing and skating, more popular in Norway than in southern countries, and these traditional and historical sports have played their role in the process of nation building [37]. More recently, however, sport as a cultural carrier has been influenced just as much by global processes as national traditions [38], and some of the national particularities have lost

their impact. The most popular sport – based on the number of organizations having the sport on their agenda – is football (34 per cent of the clubs) followed by skiing and ‘exercising groups’ (18 per cent), handball (14 per cent), track and field (11 per cent), shooting (10 per cent) and gymnastics (8 per cent). Third, one should notice the close relation between voluntary sport organizations and the state [39].

Data and Methodology

The data applied in this essay come from ‘The Sport Club Study 1999–2000’, and consists of a random sample of members (above the age of 12 years) of Norwegian voluntary sport clubs [40]. Of the 9,377 members who were sent a questionnaire, 1,660 responded. This gives a response rate of about 30 per cent [41]. Even though this is a relatively disappointing rate of response, available information on the population indicates that the sample corresponds well to the population in important respects. For gender, the relevant population consists of 38 per cent women, 62 per cent men; our data consists of 39 and 61 per cent respectively. For age, the population has 20 per cent in the 13–16 years age group, with 80 per cent 17 years and more; our data has 22 per cent and 78 per cent respectively. Due to this very good correlation between our final sample and the population, we have found it worthwhile to apply the data in spite of the low response rate. Speculating on the quality of the data, there could be a bias in the data where those more interested in, or devoted to, sport or sport organizations have tended to answer our questionnaire. This could give a too ‘positive’ image of sport, a fact to keep in mind when interpreting the following analyses.

As the above presentation of the case shows, there are both similarities and differences between the Norwegian case and others when it comes to levels of participation in sport, which arenas of physical activity people partake in and which sports are popular. This makes it problematical to apply these results to other countries, even though the Nordic countries and some other European countries (for example, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium) share numerous characteristics with the Norwegian case. This makes it reasonable to assume that many of the findings from this study also are valid for these countries. Moreover, and in spite of more differences for other cases, the substance of this study – the meanings of sport – and the factors used to interpret these meanings – social background and the sport activity itself – are central in relation to sport activities in most (if not all) countries. This implies that the social processes described in this essay and the social mechanisms operating through these processes probably are familiar also in more dissimilar cases. The various operationalizations are presented along with the empirical analyses.

The Meanings of Sport: Empirical Analyses

The above sections have outlined, theoretically, along which dimensions people might assign meaning to their sport activity, and presented the most important factors for

explaining differences with respect to how various groups experience their activity. In the next section, I will show the prevalence of the seven meanings of sport. Then, I will study how these meanings vary according to the two sets of explanatory factors included in this study.

The Seven Meanings of Sport

Theoretically, I have arrived at seven reasons for being active in a sport organization. The background for the concrete operationalizations of this theoretical framework is a survey ‘question’ listing various reasons for partaking in sport, where the respondents were asked to indicate how appropriate they considered these reasons for their own activity. Attempts to generate underlying dimensions in this material statistically (factor analyses) did not give theoretically satisfactory solutions, so the indices applied in the analyses are constructed one by one building on the theoretical framework. In all cases, the consistence and reliability of the indices are controlled for [42].

As is clear from Table 1, there are substantial differences when it comes to how important the various ‘meanings’ are experienced, and how widespread their support is. The most important meaning of sport is intrinsic to the activity ‘joy and fun’. Next comes a set of more instrumental reasons: sport as an activity for ‘keeping fit’ and to ‘relax mentally’. Thereafter, sport activity is chosen for its ‘sociability’, before there is a leap in importance down to ‘competition/achievements’. The ‘expressive’ sides of sport come next, and the clearly least important reason for being active in a sport organization is ‘body and appearance’. The standard deviation increases as the general support decreases and thereby supports the impression that some of the reasons really are important and widespread, whereas others seem restricted to specific groups. All in all, the importance of some of the non-instrumental reasons – especially to have fun, but also the social relations – underlines the importance of studying ‘meaning’ as an aspect of sport as a social good; sport is more than physical health and mental recreation. The diversity of reasons getting a high score also illustrates the diversity in experiences of sport activities, probably reflecting both the diversity in the field of sport and the individualized way to participate in these activities.

