



Sport and Social Inequalities

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Abstract

This article reviews recent research on the relationship between sport and social inequalities, focusing on gender, race, nation and social mobility. Through an engagement with these areas of research, we highlight how sport reflects and reinforces broader hierarchical structures; how it serves as a site for both inclusion and exclusion, but in ways that work unevenly; and how sport is ultimately a site for social reproduction of hierarchy and social stratification. We argue that the gender, racial and national hierarchies that sport is embedded within interact to largely prevent sport from being a site for social mobility, despite popular myths to the contrary.

Introduction

Given its global popularity and its significance to global political, economic and cultural issues, as well as to everyday life, it is unsurprising that sport has burgeoned as a research field in sociology (Woodward 2012). Increasingly, this body of research has been directing attention to the relationship between sport, social inequalities and social change, with scholars calling on sociologists to make sport more central to analyses of social power (Eckstein et al. 2010; Washington and Karen 2001). The sociology of sport has evolved significantly in recent years, and it is timely to critically reflect on its recent developments in relation to analyses of social divisions and inequalities.

In this article, we examine sport as a contested set of power relations embedded in systems of social inequality at the global, national and local levels. We review recent research on the relationship between sport and social inequalities, focusing on gender, race, nation and social mobility. This review shows that institutionalised inequalities according to gender, race and nation are often considered in isolation from each other or, less frequently, in terms of how they intersect. We highlight how sport is structured by inequality along gender, racial and national lines and how it is limited as a source of social mobility for those at the bottom of these hierarchies, despite the rhetorical fairness and meritocracy often attributed to sports. We argue that these gender, racial and national hierarchies that sport is embedded within interact to maintain sport as a site for social inequality. This embeddedness largely prevents sport, despite popular myths to the contrary, from being a level-playing field and a site for social mobility.

Gender

Gender is arguably the most visible site of inequality in sport. The contemporary literature on gender in sport is largely concentrated in three somewhat overlapping areas: masculinity and

femininity; sexuality and homophobia; and bodily sex (including gender testing). It also, at times, looks at intersections between gender, race and class, though this is not a large focus. Similarly, gender equity, which used to be a key issue for sports sociologists, has been studied infrequently in recent years (but see Dufur and Linford 2010).

The main recent focus for gender research in sport has arguably been in the interconnected areas of masculinity, femininity and sexuality. Sport itself is organised by ideologies of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Mainstream sports such as hockey (e.g. Allain 2012), soccer (association football) (e.g. Adams et al. 2010), and sport in general (e.g. Coad 2008; Messner 2002) are organised around discourses of hegemonic masculinity that value hypermasculine, heterosexual men. These discourses serve to marginalise effeminate men and all women, maintaining mainstream sport as both heterosexual and homophobic (Coad 2008). Hegemonic masculinity justifies the lesser regard, and its associated lack of resources provided to women's sport by asserting that the patriarchal organisation of sport is natural, normal and is therefore somehow right.

Mainstream men's sports are associated with hegemonic masculinity and often explicitly marginalise homosexual athletes (Coad 2008). Homosexual men are almost never openly homosexual in mainstream sport, particularly in team sports (Coad 2008). Male homosexuality is marginalised in sport culture where one way of maintaining heteronormative hegemonic masculinity is to value manliness while simultaneously expressing homophobic opinions (Anderson 2002). Heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity are reinforced in locker room talk which marginalises homosexuality and reinforces heterosexual masculinity (Anderson 2002; Coad 2008; Messner 2002). As a result, professional male athletes almost never come out as homosexual, but sometimes come out as straight, usually in response to rumours about their sexuality (Coad 2008).

Interestingly, recent research suggests that as broader societal homophobia has decreased homophobia in sport, while still present, has lessened, and heterosexual men are now sometimes able to present as less hypermasculine without repercussion (Anderson 2009). This has led to the development of a theory of inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009). Inclusive masculinity emerges when homophobia, a culture characterised by homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, diminishes, and a more inclusive masculinity emerges in contest with what Anderson (2009) calls orthodox masculinity, which is akin to what we have called hegemonic masculinity. This reduction in homophobia is also present in sports fans, with a recent study finding that a large majority of sports fans do not hold homophobic attitudes and are more interested in on-field performances than whether or not the players are gay (Cashmore and Cleland 2012). However, this perceived move towards inclusive masculinities and greater tolerance amongst fans has not yet led to gay athletes feeling comfortable coming out (Cashmore and Cleland 2012).

