chapter

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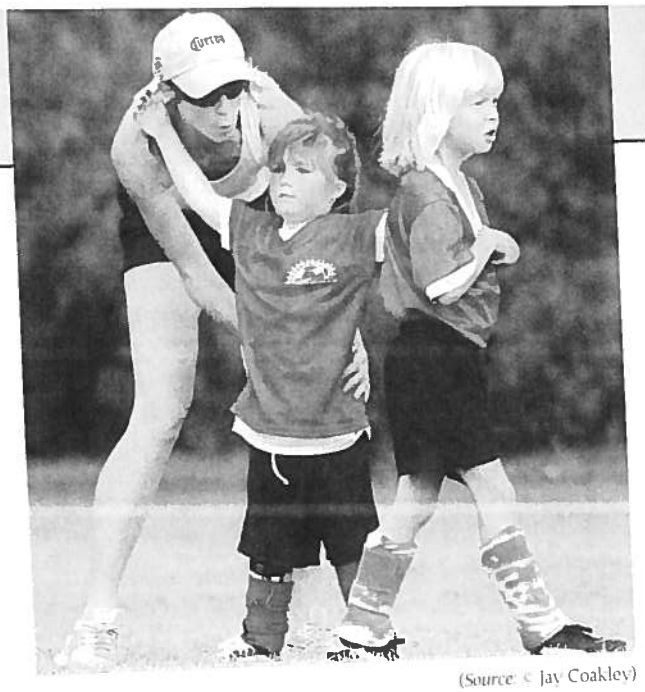


(Source: © Jay Coakley)

SPORTS AND SOCIALIZATION

Who Plays and What Happens to Them?

I know how to manage a football game. The problem with me is, sometimes, managing my life.

—Lawrence Taylor, NFL Hall of Fame player (Associated Press, 2012)

Why do we even pretend that sportspeople are models of propriety? Or rather why do we need them to be? . . . we continue to project an irrational desire for the physically perfect to be spiritually strong.

—Julia Baird, journalist (2004)

. . . so many kids don't even know what they could be good at because they're only playing one sport since they were eight years old. So, I look back and I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to play those other sports.

—Jennie Finch, Gold medalist softball pitcher (Jacobson, 2010)

If I have a shot at the championship and there's two races to go and my head is hurting and I just came through a wreck . . . I'm not going to say anything.

—Jeff Gordon, NASCAR driver (Moore, 2012)

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives

- Describe what occurs during the socialization process, and explain why it is important to study socialization as an interactive learning process.
- Identify key factors involved in the process of becoming and staying involved in sports.
- Describe key factors involved in the process of changing or ending sport participation, and explain when the retirement process is most likely to be difficult for a former athlete.
- Understand why sport participation does not have the same socialization effects for everyone who plays sports.
- Differentiate pleasure and participation sports from power and performance sports, and explain why it is important to know these differences when discussing socialization in sports.
- Identify the conditions under which sport participation is most likely or least likely to have positive socialization effects on those who play sports.
- Explain why sport participation does not automatically lead to physical fitness and well-being and why it may not reduce obesity rates in a society.
- Identify examples of how sports are sites at which ideological messages are communicated to people in society.
- Explain what sociologists mean when they say that socialization is a community and cultural process.

Whenever we discuss why people play sports, why they stop playing, and what happens to them as they play, we deal with the process of social learning and development that sociologists call socialization.

For more than half a century, people in the sociology of sport have done research to learn about three topics that are central to discussions of sports and socialization:

1. The process of becoming involved and staying involved in sports
2. The process of changing or ending sport participation
3. The consequences, both positive and negative, of being involved in sports

This chapter is organized around these topics. As you read, you'll see that we've learned much about socialization and sports, but our understanding remains incomplete. Some of what we've learned is so complex that the discussions carry over to subsequent chapters.

The chapter closes with a discussion of socialization as a community and cultural process affecting many people at once.

WHAT IS SOCIALIZATION?

Socialization *is a process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become familiar with social worlds.* It involves forming ideas about who we are and what is important in our lives. We are *not* simply passive learners in this process. We actively participate in our own socialization as we form relationships and are influenced by others at the same time that we influence them. We actively interpret what we see and hear, and we accept, resist, and revise messages that we receive from others about who we are and how we are connected with social worlds. Therefore, socialization is not simply a one-way process of being molded and shaped by our social environment. Instead, it is an interactive process through which we make decisions about our relationships, our interpretation of information that comes to us through interaction, and what we will say and do. It is through these decisions that we become who we are and influence the social worlds in which we participate.

Each of us experiences socialization as we learn about social worlds and use our knowledge to construct our own lives. In this sense, socialization, social development, and identity formation are interconnected processes. We make choices in this process, but our choices are influenced by the options available to us, the resources we have to assess them, and the context in which we make them (Van de Walle, 2011).

The *consequences* of these choices for our lives also depend on the contexts in which we make them. For example, one person might have opportunities to play many different sports and then be able to choose the one in which she or he has the best chances of succeeding, whereas another person might have an opportunity to play only one sport. Additionally, one person might play a sport in a context where there is excellent coaching, good support from others, and good mentors, whereas another person might play in a context where there is no one around to be a coach or mentor. Therefore, some of us are in better positions than others when it comes to using socialization experiences to our advantage and extending our knowledge, experience, and developmental opportunities.

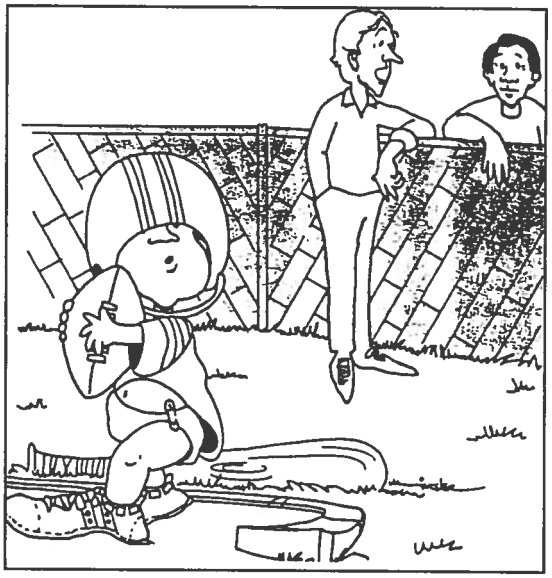
This explanation of *socialization* is based on a *social interaction model* that is organized around a combination of cultural, interactionist, and structural theories. It leads researchers to assume that human beings learn values and norms and develop as individuals as they interact with others and participate in social worlds. For example, as children interact with their parents, other family members, teachers, and peers, they learn norms about safety and risk-taking and they learn to give meaning to the pain that comes with the bumps, bruises, and cuts that are a part of childhood. However, if they play organized sports, their interaction with coaches and teammates may lead them to define pain as a normal part of playing sports and to see sports injuries

as symbols of their commitment to a team and their identity as an athlete. In this way sense, socialization can be is a powerful and influential process.