Table 1 Meanings attached to sport activity in voluntary sport organisations. (N ~ 1400)

	Means	Standard deviations
Joy/fun	4.34	0.94
Keep fit	4.18	0.86
Mental recreation	3.86	0.94
Social factors	3.60	1.06
Achievements/Competition	3.09	1.22
Expressivity	2.87	1.39
Body/Appearance	2.38	1.04

Explaining The Meanings of Sport: Empirical Results

The following analyses consist of two sections. First, I will rather briefly present some findings regarding sport and social class in simple bivariate analyses [43]. Second, I have conducted stepwise multivariate regression analyses for each of the seven meaning-dimensions where I include the most important social variables and some characteristics of the sport activity. This makes it possible both to compare the importance of two blocks of variables – social background and sport activities - and to analyse the effects of the particular variables.

As already indicated, the question of social class has been high on the sport sociological agenda. In Figure 1, several significant differences between how various social classes experience their sport activities are reported [44]. ‘Social factors’ and ‘expressivism’ present the two most systematic patterns: The higher classes have lower scores, the lower classes higher scores. Next, there are also relatively systematic differences when it comes to ‘keeping fit’ and ‘mental recreation’, and here the pattern is the opposite: more important for the higher classes than for the lower classes. These findings confirm the revised-Bourdieu-perspective suggested above. On the one hand, Bourdieu’s insights are confirmed when the lower classes are most concerned with the social and expressive dimensions of sport; thereby sport appears as more existential to these social groups whereas the higher classes maintain a more distanced attitude to these activities. On the other hand, the instrumentality of the higher classes when it comes to certain life-style aspects indicates that Bourdieu’s approach today is too simple, and should be refined in future studies. The lack of significant differences when it comes to competitive orientations is a challenge for future studies, which should also, if possible, test out how different ways to measure class (occupation, culture) matters for sport activities.[45]

The results of the multivariate analyses are presented in Tables 2a to 2g where each analysis consists of two blocks of variables. First, gender and age is introduced as the essential social background variables. Second, the two aspects of the sport activity are

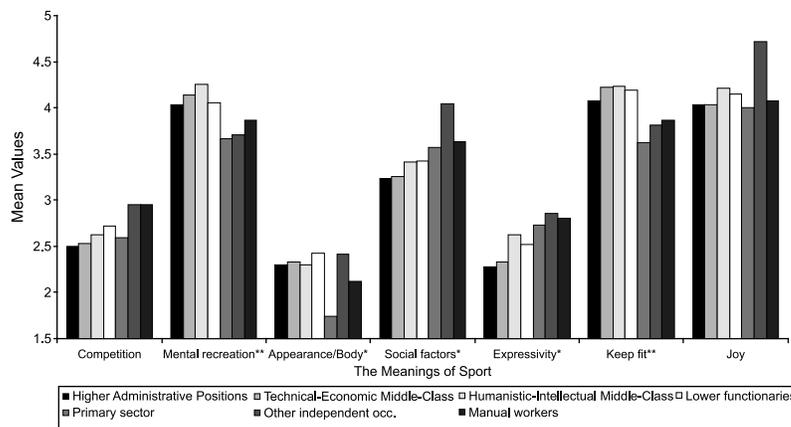


Figure 1 The Meanings of Sport and Social Class

Table 2a Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Joy. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	4.93**	3.86**
Male	0.02	-0.07
Age	-0.02**	-0.09**
Competitive level		0.55**
Individual vs. team sport		0.06
Comp. level x Comp. Level		-0.06*
R ²	0.11	0.17

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2b Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Keep fit. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	4.64**	4.79**
Male	-0.00	-0.04
Age	-0.02*	-0.01
Age x Age	0.00**	0.00**
Age x Gender	-0.01*	-0.01*
Competitive level		-0.16
Individual vs. team sport		-0.27
Individual x comp.level		0.14*
R ²	0.04	0.04