The place of sexuality is different in women's sport. Where homosexual men are considered unsuited to sport because they are not masculine enough (Elling and Janssens 2009), homosexual women are excluded because they are too masculine. Where men have to highlight their masculinity, women have to emphasize their femininity. For example, professional sports-women are often portrayed in full make-up and accompanied by their children (Muller 2007), whereas professional sportsmen are not. Further, women who participate in male-dominated sports are often constructed as masculine (Russell 2007), while men who participate in women's sport are often seen as feminine or gay (Grindstaff and West 2011). Constructing women who are good at sport as manly or lesbian serves to downplay their achievements while reinforcing heteronormativity. Likewise, marginalising homosexual men so that they are discouraged from being openly gay also reinforces the dominance of heterosexual masculinity in sport (Anderson 2002).

There is much less research into femininity in sport than there is into masculinity. Indeed, it has been argued that femininity in sport and in general is under-theorised (Grindstaff and West 2011). While Connell (1995) argues that there is no hegemonic femininity because all femininities are subordinate to hegemonic masculinity, nevertheless the types of femininity in sport reinforce the valuing of the feminine heterosexual woman athlete above the homosexual woman athlete. Studies of masculinity, femininity and sexuality in sport highlight that sport maintains and reinforces both the patriarchal gender hierarchy and the heteronormative sexuality hierarchy. These hierarchies are further normalised through practices of sex testing.

A small but interesting body of research looks at sex testing (sometimes referred to as gender verification) and gender boundaries in sport (e.g. Henne 2014, 2015). Gender boundaries are policed in sport, but only in women's sport. This is because men's bodies are considered to be bigger and stronger than women's, and so it would not be fair for men to compete directly against women. A woman masquerading as a man is thought to have little chance of winning, and whether such a woman participates does not threaten the perceived fairness of competition. However, a man masquerading as a woman is expected to have an advantage, and his participation would threaten the evenness of the playing field. So sports care very much whether men participate as women, but not at all whether women participate as men.

Because of this concern, women who are performing well or appear masculine are sometimes sex tested (Wackwitz 2003). The challenge for sex testing is that there is no definitive sex test (Dreger 2010; Wonkam et al. 2010). Bodies, hormones and chromosomes do not necessarily align with either sex or gender categories. There are a number of conditions where a person may appear to be female and may have no testosterone but may have XY chromosomes. Such a person would have no physical advantages. On the other side, a person with XX chromosomes might have 'extra' androgens, hormones that are thought to give physical advantages. Indeed, normal people have a range of levels of hormones, and it is unclear what constitutes normal (Dreger 2010).

Social research into sex testing argues largely against it and also challenges the notion that sex and gender are binary categories. Further, this research notes that sex testing consolidates patriarchy by maintaining and reinforcing the idea that there are separate sexes, even though the bodily evidence is much more nuanced in this regard (Wackwitz 2003). Women's bodies alone are subject to this regulatory regime. Sociologists have not contributed a great deal to discussions in this area, but it is one that should be of concern.

The research into gender and sport shows that sport is organised around hierarchies that value men (patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity) and heterosexuals (heteronormativity). Sport, then, can be conceptualised as a heteronormative masculine domain. Taken together, contemporary research on gender in sport highlights the power differences between men's and women's sport. Women participate less, and their sports are less valued in all regards. Sport continues to be organised on patriarchal grounds and structured by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Grindstaff and West 2011; Marjoribanks and Farquharson 2012). Heterosexual men remain at the centre of sport (Messner 2002), while homosexuals and women remain on the margins. Due to their perceived physical disadvantages, women's bodies in sport are further scrutinised through sex testing regimes.