The social interaction model is widely used in the sociology of sport today, but some scholars continue to use a *personal internalization model* of socialization when they study sports. This model emphasizes that social learning occurs when people internalize the rules of society as they grow up in families, attend school, interact with peers, and receive messages through media. This approach has inspired many studies of socialization, but it mistakenly assumes that socialization is a one-way process in which learning occurs automatically.

Most studies based on the personal internalization model produce inconsistent and contradictory findings about why people play sports, why they stop, and what happens to them as they play. However, a few studies using this model of socialization have been carefully designed and provide detailed statistical analyses of the complex connections between sport participation and other aspects of people's lives (Berger et al., 2008; Guest and Schneider, 2003; Hershow et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2013; Kraaykamp et al., 2012; Lee, 2013; Sabo et al., 2005; Shakib and Veliz, 2013). The findings in these studies identify three things: (1) general patterns in sport participation through the life course; (2) the barriers that prevent or discourage some people from playing sports; and (3) connections between sport participation and educational achievement, occupational success, sexual behavior and pregnancy rates, health and wellness, and general self-esteem. These findings are discussed throughout this chapter.

Most studies of sports and socialization today are based on a social interaction model and use qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. Instead of using written questionnaires or other quantitative methods that provide snapshots of people's lives, they use in-depth interviews and field observations to study smaller collections of people over time. This provides continuous videos rather than snapshots. Their goal is to obtain detailed descriptions of sport experiences as they occur in people's lives and then analyze the processes through which people make decisions about sport participation and give meaning to sport experiences. Finally, they seek to connect those decisions and meanings with the cultural and structural contexts in which sports and sport participation exist. This approach captures the complexity of the processes through which people become and stay involved in sports, change or end sport participation, and incorporate sports into their lives. The rest of this chapter uses both research snapshots and videos to explain what we know about sports and socialization today.



"I know this is starting early, but I can't let him get too far behind the other kids if he's going to succeed in life."

Research guided by structural theories focuses on who influences the sport participation patterns of children. Fathers and other family members are usually identified as *significant others* who influence when, how, and where children play sports.

BECOMING AND STAYING INVOLVED IN SPORTS

Who plays sports consistently over time, who plays and drops out, and who never plays? This

three-part question is important today, as many societies deal with health problems that are partly related to a lack of regular physical exercise (Nike, Inc. 2012).

Carefully designed studies based on structural theories and a personal internalization model of socialization have found that sport participation is related to three factors: (1) a person's abilities, characteristics, and resources; (2) the influence of significant others, including parents, siblings, teachers, peers, and role models; and (3) the availability of opportunities to play sports in ways that are personally satisfying. These are the snapshot research findings that help us explain how and why people become involved and stay involved in sports. However, a more complete explanation is provided by detailed stories from people about their sport participation. When these stories are collected in research based on a social interaction model, they provide socialization videos rather than single snapshots.

Studies using in-depth interviews and participant observation indicate that sport participation is connected to multiple and diverse processes that make up people's lives, and it occurs as people interact with others and make decisions based on available opportunities and the meanings they give to sports in connection with what they want to happen in their lives. These decisions and meanings are not permanent and often change as social conditions and relationships change. Furthermore, as people stay involved in sports, their reasons for participating usually change over time. When there are no reasons, they discontinue or change their sport participation—until things change again and there are new reasons to become re-involved.

Current knowledge about the processes through which people become and stay involved in sports has been produced through multiple studies across various populations of people in different situations. The most effective way to learn what we know about socialization is to review a few studies that highlight key aspects of these processes. The following summaries provide three sociological videos illustrating processes of becoming and staying involved in sports.

Example 1: Family Culture and the Sport Participation of Children

Sociologist Sharon Wheeler studies sport education and development in England. In one of her research projects she conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary school children identified as "sporty"—that is, playing sports was important in their lives—and their parents. She found that the parents in each family defined sport participation as important for young people and willingly dedicated considerable family time, money, and energy to support their children as they sampled different sport activities in various programs. Transporting them to practices and games and attending games were part of the family routine and overall lifestyle. Their support, however, had limits in that they did not coach or critique their children nor did they provide anything other than verbal encouragement as they participated (Wheeler, 2012, 2014).

Because these families lived in the United Kingdom, parents were not obsessed with pushing their children to excel so they might obtain athletic scholarships to college, as many parents do in the United States. These UK families also were relatively well off, meaning that they had the resources to sustain a lifestyle that included sport participation. This lifestyle was linked with a culture created and sustained by a network of families with similar beliefs and lifestyles. This culture of family sport participation then served as a context in which playing sports was seamlessly integrated into the lives of the children. Sports for these children were simply a taken-for-granted part of family life.

Of course, families with fewer resources and less access to sport programs would have different lifestyles in which such a culture would be more difficult to create and sustain. This would also be the case for single-parent families and families

When physical activities and sport participation are incorporated into everyday family life, children are more likely to remain physically active through their lives. The four children in this family are learning that running is an enjoyable activity for men and women, young and old. The positive memories from "fun runs" such as this will be factors that encourage these children to be active in the future. (*Source:* © Jay Coakley)

in which sports were given a low priority for the expenditure of resources.

Wheeler notes that it is important to study families as the immediate contexts in which sport participation is initiated and nurtured. This is especially the case as publicly funded sport programs are eliminated and selectively replaced by private fee-based programs that require parental support and family resources for transportation, uniforms, equipment, and paid coaches.

Wheeler's findings are consistent with other research in which family culture has been found to provide a context in which children see sport involvement as a normal part of their everyday lives and continue playing sports as they become adolescents and young adults (Birchwood et al., 2008; Hennessy et al., 2010; Kraaykamp et al., 2012; Quarmby and Dagkas, 2010). Her findings also suggest that short-term interventions designed to increase sport participation among young people outside of this culture are likely to fail if they ignore the extent to which families now serve as the contexts in which participation decisions are made and supported. For example, young people cannot develop or sustain a commitment to sport participation if their families lack the resources to pay for their opportunities to sample different sports and select one or more programs that suit their interests. Additionally, if they don't become involved during childhood or early adolescence, they are less like to feel comfortable playing sports later in their lives.

Wheeler's research shows us that the process of becoming and staying involved in sports is closely tied to family dynamics and decisions, and these are influenced by structural and cultural factors.