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2c Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Mental recreation. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	3.41**	3.68**
Male	-0.31**	-0.32**
Age	0.05**	0.06**
Age x Age	-0.00**	-0.00**
Competitive level		-0.06
Individual vs. team sport		-0.49**
Individual x comp.level		0.14*
R ²	0.11	0.13

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2d Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Social factors. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	4.21**	3.04**
Male	-0.02	-0.11
Age	-0.02**	-0.01**
Competitive level		0.18**
Individual vs. team sport		0.38**
R ²	0.08	0.13

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2e Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Competition. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	4.27**	1.89**
Male	0.45**	0.29**
Age	-0.09**	-0.05**
Age x Age	0.00**	0.00**
Competitive level		0.81**
Individual vs. team sport		0.43**
Individual x comp. level		-0.18**
R ²	0.26	0.40

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2f Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Expressivity. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	4.59**	3.40**
Male	-0.12	-0.20*
Age	-0.08**	-0.06**
Age x Age	0.00**	0.00**
Competitive level		0.31**
Individual vs. team sport		0.07
R ²	0.08	0.13

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Table 2g Regression (OLS). Meaning of Sport: Body and appearance. Unstandardized coefficients

Constant	2.24**	2.86**
Male	-0.14	0.12**
Age	0.02**	0.02*
Age x Gender	-0.01**	-0.01**
Competitive level		-0.23*
Individual vs. team sport		-0.46**
Individual x comp. level		0.18*
R ²	0.02	0.03

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

included in the model [46]. In each case, it is controlled for interaction effects and non-linear effects, and these are included in the presentation of results where they were found to be statistically significant.

The most widespread reason for being active in sport is the fun and joy associated with the activity. Social background explains about ten per cent of the variance for this variable, and sport activity adds six per cent to this. Basically, two kinds of variables seem important. First, for social background, low age seems to contribute to a high level of 'fun and joy'. This is the first in a line of indications showing very clearly, and in accordance with official sport policies, that sport does not represent the same kind of social good to young and old athletes: Sport as enjoyment is for young people more

than for the elderly. Second, being on a high competitive level also seems to go together with a pleasurable sport activity, especially among those on the highest competitive level. Competition is often presented as a threat to sport as a social good because it excludes groups of people. The other side of the coin emerges here where competition seems to imply a kind of involvement and commitment to the activity that also increases the experience of having a good time. Thus, the ambiguity hypothesized above is confirmed.

The second most prevalent reason for being active in sport – to keep fit – is not explained very well by our variables, but the most significant set of explanatory variables is social background: age and gender in rather complex interaction. First, when including age-squared, there is a positive effect of age but this effect decreases with increasing age (and in line with the hypothesis). Second, we find an interaction between age and gender, which means that ‘to keep fit’ is a reason of importance for women, but that the difference between men and women increases with age; differences are insignificant among the younger groups but increasingly important with age. Again we see that different age groups experience their sport differently; older participants seem more instrumental than younger athletes. The interaction effect for gender and age complicates our assumptions, and could indicate that there is a generational shift going on where not only the younger are less instrumental than the elder participants, but also that young women and men are more similar than elder women to elder men when it comes the meaning ascribed to the activity. Next, there is also a significant interaction between level and kind of sport, which means that to keep fit is a more important reason for being active among those on a low competitive level in individual sports than low level team sports, and that this difference between kinds of sport decreases by increasing competitive level; on a high competitive level there is a very modest difference between individual sports and team sports when it comes to ‘keep fit’ as a reason for being active.

Third, for mental recreation, social background again is most important. First, women seem to be more concerned with sport as mental recreation than men. Second, age has, as expected, a positive effect on this meaning, but the effect drops a little among the oldest members. Once more older people seem to have a more instrumental approach to sport than the younger. On a general level, mental recreation is a more important reason for those active in individual sports, but there is an interaction effect between competitive level and the kind of sport which indicates that this effect is stronger for those on a low competitive level compared to those in team sport, and not very strong on a high competitive level.