Race

Race has been a key area of social research into sport. Race is a socially constructed category. Geneticists have long known that there is greater genetic variation within racial groups than between them (e.g. Bamshad et al. 2003), and, further, that genetic endowments that favour sporting achievement do not fall along racial lines. Nevertheless, the myth that Black athletes are

naturally talented is pervasive, and shapes the experiences of all athletes in multi-racial sporting contexts. This sporting myth is based on an ideology that situates Blacks as lesser than other racial groups. In this way, sport maintains racial hierarchies, serving as site for social control by race.

Research into race in sport has focused on a number of key areas including media representations of race in sport, positional segregation, pay discrepancies, racial vilification and racialised sport participation patterns. In addition, there is an emerging literature around Whiteness and sport. Many of these studies have aimed to debunk the myth that Black athletes are naturally gifted. In this section, we review the research on race and sport, beginning with a discussion of the myth of natural talent. Overall, the literature indicates that race and racism are ongoing concerns in sport around the world.

The myth of natural talent says that Black athletes are naturally good at sport, while White athletic success is the result of hard work. It downplays the achievements of Black athletes while lauding the achievements of White athletes. It associates Blackness with intellectual inferiority and Whiteness with intellectual superiority (Sailes 1991). The myth has been observed in the United Kingdom (Long and Hylton 2002), Australia (Hallinan and Judd 2009), Norway (Massao and Fasting 2010), the United States (Azzarito and Harrison 2008), and elsewhere.

The myth of natural talent appears to be behind much of the discrimination and differential treatment experienced by Black athletes. Based on an ideology that situates Black peoples as physically gifted but mentally inferior, the myth of natural talent serves to justify the differential treatment meted out to Black athletes. This myth is a form of social control that is pervasive in societies in general, not just in sport. Although not based in reality, it is deeply held and difficult to shift (St. Louis 2004). The myth is held by people of all races, even the Black athletes who are subject to it (Rasmussen et al. 2005). It is perpetuated from junior sport all the way through to professional sport (Azzarito and Harrison 2008). Media discourses around race in sport serve to reinforce and maintain the myth of natural talent (Bruce 2004). Because of this myth, one study found, Black student athletes felt they needed to overtly manage the stereotypes that suggested they were not worthy of their university place (Martin et al. 2010).

The myth of natural talent is reinforced by media discourses of race in the context of sport (Bruce 2004; Van Sterkenburg 2011). For example, in one British study, White soccer players were more likely to be discussed using psychological descriptors than Black players, and Black players were more likely to be discussed using physical descriptors (McCarthy and Jones 1997). A North American study found that African-American players were more likely to be called by their first name by commentators than White players (Bruce 2004). Another study found that media coverage of Black athletes reinforces myths around Blacks' masculinity and sexuality and helps to maintain a racial frame that privileges Whites (Leonard and King 2011).

The myth of natural talent affects players' on-field experiences, and in particular, it likely contributes to the practice of positional segregation, also called 'stacking', which occurs when players are restricted to particular positions on the field of play depending on their race. Typically, Black players are put in positions that require speed and agility, while White players are put in decision-making roles. Positional segregation was first described by Loy and Elvogue in 1970 and remains an issue today in many sports including Major League Baseball (Associated Press 2008), American football (gridiron) (Berri and Simmons 2009), Australian rules football (Hallinan and Judd 2009), and soccer (Massao and Fasting 2010). Notably, not all professional sports have positional segregation. NBA basketball in the United States does not appear to have positional segregation (Kahn and Shah 2005), and although British soccer and Australian rugby have histories of positional segregation, it no longer seems to be practiced.

One of the consequences of positional segregation is that non-White players do not get decision-making experience and are overlooked for coaching and sports administration positions once they finish playing (Loy and Elvogue 1970). This is borne out by statistics that show

few professional coaches in sports with positional segregation are not White (Hallinan and Judd 2009; Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport 2008; Madden 2004). An additional type of racial discrimination in professional sport is in salaries. There is evidence from American football and basketball that Black athletes are paid less than non-Black athletes, even when they are better performers (Berri and Simmons 2009; Kahn and Shah 2005; McCormick and Tollison 2001).