Structural factors include the availability of sport facilities, equipment, financial support, coaching,

and competition opportunities (Wheeler and Green, 2014). Cultural factors include the importance given to particular sports and to the ways that one's age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability influence the meaning of being an athlete. For example, data from a national sample of young people in the United States indicates that African American youth are more likely than their white, Latino, and Asian counterparts to receive encouragement for sport participation through all their relationships, including family, teachers, coaches, peers, and friends (Shakib and Veliz, 2013). This is partly because many people in the United States assume that there is a connection between sport and race and that African Americans are either better at or more interested in sports than others, and that sports provide them with mobility opportunities that are less accessible in other realms of life.

Example 2: To Participate or Not to Participate

When I worked at the University of Chichester in England, my colleague Anita White and I received a grant to study why most young people did not participate in a highly publicized, state-sponsored sport program. We designed a study in which we used in-depth interviews to explore how British adolescents in a working-class area east of London made decisions about what they did in their free time (Coakley and White, 1999).

Data from our interviews indicated that the young people took a combination of factors into account as they made decisions about sport participation. These factors included the following:

1. Their ideas about the connection between sport participation and other interests and goals in their lives
2. Their desires to develop and display competence so they could gain recognition and respect from others
3. Social support for participation plus access to the resources needed for participation (time, transportation, equipment, and money)
4. Memories of past experiences with physical activities and sports
5. Sport-related images and meanings that were part of their social worlds

Overall, the young people decided to play sports when it helped them extend control over their lives, achieve development and career goals, and present themselves to others as competent. We also found that young women were less likely than young men to imagine that they could accomplish those things by playing sports. Therefore, the young women took sports less seriously and chose to participate less often.

The young people in our study made their decisions by determining if sport participation would add something positive to their lives. They didn't passively respond to the world around them, and their decisions and sport participation patterns shifted over time, depending on access to opportunities, available resources, and changes in their identities. Therefore, socialization into sports was a *continuous, interactive process* grounded in the social and cultural contexts in which they lived.

Our study also found that people make decisions to participate in sports for different reasons at different points in their lives. This is consistent with theories stating that personal growth depends on accomplishing developmental tasks associated with various stages of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood. Therefore, the issues considered by seven-year-olds as they make decisions about sport participation differ from the issues considered by fourteen-year-olds, forty-year-olds, and sixty-year-olds. Furthermore, when seven-year-olds make decisions about sport participation today, they do so in different social and cultural contexts than the contexts in which seven-year-olds lived in 1980 or will live in 2030.

After analyzing our interview data, it was clear to Anita and me that sport participation decisions among these young people were tied to their perceptions of the cultural importance of sports and the links between playing sports, gaining social acceptance, and achieving personal goals.

Therefore, when we study why people become and stay involved in sports, we should take into account people's perceptions of how sport participation is related to their own growth and development, how sports are integrated into their social worlds, and the extent to which participation is supported by widely accepted ideologies in their culture.

I was reminded of these points when I read that some parents in Ethiopia now accept competitive running as a way for their daughters to achieve financial success. This change has allowed girls to take up running as a strategy to stay in school, avoid an arranged marriage (as a young teen), and seek a life that consists of more than washing laundry, preparing food, and obeying a husband who is likely to define her as a form of property. Running, for girls lucky enough to be identified as talented, opens up developmental opportunities, gives them more control over their lives, and enables them to claim their bodies as their own. This is why thirteen-year-old Ethiopian girls are more likely to define running as a desirable activity than thirteen-year-old girls living in air-conditioned homes in Beverly Hills, California—the context and consequences of their decisions are much different.

Example 3: The Process of Being Accepted as an Athlete

Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young (1999) are sociologists who have studied sports as social worlds in which people form relationships and unique ways of life organized around shared interests. One of their studies focused on the process through which people became accepted members of sport cultures.

Using data that Donnelly collected from expert rock climbers and Young collected from elite rugby players, they concluded that playing sports occurs in connection with processes of identity formation. They explained that becoming an athlete in a particular sport culture occurs through a four-phase process:

1. Acquiring knowledge about the sport
2. Interacting with people involved in the sport
3. Learning how participation occurs and what people in the sport expect from each other as athletes
4. Becoming recognized and fully accepted as an athlete in the sport culture

This finding shows that becoming an athlete in a particular sport depends on learning to "talk the talk and walk the walk" so that one is identified and accepted as an athlete *by other athletes.* This process of identification and acceptance is continuous; it doesn't happen once and for all time. When athletes can no longer talk the talk and walk the walk, interaction with other athletes declines, and support for their identity fades away. Membership in a sport culture is always temporary; it depends on what you do today, not what you did in the past.

To understand Donnelly and Young's findings, observe skateboarders, in-line skaters, snowboarders, beach volleyball players, basketball players, or members of any sport culture. Each culture has a unique vocabulary, its own way of referring to its members and what they do, unique ways of thinking about and doing their sports, and special understandings of what they expect from each other. New participants are tested and "pushed" by the "veterans" before being accepted as true skaters, riders, boarders, volleyball players, or ballers. Vocabularies may change over time, but the process of being accepted as an athlete exists in all sport cultures.

Donnelly and Young help us understand that becoming and staying involved in a sport often depends on establishing social connections, being accepted in a sport culture, and receiving social support for the formation of an athlete identity (see also, Light et al., 2013). This finding also helps explain why there are so few girls and women in alternative sport cultures. Boys and men have defined riding on a board, whether it is down a mountain, a wave, or a sidewalk curb as an activity that conveys a valued form of masculinity. In the process, they create cultures that make it very difficult for girls and women to be accepted as authentic