Being active in sport organizations because of the social relations involved is explained, from the view of social background, first and foremost by age: as hypothesized social relations within sport organizations are important for the younger members. Again we see that sport is something more of a social good for younger than elder participants. Characteristics of the sport activity itself – high competitive level and team sports (as opposed to individual sports) – also seem to lead to emphasizing the social relations as a reason for being active within the voluntary sport

organizations. Of particular interest here is the confirmation of team sport as being more socially important than individual sport. Once again we see that competing on a high level (relatively) seems to imply that some kind of social integration is appreciated. As for fun, this indicates that competition implies involvement and commitment of a kind that also has repercussions for how the activity is experienced more generally.

The fifth reason for being active in the sport organizations – ‘competition and achievements’ – is the motive best explained by our variables. First, this is obviously a reason stated more often by men, and it also has a stronger hold among younger than elder athletes. Most interesting here is that this is the only meaning dimension prioritized significantly higher by men than women, indicating that sport still partly functions as what Dunning calls a ‘male preserve’ [47]. Next, type of sport activity contributes significantly to how important competition is considered. First (and naturally), being on a high competitive level indicates that competition is important. Second, being active in team sport also tends to lead to a focus on competition as a reason for being active. Third, an interaction between the two sport-activity-factors shows that team sport especially is more conducive to competition, compared to individual sports, on a low competitive level [48].

Expressing oneself through sport activity is explained both by social characteristics (women and young people [with an additional small increase among the elderly]) and sport characteristics (high competitive level). The age difference for this dimension again highlights that sport is a far more important social arena existentially for young people than older people.

Doing sport because of ‘body and appearance’ is, through an interaction between age and gender, clearly more important to women than men, but this difference is negligible among the youngest, and increases by age. ‘Body and appearance’ is also more important for those doing individual sports, and (through an interaction with competitive level) this difference is especially important for those on a low competitive level, close to zero for those on a high competitive level. The interactive effect of gender and age again suggests that there is a generational shift going on where younger women and men participate in a more equal manner than older participants.

All in all there are patterns that are, to different degrees, common to all the above analyses. First, social background (age and gender) represents the most important – explaining the largest proportion of the variance – set of variables for all ‘meanings’ analysed. Second, however, in five of the seven analyses, characteristics of the sport activity – competitive level and individual sport versus team sport – also contributes substantially to the explanations of differences in the ‘meanings of sport’ for those active in sport. Third, the analyses generate a rather complex and manifold picture of how these four factors influence the reasons for being active in a voluntary sport organization. Moreover, it seems from the differences between the two blocks of explained variance (R^2) in the seven analyses that reasons (more or less) intrinsic to the activities are more closely linked up to the kind of sport activity, than extrinsic reasons. This probably indicates that some sports/some ways to do sports are more

conducive to these experiences than other sports. This complexity is outlined above in the presentation of the empirical data, and I will return to some of the most significant findings in the subsequent discussion.

Summary and Discussions

In summing up, three empirical findings should be noticed. First, there is a large variety of reasons for doing sports. The most widespread is simply to have ‘fun and enjoy’ the activity, followed by the desire to ‘keep fit’; to get some ‘mental recreation’ and to enhance the ‘social relations’ related to the sport context. The least important reasons, among those included in the analyses, are ‘body and appearance’, ‘expressivity’ and ‘competition’. There are significant qualitative differences between these reasons, which indicate that people experience their sport activities very differently. This finding confirms the need for multi-dimensional approaches to really get at how sport functions as a social good. Second, it is also important to note that there are significant differences between various social groups (age and gender) and different kinds of sport activities (individual vs. team sports and competitive level) with respect to which reasons appear central. Third, without being able to include this factor in the multivariate analyses, I have also pointed to class differences with respect to how athletes attach meaning to their sport activity, and this result, though explorative, points towards a more complex understanding than found in, for example, Bourdieu’s analyses of sport and social class.