Racial vilification is commonly experienced by Black athletes. Racial vilification refers to abusive statements made against players, coaches, officials, spectators and teams due to their racial background. It has been reported in sporting competitions around the world (Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2006; Gardiner 2003; Long 2000; Massao and Fasting 2010). Many competitions have developed policies against racial vilification, and these do seem to reduce its practice (Gardiner 2003), but research indicates it is an ongoing issue that aims to disadvantage Black players (Burdsey 2010).

More broadly, sport participation patterns vary by race, with overrepresentation of minority groups in some sports, and under-representation in others. For example, Olympic swimming has long been dominated by White athletes, while North American basketball is dominated by African-Americans (Marjoribanks and Farquharson 2012). There are few elite Black tennis players or golfers, but many Black American football players. Blacks are under-represented in Major League Baseball (Associated Press 2008). Recent research suggests that even in sports where African-Americans dominate, African-Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented (Dubrow and Adams 2012). Further, non-Whites are less likely to participate in recreational sport than Whites in several locales (Department of Sport and Recreation 2005; Sport England 2005), with potential negative effects on their health.

Finally, there is an emerging concern with Whiteness in sport. Whiteness studies aim to shed light on the mechanisms of racism by studying the dominant group. Such research has problematised Whiteness, which has usually been situated as the reference group that others are compared with. Research into Whiteness has examined its absence. For example, in studies where people are asked to identify their ethnicity, White ethnicity is often not interrogated whereas non-White ethnicity is (Hylton 2008; Long and Hylton 2002). In the sporting context, non-Whites are sometimes seen as others ('they', not 'us') (McDonald, forthcoming) and are associated with attributes related to the myth of natural talent (Long and Hylton 2002). Research into Whiteness often examines how Whites benefit from the maintenance of beliefs in racial difference. Whiteness intersects with gender and class to maintain the racial order.

Overall, research into race and sport indicates that racism is an ongoing issue. Fuelled by a persistent belief in the myth of natural talent, Black athletes face positional segregation, racial vilification and a downplaying of their achievements. Most pernicious is the way in which the myth of natural talent situates the achievements of Black athletes as less than those of athletes of other racial backgrounds. Beliefs in racial difference serve to maintain racial hierarchies and can be viewed as a form of social control. Racial ideologies such as the myth of natural talent help to keep Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. As with gender, these beliefs are enacted on a global scale and reinforced through global media coverage of both national and international sporting events.

Nation

In this section, we discuss inequality in the context of nation. Here we consider nations as both part of a global community where national teams compete on an unequal playing field and in competition with wealthy professional sports leagues, and as a site of belonging, where sport can both exclude and include groups within nations.

International sport is predicated on the existence of separate nations that compete for national glory (Rowe 2003). In this way, the nation and the nation-state remain critical organising principles for contemporary sport and continue to structure and influence global sports governance and transnational athlete migration (Carter 2011). In many sports, there is, however, a global market that competes with national teams, attracting the best athletes to leave their country of origin to play in professional leagues. This trend places these elite leagues in competition with nations for players' time and loyalty. For example, the increasingly powerful club-based teams of European soccer seek to dictate the organisation of soccer for their own interests, even where that is at the expense of national teams (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009; King 2000). Athletes contracted to these clubs are expected to put club obligations above national obligations, thus threatening the status of international competitions. The Indian Premier League (IPL) is a similarly multinational professional Twenty20 cricket professional competition, in which teams are made up of players contracted from other clubs and competitions from around the world.

What emerges is a professional context in which players travel from nation to nation to ply their trade, focused on club and individual advancement (Poli 2007). Nations with strong leagues that pay high amounts are able to attract the best players. The IPL and similar sporting ventures in non-western nations may be taken as evidence that these leagues are challenging the global game power structure (Gupta 2009). The case of the IPL is interesting as India would otherwise not be considered a wealthy sporting nation. Generally, the movement of athletes globally is from poor nations to rich nations with wealthy leagues (Poli 2010; Klein 2006).