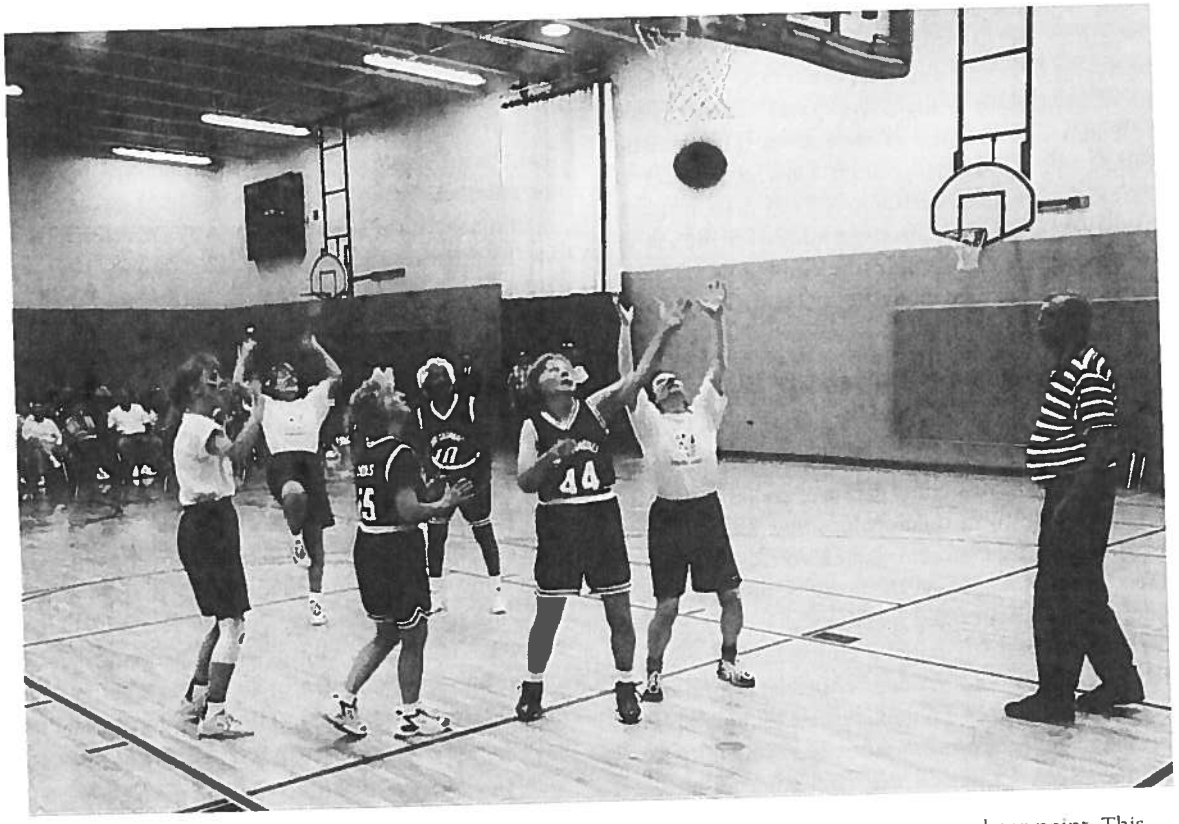
"board athletes." In other words, becoming and staying involved in sports is a complex, *interactive* socialization and *identity formation* process.

In summary, these three studies provide complementary videos about the process of becoming and staying involved in sports. They show that people don't make decisions about sport participation once and for all time; they make them day after day as they consider how playing a sport is related to their lives. These decisions are made in particular social and cultural contexts and they are influenced by access to resources and the meanings attached to gender, class, skin color, ethnicity, age, and physical abilities.

CHANGING OR ENDING SPORT PARTICIPATION

Questions about becoming and staying involved in sports are usually accompanied by questions about changing or ending involvement. Research done during the latter half of the twentieth century helped us understand the following basic facts about changing and ending sport participation:

- When people drop out of a particular sport, they don't drop out of all sports forever, nor do they cut all ties with sports.



Although people may drop out of sports at one point in the life course, they may return at a later point. This team of women, all over seventy years old, is playing an exhibition game against a group of younger women. The team is raising funds to travel to the national finals in the Senior Games. Most of these older women had not played competitive basketball for thirty to fifty years. (*Source:* © Jay Coakley)

- Many people play different and less-competitive sports as they become older, or they move into other sport roles such as coach, administrator, or sports businessperson.
- Dropping out of sports is usually connected with developmental changes and transitions in the rest of a person's life—changing schools, graduating, getting a job, getting married, having children, and so on.
- Dropping out of sports is not always the result of negative experiences, although injuries, exploitation, poor coaching, and abuse from coaches influence some decisions to change or end participation.
- Problems may occur for those who end long careers in sports, especially those who have no identities apart from sports or lack social and material resources for making transitions into other careers and relationships.

More recent studies, especially those using qualitative research methods and a social interactionist model of socialization, have built on these findings and extended our understanding of the process of changing or ending sport participation. The following summaries of three studies are representative of this research.

Example 1: Burnout Among Young Athletes

My work with coaches and my interest in identity issues led me to study young people who decided to quit sport at a time when they were experiencing great success, often as age-group champions in their sports (Coakley, 1992, 2011a). People described these young people as "burned out," so I decided to interview former elite adolescent athletes who were identified as cases of burnout.

Data collected through in-depth interviews indicated that burnout during adolescence was grounded in the organization and authority structure of many high-performance sports for young people. It occurred when young athletes felt they no longer had control over their lives and could not explore, develop, and nurture identities apart from sports. This led to increased stress and decreased fun as they did their sports. Burnout occurred when stress became high and fun declined to the point that they no longer felt that continued participation was worth their effort.

The data also indicated that stress increased and fun decreased when sport programs were organized so that successful young athletes felt that they could not accomplish important developmental tasks during adolescence. My conclusion was that burnout could be prevented only if sport programs were reorganized so that young athletes had more control over their lives. Stress management strategies might delay burnout, but they would not change the underlying organizational and development barriers that caused burnout. Overall, my study led me to conclude that young people sometimes end sport participation during late adolescence when they feel that their career in a sport prevents them from developing the autonomy and the multiple identities necessary to effectively claim adult status in U.S. culture.

Example 2: Getting out of Sports and Getting on with Life

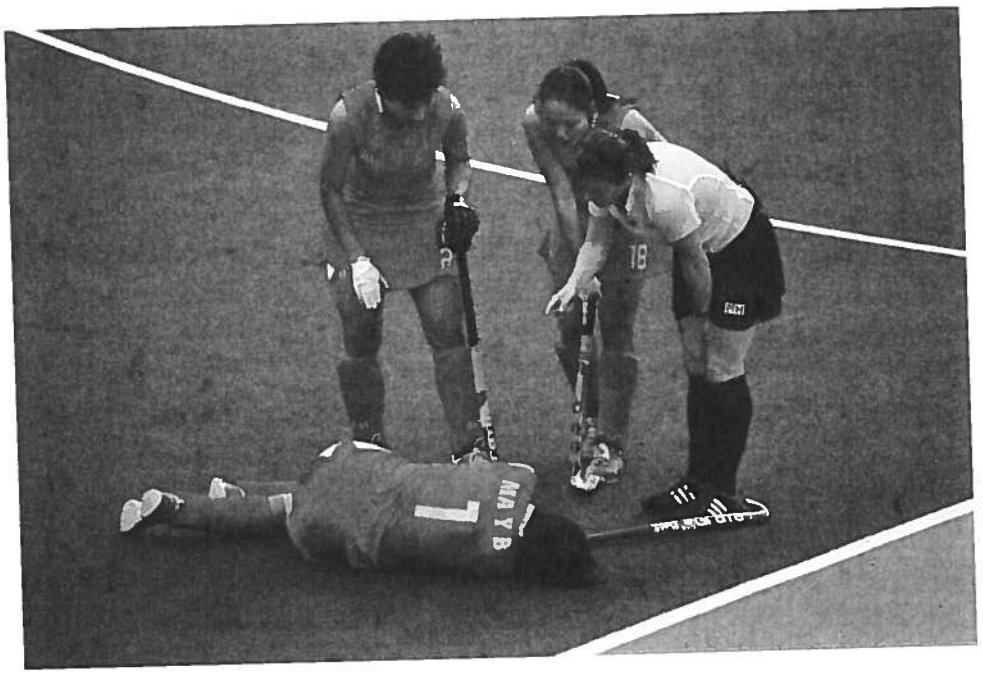
Konstantinos Koukouris (1994, 2005) is a physical educator from Greece who wanted to know why seriously committed athletes ended or reduced their sport participation. After analyzing questionnaire data from 157 former national athletes, Koukouris identified thirty-four who had ceased or reduced sport participation between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. In-depth interviews with these people enabled him to identify patterns in the disengagement process.