In light of the theoretical discussions introducing the seven meanings of sport in this essay, at least four points should be noticed. First, sport activity is, quite naturally and beyond any doubt, an arena where young and old people assign different meanings to their participation; that is, they benefit in different ways from their sport activity. It seems reasonable to conclude that, on a general level, young members have more reasons for their sport practice than elder members, and the only dimension where the elderly in a uniform and linear way have a higher score than the younger is sport as ‘mental recreation’.

That gender also has an effect on how many sports are experienced, even after a very gender-biased-selection into the sport arena, is definitively worth noticing. For practical reasons it is perhaps most interesting to note that the only reason where men have a systematically higher score – competition – is a characteristic mostly intrinsic to sport compared to physical activity more generally. This finding indicates both why sport still is an arena dominated by men, and also why the emerging fitness sector, not based on traditional competitive sport to the same extent, is an arena with a clear majority of women [49]. Some of the interactive effects of age and gender indicate that the differences between men and women are smaller in the younger age groups, and this could imply that a new generation of athletes are growing up, where gender is less of a distinctive marker. These age and gender inequalities also raise several normative questions: What should sport

activities be like? Which characteristics should be emphasized when considering public support to sport organizations?

Third, there are notable differences between how various characteristics of the sport activity itself influence the experience of the sport activity. This applies directly to different kinds of sports (not reported here), to team sport in contrast to individual sports and, not least, to the competitive level of the athletes. Again, this raises important questions with respect to what is considered important when evaluating sport activities and what kind of sport activities should receive public funding. Especially important here is the finding that being on a high competitive level is a strong predictor for benefiting from sport activity, and especially a significant positive effect of competitive level on what could be called the existential dimensions of sport (fun, expressivity and social relations) is noteworthy. Thus, at the same time that competition bars people from participating in sport, competition seems to be what is required for sport to function as a sort of existential social good. This is an argument in favour of distinguishing more clearly between competitive sport and physical activity in general, and it complicates the issue of how to respond to the question of mass versus elite sport: It seems that some of the good effects aimed at through a broad mass participation in sport actually require a certain level of competitive involvement and that a certain dose of elitism is a prerequisite for getting something 'existential' out of ones sport activity. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that this factor – competitiveness – in some cases has a different function within team sports and individual sports.

Finally, if one considers the experiences people have in sport organizations – joy and pleasure, keeping fit and social relations – as individual and social goods, it is, first, as a consequence, significant to note that these goods are distributed in systematically biased ways. Accordingly, it is important to note that the social goods associated with sport activity emerge as part of a rather complicated picture; there are different kinds of goods, and they are distributed in some cases in opposite directions, according to various variables. This makes sport activity as a social good an interesting case, though more difficult to handle than often assumed, both for researchers and policy makers.

Notes

- [1] Lüschen *et al.*, 'The Sociocultural Context of Sport and Health'; Thrane, 'Fysisk aktivitet, helse og subjektivt velvære'.
- [2] As an example, about 70 per cent of the Norwegian population exercises at least once a week according to Statistics Norway, see <http://www.ssb.no/emner/07/02/50/fritid/>.
- [3] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Beck, *Risk Society*; for sport, see Elias & Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*; Rittner, 'Sport in der Erlebnisgesellschaft'; Bette, *Systemtheorie und Sport*; Dunning, *Sport Matters*, Sassatelli, 'Interaction Order and Beyond'.
- [4] Cox *et al.*, 'Overview of Sport Psychology'.
- [5] Searle, *Intentionality*.