Just as nations can act as a source of identity construction and building (Rowe 2003; Smith and Porter 2004), so they can act as sites of tension, division and social exclusion (Burdsey 2006; Spaaij 2012). Within nations, whether or not a person follows sport can become an everyday mechanism through which they either are included or excluded. It is also evident that sport at the national level can be a source of inclusion or exclusion through the ways in which it intersects with other social relations, such as gender and race (Van Sterkenburg 2013). For example, at the national level, while there will often be both men's and women's teams competing in the same sport, men's teams typically secure much more media exposure, higher levels of sponsorship and higher pay levels for the athletes. As our discussion of race and gender above shows, there is nothing natural about such differences. They are the outcome of contested power relations in society.

The media plays a crucial role in framing particular representations of the nation, with consequences both in terms of the types of representations that occur and their effects or impacts (Farquharson and Marjoribanks 2003). The sports media's stereotyping of nations, and particularly other nations, has been a common finding in research on national identity and sport (Crolley and Hand 2006; Garland 2004; Maguire and Poulton 1999). While supra-national sporting competitions and the increasing multinational composition of clubs and competitions provide a potential space for the articulation of post-national identities (Millward 2006), recent research suggests that stereotyped and even xenophobic representations of nation and national identity are still routine and persistent features of the media's coverage of international sporting events (Cox et al., forthcoming).

Overall, sociological research has made important contributions in showing how the nation has been and continues to be a significant site of inequality in sport at both global and local levels. Nation and nationalism are key sites of contested and contradictory power relations within sport. On the one hand, they can be sites of social inclusion, creating a space through which people are able to feel they are members of a larger collectivity. On the other hand, sport can also act as a form of social division and exclusion in the context of the nation.

Social mobility

A popular belief is that sport offers the underprivileged a vehicle for social mobility. Sport is seen to provide a level-playing field where those with sufficient talent and commitment can succeed, regardless of their race, gender or socioeconomic status. The possibility of staggering wealth and social status through professional sport most certainly exists. In reality, however, the relationship between sport and social mobility is complex and ambivalent (Eitzen 2009; Spaaij 2011).

International research shows that sport participation can facilitate intragenerational and inter-generational mobility through mechanisms such as enhanced occupational and income status, educational attainment and social prestige (e.g. Eisen and Turner 1992; Semyonov 1986; Sohi and Yusuff 1987; Spaaij 2011). Athletic performance and physical capital are resources of power that can open doors that would otherwise remain closed for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, recent research shows that the social mobility pathways that sport offers are often exaggerated. Not only is the popular view of sport as a social mobility escalator unrealistic, it may even be detrimental to disadvantaged groups because it reproduces or exacerbates their disadvantage (Anderson 2010; Messner 2007). The relationship between sport and social mobility may be viewed as a zero-sum game where time spent on sport takes away from time that could be spent on education or work experience (Mackin and Walther 2012; Spaaij 2012; Rodriguez and McDonald 2013). These critical accounts suggest that instead of facilitating upward mobility, participation in sport diverts attention and energies away from more likely paths to social mobility (Carrington 1986; Anderson 2010).

While this body of research advances our understanding of the relationship between sport and social mobility, a number of areas of contention remain. A major limitation of existing research is that most studies focus on athletes who have achieved professional status. The picture these studies present is unbalanced; it does not account for the fact that for every elite athlete, there are thousands of aspiring athletes who never reach professional status (Messner 2007; Poli 2010). Not only are the odds of becoming a professional athlete very long (Leonard 1996; Poli 2010), professional sporting careers are also notoriously brief, averaging well below 10 years, particularly in team contact sports (Leonard 1996; Witnauer et al. 2007). A sporting career is a compressed work career that typically involves rapid ascent followed by rapid decline. For example, a recent study found professional baseball careers in the United States to be 'an inevitably short time on a very slippery slope' (Witnauer et al. 2007: 382). Age is a key factor influencing career longevity and social mobility opportunities.