His data indicated that ending or reducing sport participation was a voluntary decision among these athletes. But this decision was often part of a process during which they stopped playing and then started again more than once. In other words, they hadn't gone "cold turkey" as they withdrew from sport. Their decisions were usually associated

with two practical factors: (1) the need to obtain a job and support themselves and (2) realistic judgments about their sport skills and the chances of advancing to higher levels of competition. As they graduated from high school or college, the athletes faced the expectation that they should work and be responsible for their livelihoods. But jobs interfered with the time needed to train and play sports at an elite level. Furthermore, as they spent money to establish adult lifestyles, there was little left to pay for serious training. At the same time, their demanding training programs conflicted with new responsibilities in their adult lives.

When they ended serious training, many of these young adults sought other ways to be physically active or involved in sports. Some encountered problems, but most of them grew and developed in positive ways, much like their peers who had never played elite sports. Most of the former athletes perceived the end of their serious training and competition as an inevitable, necessary, and usually beneficial developmental change in their lives.

Koukouris (2005) also did in-depth interviews with nineteen elite gymnasts and found that their disengagement from sport often occurred prematurely due to a combination of mental and physical exhaustion, lack of support from coaches and administrators, and the politics of judging and Federation governance. Unlike the athletes in Koukouris's previous study, the gymnasts began their elite careers at a very young age and required more guidance and support to prevent them from becoming disillusioned and gradually disengaging from their sport.



Many factors influence the decisions to drop out of sports or shift participation from one sport to another. Although identity changes, access to resources, and life course issues are involved, injuries often force people to make changes. In all these cases, as our circumstances change, so do our ideas about ourselves and about sports and sport participation.
(*Source:* © Lara Killick)

Example 3: Changing Personal Investments in Sport Careers

Garry Wheeler at the University of Alberta, has been concerned with the careers of athletes with a disability and what happens when their playing careers end. Building on a previous study of Paralympic athletes, Wheeler and his fellow researchers interviewed forty athletes from the United Kingdom, Canada, Israel, and the United States (Wheeler et al., 1999). The data indicated that athletes in each of these countries became deeply involved in sports and often achieved a high level of success in a relatively short time. Through sports they developed a sense of personal competence and established identities as elite athletes.

Ending active sport participation and making the transition into other spheres of life often presented challenges for these athletes. Retirement generally came suddenly and forced them to reinvest time and energy into other activities and relationships. As they reconnected with family members and friends, returned to school, and resumed occupational careers, some of the former athletes experienced emotional problems. However, most stayed connected with sports and sport organizations as coaches, administrators, or recreational athletes. Those few who hoped to regain their elite athlete status usually experienced difficulties during the retirement transition, whereas those who accepted the end of their competitive careers had fewer adjustment problems.

In summary, research shows that ending or changing sport participation often involves the same interactive and decision-making processes that occur as a person becomes and stays involved in sports. Changes in participation are often the result of decisions associated with other life events, social relationships, and cultural expectations related to development. This means that theories explaining why people play sports and change their participation over time must take into account identity issues and developmental processes that are part of the social and cultural contexts in which people make decisions about sports in their lives (van Houten et al., 2015).

Furthermore, theories must take into account the personal, social, and material resources that former athletes possess as they make transitions to other relationships, activities, and careers. When problems occur during this transition, they are associated with an unwillingness to transition into identities unrelated to sports and a lack of the personal and material resources needed to negotiate the transitional challenges they face (Tinley, 2015).

Research suggests that changes and retirement transitions are less likely to involve problems if sport participation has *expanded* a person's identities, experiences, relationships, and resources. Difficulties are most likely when athletes have never had the desire or the chance to live outside the culture of elite sports and learn to negotiate their lives in nonsport social worlds. This is highlighted in Scott Tinley's fifteen year study of retired professional and elite athletes. In one of many interviews, a former NFL player disclosed this identity-related statement: "Without football, without my ability to express myself through football I am nobody. I will disappear. Football has been my life and I have so little else" (Tinley, 2015, p. 133).

BEING INVOLVED IN SPORTS: WHAT HAPPENS?

Beliefs about the consequences of sport participation vary from culture to culture, but many people in North America and Europe accept what was described in Chapter 1 (p. 11) as the *great sport myth*. In other words, they believe that playing sports builds character and improves health and well-being. These beliefs create encouragement for children to play sports, and they lead to support for funding sports programs in schools, building stadiums, promoting teams and leagues, and sponsoring international events such as the Olympic Games, the Paralympics, and world championships.

Do Sports Build Character?

For over a half century, researchers have tried to prove that "sport builds character." Their studies have compared the traits, attitudes, and behaviors of those who play organized sports with those who don't. These one time snapshot comparisons have produced inconsistent and confusing findings. This is because researchers have used inconsistent definitions of *character* and have designed their studies around two faulty assumptions (McCormack and Chalip, 1988). First, they've wrongly assumed that *all* athletes have the same or similar experiences in *all* organized competitive sports. Second, they've wrongly assumed that organized sports provide unique experiences that are not available in other activities. These assumptions have caused researchers to overlook the following important things when they study sports and socialization:

1. Sport experiences are diverse, because sport programs and teams are organized in vastly different ways. Therefore, we cannot make unqualified general statements about the consequences of sport participation. This point is explained further in Reflect on Sports, pp. 64–66.
2. People who choose or are selected to play sports often have different character traits than those who do not choose to play or are not selected by coaches. Therefore, sports may not *build* character as much as they are organized to *select* people who already possess certain character traits that are valued by coaches and compatible with highly organized, competitive, physical activities.
3. The meanings that people give to sport experiences vary from one person to another, even when they play in the same programs and on the same teams. Therefore, there are important variations in what athletes learn when they play sports and in how they apply what they learn to their lives.
4. As people change and grow older they often alter the meanings they give to their past sport experiences and integrate them into their lives in new ways as they develop new ideas and values.
5. Socialization occurs through the social interaction that accompanies sport participation. Therefore, the meaning and importance of playing sports depend on a person's social relationships and the social and cultural contexts in which participation occurs.
6. The socialization that occurs in sports may also occur in other activities. Therefore, people who do not play sports may have developmental experiences similar to the experiences of athletes.