- [6] The intrinsic, relational or dialectic quality of the relation between 'motivation' and 'action' has been a common theme in sociology, and reminiscent examples of such approaches are found in Mills, 'Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive'; Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*; Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*; and Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology'.
- [7] Mandell, *Sport. A Cultural History*; Olstad, *Norsk idretts historie*; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*; Heinemann, *Einführung in die Soziologie des Sports*.
- [8] Sport psychology makes a parallel distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. For more on this, see Vallerand and Fortier, 'Measures of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Sport and Physical Activity'.
- [9] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 3.
- [10] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*; Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*; Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport*.
- [11] Suits, 'The Elements of Sport', 12.
- [12] Morgan and Meier, *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*; Inglis and Hughson, 'The Beautiful Game and the Proto-Aesthetics of the Everyday'.
- [13] Taylor, 'Invoking Civil Society'; Featherstone *et al.*, *The Body*; Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs & Space*; Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity*; Gibbins and Reimer, *The Politics of Postmodernity*; Schuessler, *A Logic of Expressive Choice*.
- [14] Rittner, 'Sport in der Erlebnisgesellschaft'; Breivik, 'Sport in High Modernity'; Bette, *Systemtheorie und Sport*; Heino, 'What Is So Punk About Snowboarding?'
- [15] Featherstone *et al.*, *The Body*; Blake, *The Body Language*; Bette, *Systemtheorie und Sport*; Sassatelli, 'Interaction Order and Beyond' and 'Body Politics'.
- [16] Cachay and Thiel, *Soziologie des Sports*.
- [17] Stichweh, 'Sport – Ausdifferenzierung, Funktion, Code' and 'Sport und Moderne'; Tangen, *Samfunnets idrett*.
- [18] Morgan and Meier, *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*; Heinemann, *Einführung in die Soziologie des Sports*, 34–5.
- [19] Walzer, 'The Civil Society Argument'; Taylor, 'Invoking Civil Society'; Warren, *Democracy and Association*.
- [20] See Wolfenden, *Sport & the Community*; Roche, 'Sport and Community'; Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport*; St.meld, 'Idrettslivet i endring', 14.
- [21] Dunning, *Sport Matters*; McKay *et al.*, *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*.
- [22] Abraham, "'Geschlecht' als Strukturdimension sozialer Ungleichheit"; Theberge, 'Gender and Sport'; Weinberg *et al.*, 'Motivation for Youth Participation in Sport and Physical Activity'.
- [23] Tomlinson, 'Lifestyle and Social Class'.
- [24] Wright, *Classes*; Goldthorpe, *On Sociology*.
- [25] Grusky and Weeden, 'Decomposition Without Death'.
- [26] Eder, *The New Politics of Class*; Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs & Space*.
- [27] Pakulski and Waters, *The Death of Class*.
- [28] Veblen, *Den arbeidsfrie klasse*.
- [29] Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport*; Cachay and Hartmann-Tews, *Sport und soziale Ungleichheit*; Gruneau, *Class, Sports and Social Development*; Sugden and Tomlinson, 'Theorizing Sport, Social Class and Status'.
- [30] Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', 819.
- [31] Sugden and Tomlinson, 'Theorizing Sport, Social Class and Status'.
- [32] Loland, ed., *Toppidrettens pris*.
- [33] Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*; Olstad, *Norsk idretts historie*; Heinemann, *Einführung in die Soziologie des Sports*.
- [34] Skirstad, 'Norwegian Sport at the Crossroad'; Enjolras and Seippel, *Norske idrettslag 2000*.