Upward mobility achieved during an athlete's career may be followed by downward mobility after retirement from professional sport. While some athletes do quite well after retirement from sport by maintaining financial security and social prestige, others experience downward mobility (Carrington 1986; Eitzen 2009; Houlston 1982; Lever 1995). Barriers to successful post-career transition are higher for Black and minority ethnic athletes as they continue to face restricted access to key functionary positions in professional sport, such as in coaching, management and media roles (Cashmore and Cleland 2011; Hallinan and Judd 2009).

Another key issue is the striking differences in social mobility opportunities between the small number of high paid, globally televised, male-dominated sports such as leading football, baseball and basketball competitions, and other sports that are less well funded and televised (Eitle 2005; Eitle and Eitle 2002). Schotté's study (2008) of North African long-distance runners in France, who experience financial and occupational insecurity, presents an important counterpoint to research undertaken with global sport celebrities, and highlights the precariousness of athletic careers that exists in many sports.

Most important for the present purpose, however, is that social mobility opportunities in and through sport are strongly influenced by the intersections between race, gender and class.

Overall, White males from middle-class backgrounds benefit most from professional sporting careers, while there are fewer viable, well-paid career opportunities for women, Blacks and minority ethnic groups, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Anderson 2010; Leonard 1996; Messner 2007; Sabo et al. 1993). An exception to this critical insight is a recent study in the United States (Mackin and Walther 2012) which found that sport participation also had a positive effect on social mobility for African-American men, and not just for White males. The study did not find any statistically significant influence upon social mobility for Hispanic men in the United States.

Conclusion

This review indicates that sport is a site of entrenched inequalities along gender, race, nation and class lines. Its promise as a site for social mobility is limited for most groups. Based on this reading of the literature, we come to three conclusions: sport reflects and reinforces broader hierarchical structures; sport is a site for both inclusion and exclusion, but the way this works is uneven; and sport is ultimately a site for social reproduction of hierarchy and social stratification. We discuss each in turn.

First, sport is embedded in broader hierarchical societal structures that it both reproduces and reinforces. Like the rest of western societies, sport is organised around a gender hierarchy that values men's endeavours more than women's. Similarly, sport is structured to maintain the dominance of Whiteness and wealth. While there is social mobility for some, middle-class White men are the most likely to benefit from social mobility through sport. Wealthy western nations are also at the centre of high-performance sport, while non-western societies are on the fringes. While there are some instances where sport challenges existing social hierarchies, these are relatively rare.

Second, sport can be a site of both inclusion and exclusion, depending on where you sit. Nation, gender and race all play out differently in this regard. Our analysis of nation indicates that it remains an important category for sport, enabling the existence of global sporting competitions outside of privately sponsored sports leagues. The globalisation of sporting competitions means that elite athletes are more globally mobile than ever, both working professionally in other nations, and, to a lesser extent, having the ability to change nations due to their sporting ability. Yet for women, elite sport is much less likely to be a site for inclusion, with professional opportunities both limited, and where they exist, much less well paid than for men. Ideas of race interact with gender and nation and provide both barriers to and opportunities for inclusion. Racial stereotypes associated with various sports arguably make it easier for Black athletes to be included, while simultaneously making it more difficult for them to move into coaching or management. Women in general also have difficulties moving into coaching or management on a professional level, with very few women coaching men's teams but many men coaching women's teams.

Finally, sport is largely a site for social reproduction of hierarchy and social stratification. It reproduces existing social structures through its own values, rules and engagements with other social institutions. Through its internal processes, it reproduces patriarchy, heteronormativity and racism. It also contributes to maintaining hierarchy in broader society through its promise of social mobility, which encourages disadvantaged young men to spend time on sport that may perhaps be better spent on education or other activities that would be more likely to contribute to upward mobility.

In conjunction, these insights highlight how issues of power and inequality are central to contemporary sport. They further suggest that the study of sport can make valuable contributions to our understandings of social structure and social inequalities, particularly where research adopts a

more intersectional approach to explore how various dimensions of power intersect to reproduce and reinforce hierarchies and social inequalities.

Short Biographies

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Note

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