Due to these oversights, studies that compare "athletes" with "nonathletes" have produced inconsistent and misleading research results about the impact of sport participation in people's lives. After evaluating these studies, I've concluded that sport participation is most likely to have positive socialization consequences when it provides athletes with the following things:

- Opportunities to explore and develop identities apart from playing sports
- Knowledge-building experiences that go beyond the locker room and playing field
- New relationships, especially with people who are not connected with sports and do not base their interaction on a person's status or identity as an athlete
- Explicit examples of how lessons learned in sports may be applied to specific situations apart from sports (skills transfer)
- Opportunities to develop and display competence in nonsport activities that are observed by other people who can serve as mentors and advocates outside sports

In other words, positive socialization outcomes *do not* occur automatically.

My review of past research also suggests that when playing sports *constricts* opportunities, experiences, relationships, and general competence apart from sports, it is likely to have negative

reflect on SPORTS

Power and Performance *versus* Pleasure and Participation

Different Sports, Different Experiences, Different Consequences

Sport experiences are diverse. It's a mistake to assume that all sports are organized around the same goals and orientations, played in the same spirit, or defined in the same way. For example, there are highly organized competitive sports, informal sports, adventure sports, recreational sports, extreme sports, alternative sports, cooperative sports, folk sports, contact sports, artistic sports, team sports, individual sports, and so on. However, at this point in history, the most dominant sport form in wealthy postindustrial nations is organized around a **power and performance model.**

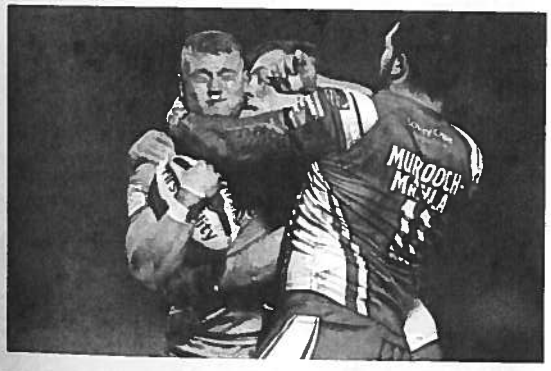
Power and performance sports are highly organized and competitive; they emphasize the following factors:

- Using strength, speed, and power to push human limits and achieve competitive success
- Proving excellence through competitive success and attributing success to dedication, hard work, and sacrifice
- Being willing to risk physical well-being and play with pain
- Exclusive processes through which participants are cut from teams if they do not meet elite performance standards
- A chain of command in which owners and administrators control coaches, and coaches control athletes
- Competing against opponents and defining them as enemies to be conquered

These points exaggerate the characteristics of power and performance sports to show that experiences in these sports are very different from experiences in other sport forms. Although, many people use the power and performance model as a standard for defining "real" sports, it is not the only model around which sports are organized. For example, people in many societies often play other forms of sport, including various revisions of, alternatives to, and reactions against dominant sports.

The sport forms most unlike power and performance sports today are organized around a **pleasure and participation model,** and they emphasize the following factors:

- Active participation revolves around connections between people, integration of mind and body, and harmony with the environment



Power and performance sports involve the use of strength, speed, and power to dominate opponents in the quest for competitive victories. (*Source:* ¢ Al Bello/ Getty Images)

Pleasure and participation sports may involve competition, but the primary emphasis is on connections between people and personal expression through participation. This is often seen at skateboard parks where participants support and encourage each other. (*Source:* ¢ Jay Coakley)

Continued

reflect on SPORTS

Power and Performance *versus* Pleasure and Participation (*continued*)

- A spirit of personal expression, enjoyment, growth, good health, and mutual concern among participants
- Personal empowerment created by gaining knowledge about and pleasure from the body
- Inclusive processes through which participation is encouraged by accommodating ability differences
- Democratic decision-making structures in which relationships are characterized by cooperation and sharing power
- An emphasis on participating and competing *with* others who are defined as partners in creating and meeting physical challenges

Again, these points exaggerate the characteristics of pleasure and participation sports, but they show that experiences in these sports are very different from experiences in power and participation sports.

These two sport forms do *not* represent all the ways that sports might be organized, played, and defined. There are sports that contain elements of both forms and reflect diverse ideas about what is important in physical activities. However, power and performance sports remain dominant today because they receive the most attention, support, and sponsorship. When people play or watch these sports, their socialization experiences are different from their socialization experiences in pleasure and participation sports.

WHY ARE POWER AND PERFORMANCE SPORTS SO DOMINANT TODAY?

Power and performance sports are dominant today because, they foster the interests of people and organizations with the resources to sponsor and stage large sport events. History shows that wealthy and influential people in societies around the world have used different strategies to maintain their privileged positions. Some have used coercive strategies such as employing the police and military to maintain their control over resources and people, but most have used cultural or "soft" strategies that foster the belief that they deserve their wealth and power and that society benefits from their resources.

In countries where wealth and power have been controlled by a monarchy, the privileged position of the royal family is based on the belief that it is their birthright to rule over others. Therefore, kings and queens maintain their privileged positions as long as their "subjects" believe that birthrights represent legitimate claims to wealth and power. This is why the church and state have usually been closely aligned in societies with monarchies—kings and queens use the clergy to promote the belief that their wealth and power are bestowed on them by a divine, supernatural source, such as a god.

In democratic countries, most people use *merit,* or "personal achievement," as a standard when judging whether the possession of wealth and power is legitimate. Therefore, it is only when most people believe that wealth and power are rightfully earned that those who possess them are seen in a positive way. When a democracy is characterized by widespread inequality, as in the United States today, people with wealth and power promote the idea that they have earned their privileged positions through hard work and intelligence and that society as a whole benefits from their control and influence. In recent history, this idea has been promoted by emphasizing that *competition* is a natural part of social life and the only fair basis for determining who gets what in society. When there is widespread acceptance of this idea, people generally idealize and defer to wealthy and powerful people and believe that they deserve what they have.

Power and performance sports are widely promoted and sponsored by people with wealth and power because these sports are based on an ideology that celebrates competitive winners and defines competition as the only fair and natural way to distribute rewards. This ideology also explains and justifies economic inequalities as part of the natural order of things. The executives of major corporations realize this and collectively allocate billions of dollars annually to sponsor power and performance sports worldwide. They personally believe that rewards should go to winners, that winners deserve wealth and power, and that the ranking of people on the basis of wealth and power is fair and natural. By sponsoring

power and performance sports and making them a major source of enjoyment and excitement in people's lives, they promote these beliefs at the same time that they profit from selling the vehicles, fast food, soft drinks, and beer advertised during sports events.