- [35] In a Norwegian context, two out of three in the adult population exercise at least once a month and 28 per cent of the population is a member of a voluntary sport organization. For an overview of participation in physical activity and sport in a Norwegian context, see Dølvik *et al.*, *Kluss i vekslings*; Breivik and Vaagbø, *Utviklingen i fysisk aktivitet i den norske befolkning 1985–1997*; Vaage, 'Kultur- og fritidsaktiviteter' and www.ssb.no.
- [36] Seippel, 'Volunteers and Professionals in Norwegian Sport Organizations'.
- [37] Goksøyr, 'The Popular Sounding Board'.
- [38] Goksøyr, 'Norway and the World Cup'; Maguire, *Global Sport*; Miller *et al.*, *Globalization and Sport*.
- [39] Goksøyr. ed., *Kropp, kultur og tippeskamp*.
- [40] The sample of individual members is based on lists of members from a random sample of Norwegian voluntary sport organizations (which in turn is taken from the register held by the 'Norwegian Olympic Committee and Sport Federation' [NOC]). From a population of about 7,000 clubs, 549 clubs were randomly selected. 294 clubs responded to the questionnaire, which gives a response rate of 54 per cent. The size of the clubs in the total population is known, and comparing our sample with the population indicates that the quality of the data on this organizational level is quite good. For more on this, see Enjolras and Seippel, *Norske idrettslag 2000*.
- [41] This number reflects two factors that are partly caused by the lack of quality of the lists of members provided by the sport organizations. First, lots of questionnaires were returned by the postal service (1,149) and many respondents communicated that they were not, and in some cases had never been, members of a sport club. Together we estimated that misdirected questionnaires amounted to about 2,000 respondents. Next, we did not know the age of most of our sample, so we estimate that 1,725 respondents who were in the wrong age group (below 13) received the questionnaire. This leaves us with 1,660 answers from a sample of 5,654 'valid members', which, in turn, gives a response rate of 29.4 per cent.
- Three complicating factors contributed to this result. First, because the research project was to cover a wide spectrum of age groups of which the factual age of the respondents was not known beforehand, various versions of the questionnaire were sent to each one, and the respondents were asked to choose the correct one for their age-group. Next, because of public restrictions, several age groups needed permission from their parents (a signature) whereas some just had to inform their parents of their participation. Third, the questionnaire was sizeable (20 pages at most).
- [42] The questionnaire contains a list of statements where the respondents are asked whether they consider each statement as 'very appropriate', 'rather appropriate', 'rather inappropriate', 'very inappropriate' and 'don't know' for their sport activity within the club. The 'don't know' category is used as a middle category making each variable into a five-point scale. The dimensions of meaning then consist of one, two or three variables merged into an additive index. Below is a list of the statements used for each dimension of meaning and Cronbachs alpha as a measure for the reliability of the indices.
- Joy*: 'I think doing sport is fun.'
- Physical health*: 'I want a healthy body', 'I want to keep fit'. Cronbachs alpha: 0.74.
- Mental recreation*: 'I feel that I get a mental surplus from my exercise', 'I feel that I get a physical surplus from exercising'. Cronbachs alpha: 0.76.
- Social factors*: 'I meet my friends in the sport club', 'I appreciate the social community of the sport club', 'Sport is important for my social network'. Cronbachs alpha: 0.79.
- Competition and achievements*: 'I like to compete', 'I like excitements and challenges', 'I like to win'. Cronbachs alpha: 0.78.
- Expressivism*: 'I feel that I am able to express important aspects of myself through the activity in the sport club.'
- Appearance and body*: 'I want to take care of my appearance', 'I consider my weight important', 'I take part to get a nice and attractive body'. Cronbachs alpha: 0.71.

- [43] I have chosen this approach because the social class variable does not function very well in multivariate analyses because of the large proportion of youngsters in our sample and the lack of appropriate data on their parents.
- [44] The analysis is based on the part of the sample aged 18 years or above (N = 1222). Class is measured rather traditionally, without possibilities for more fine-grained analyses.
- [45] * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.
- [46] Respondent were asked to list their sport activities. If active in more than one sport, sport activities were listed according to how often they participated. The respondents are then classified according to whether this 'most active' sport is a team-sport or an individual sport. For competitive level, respondents were asked 'At which competitive level do you see yourself in your sport? Consider your level compared to other athletes at your age.' The answers were: 1. 'Exercising level, without any competition', 2. 'Exercising level with some competition', 3. 'Low competitive level', 4. 'Medium competitive level', 5. 'High competitive level, nationally', 6. 'High competitive level, internationally'.
- [47] See Dunning, *Sport Matters*.
- [48] This is probably due to the fact that competition is, regardless of level, an intrinsic feature of most team sports (football, handball et cetera), whereas many individual sports could be performed without focusing upon competition.
- [49] See Ulseth, 'Prestasjon eller rekreasjon?'

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