The sport forms that challenge this ideology may be popular among some people, but they don't receive many sponsorship dollars from wealthy and powerful people. For example, alternative sports such as skateboarding and disk sport (Frisbee) were often banned and associated with deviance until they were organized around a power and performance model. Free-flowing, expressive alternative sports that don't produce winners and losers receive little attention from powerful sponsors. But when ESPN used a power and performance model to restructure these sports in the X Games, corporate sponsors began to support them. Today, many of these sports have lost their alternative character. Celebrity athletes now hawk corporate products and lifestyles of consumption. At the same time, participation comes to be tied with brands and the quest for the latest piece of equipment, clothing, or energy drink endorsed by the athletes. The masses watch and idolize the select few at the top. This raises questions about who benefits from the ways sports are currently organized and supported worldwide.

Are there ways to preserve and promote pleasure and participation sports under these circumstances? Is this important to do in today's societies? From a policy and management perspective these are important questions to answer.

consequences for a person's overall development. Therefore, we cannot make a general statement that sports build *or* undermine character development. Neither positive nor negative character is automatically developed by playing sports. Sport experiences are diverse, and they are given meaning and incorporated into people's lives in various ways, depending on the social and cultural contexts in which they live (Denise Anderson, 2009; Hartmann, 2008; Light, 2010; Robbins, 2012; Swanson, 2009; Taylor and Turek, 2010; Taylor et al., 2010a, 2010b; Van Ingen, 2011).

This conclusion does *not* mean that sports and sport participation are irrelevant in people's lives. We know that discourses, images, and experiences related to sports are vivid and powerful in many social worlds. Sports *do* affect our lives and the world around us. However, we cannot separate those affects from the meanings that we give to sports and how we integrate them into our lives. Therefore, if we want to know what happens in sports, we must study sport experiences in the contexts in which they occur. This type of research provides insights into the complex connections between sports and socialization and helps us understand the conditions under which positive or negative outcomes occur among those who play sports (Holt, 2016).

Do Sports Improve Health and Physical Well-Being?

An international organization called Sport for Development and Peace asked a team of scholars at the University of Toronto to answer this question (SDP/IWG, 2007). After a critical review of English language studies worldwide, the scholars came to this conclusion:

> The physiological effects of participation in sport and physical activity are widely known, and one of the best established findings in the research literature. It is important to note that the effects are not a result of sport, . . . but of physical activity more generally. . . . Given clean air, adequate nutrition, and a variety of moderate levels of exercise, *there is a well-established direct positive relationship between physical health and physical activity,* including feelings of well-being associated with increasing

> physical fitness. In addition, research increasingly points to both the preventive and rehabilitative effects of physical activity with respect to some diseases. (SDP/IWG Secretariat, p. 4)

This is a carefully worded statement because the authors knew that it was important to distinguish between *exercise*, *physical activity*, and *sports* when talking about physical health and well-being. Similarly, a report by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2008), "competitive athletes who participate and train at high levels (e.g., elite, professional sports, National Teams, Olympic athletes) in sports requiring high joint impact (e.g., football, track and field, soccer) for many years have higher rates of incident knee or hip OA [osteoarthritis] than do non-athletes" (p. G5–20). These athletes also incur abnormally high rates of joint injuries that result in eventual surgeries over the life course.

The Sport–Health Connection The relationship between sports, exercise, and health has been widely studied (Ng and Popkin, 2012; Nike, Inc., 2012; USDHHS, 2008). When sociologist Ivan Waddington (2000a, 2000b, 2007) reviewed research on this topic, he concluded that the healthiest of all physical activities were rhythmic, noncompetitive exercises in which individuals control and regulate their own body movements. The research also indicated that health benefits decline when there is a shift from self-controlled exercise to competitive sports. This is because the injury rates in competitive sports are high enough to increase health costs above what is considered "average" in most populations. This benefit–cost ratio becomes even less favorable when there is a shift from noncontact to contact sports and from recreational sports to elite sports in which participants train intensely for more than 15 hours per week, play while injured, and perceive their bodies as tools for achieving competitive success.

The connection between sport and health is being viewed more critically now that mainstream media have published numerous stories about concussions, brain trauma, sudden cardiac arrest, heat stroke, overuse injuries, ACL injuries, and others sustained regularly by athletes (Abrams, 2013; Cook, 2012; Gregory, 2012; Le Batard, 2013; Longman, 2011b; Pennington, 2013; USDHHS, 2008; Wiedeman, 2013).

Dr. Edward Wojtys, director of sport medicine at the University of Michigan, notes that ACL injuries are so frequent, especially among female athletes, that they are becoming a public health problem (Longman, 2011b). Athletes tear or rupture ligaments in over 250,000 knees each year and sustain between two and four million concussions. Knee surgeries and rehabilitation are major health-care costs in the United States. Overuse injuries among child athletes are increasingly common—about 300,000 per year—and it costs about $1.8 billion to treat those injuries (Zernicke et al., 2009). Additionally, about 5000 former NFL players and their families sued the NFL in 2013 for withholding information about the consequences of head trauma and other injuries that are causing them chronic problems and leading to massive health care costs. College athletes have filed suit against the NCAA for similar reasons. Football, hockey, lacrosse, and other sports now publicize new efforts to make participation safer for athletes. Research on these issues is discussed in Chapter 6, but at this point people must clarify what they mean when they say that "sports improve health and physical well-being."

In practical terms, if you lack health insurance, it is best to stay fit by doing aerobics, walking, swimming, and jumping rope; and if you play football, rugby, hockey, or other competitive contact sports, you should have good health insurance because your medical bills are likely to be higher than average. If you play sports in which you sustain concussions, receive repetitive hits to the head, or collide violently with other players, you may also want to have long-term-care insurance in case you develop chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and are not able to function on your own in later life. Even if you play golf, softball, soccer, and other sports that require sudden and forceful twisting motions or sprinting from a dead stop, it is important to have health-care insurance.

The Sport–Obesity Connection Obesity is a highly publicized health issue today. Nearly, every discussion of this issue ends with the conclusion that eating right and exercising regularly is the best way to avoid unhealthy weight gains.

Some people think that as sports become increasingly popular in a society, obesity rates decline, but data in the United States indicate the exact opposite: Obesity rates among young people and adults have more than doubled between 1985 and 2012—a period when competitive sports grew significantly in popularity. This does not mean that sports cause obesity, but it does mean that the popularity of sports in a society does not automatically inspire people to exercise and change their eating habits in ways that reduce obesity.

Like the connection between sports and health, the connection between sports and weight is complex. Some competitive sports such as wrestling and gymnastics emphasize extreme forms of weight control; others emphasize weight gain for some or all participants. Many football players at the high school, college, and professional levels are encouraged to gain weight to the point that they would be classified as overweight or obese according to the body mass index (BMI). Although the BMI is not always a good measure for assessing the relationship between weight and health (Etchison, 2011), there is good reason to believe that playing football does not routinely promote healthy weight control.

Expectations in football today often encourage excessive eating, taking untested nutritional supplements, or using drugs to gain size. A consequence of these expectations is illustrated in Table 3.1. Unlike in 1920–1985, when no more than eight NFL players weighed over 300 pounds, in 2010 there were 394 players over 300 pounds, and they claim to have gained weight by overeating. This takes a toll on overall health (Briggs, 2002; Longman, 2007b, 2011a).

Research also shows that these patterns exist in college and high school football, which together have by far the most participants of all school-sponsored sports (Keller, 2007; Laurson and Eisenmann, 2007; Longman, 2007b). In fact, young men who play the line positions on high school football teams regularly have obesity rates that are twice as high as others of their age. As one 332-pound fifteen-year-old high school lineman said, "They're going to notice me because of my size. . . . Most linemen in the NFL are 290 or 300" (Longman, 2007b).

Table 3.1 Number of 300-pound players in the NFL, 1970–2012

Year	Number of Players
1970	1
1980	3
1990	94
2000	301
2010	394
2012	361

Source: Stats LLC & NFL (2012).
Note: At the beginning of training camps in 2010, there were 532 NFL players who weighed more than 300 pounds (Longman, 2011a).

Football is unique, but like other sports, it exists in a social world where expectations focus on competitive success rather than healthy actions and overall fitness. If playing sports is to have a positive impact on the long-term physical well-being of people, regardless of age, it should be accompanied by information about nutrition and health combined with effective encouragement to use this information in connection with sport participation. As it is now, participation in certain elite sports leads to forms of training and competition that create both acute and chronic health problems for some athletes.

HOW DO SPORTS AFFECT OUR LIVES?

Sports and sport participation affect the lives of many people around the world. We're learning more about this impact through three types of

studies based on a combination of cultural, interactionist, and structural theories:

1. Studies of sport experiences as presented through the voices of sport participants
2. Studies of the social worlds that are created and maintained in connection with particular sports
3. Studies of sports as sites, or "social locations," where dominant ideas and ideologies are expressed and sometimes challenged and changed

Most of these studies are grounded in a critical approach. Taken together, they help us rethink socialization issues and expand our understanding of how social learning occurs in social worlds.

Today most of us in the sociology of sport view sports as *sites* for socialization experiences, rather than the *causes* of specific socialization outcomes. This is an important distinction that highlights two things. First, sports are social locations rich in their potential for providing memorable and meaningful personal, social, and cultural experiences. Second, sports *by themselves* do not cause particular changes in the character traits, attitudes, and actions of athletes or spectators. Therefore, when positive or negative socialization outcomes occur in connection with sports, we don't simply say that sports caused them. Instead, we view sports as sites where people have potentially influential experiences and then we look for and try to understand the relationships and social processes through which particular forms of socialization occur.

The following summaries of selected studies illustrate how this approach to socialization enables us to understand more fully the social dimensions of sports and the connections between sports and the larger social and cultural contexts in which they are produced, reproduced, and changed.

Athletes' Voices: Giving Meaning to Sport Experiences

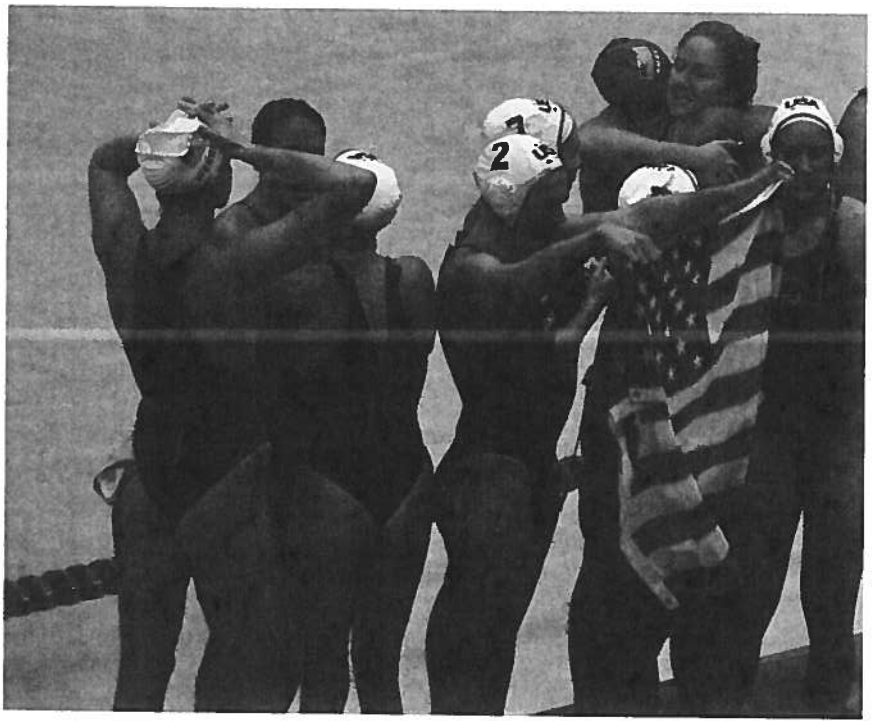
The following examples provide two socialization "videos." They present the perspectives of the participants themselves, and they help us understand how people give meaning to sport experiences and integrate them into their lives.

Example 1: Giving Meaning to Ice Hockey Sociologist Nancy Theberge (1999, 2000b) spent two years studying an elite women's ice hockey team in Canada. As she observed and interviewed team members, she noted that their experiences and orientations were influenced by the fact that men controlled the team, the league, and the sport itself. Within this structure, the women developed a professional approach to participation. They focused on hockey and were serious about playing well and winning games. In the process, they developed close connections with each other. The team became a community with its own dynamics and internal organization. Within this constructed community, the athletes learned about hockey, their teammates, and themselves. The meanings that the players gave to their hockey experiences and the ways they integrated those experiences into their lives emerged as they interacted with each other both on the ice and off.

The locker room was a key place for interacting with teammates and giving meaning to their sport experiences. Its emotional climate, especially *after* a practice or a game, encouraged talk about their lives outside hockey. This talk gave shape and meaning to what they did on the ice. It also served as a means for expressing feelings and thoughts about men, sexuality, intimate partners, and families.

The women talked and joked about men but didn't degrade or reduce them to body parts in their comments. They made references to sex and sexuality in their conversations, but the substance of these references was neither hostile nor based on stereotypes. This was very different from what has reportedly occurred in some men's locker rooms, where women have been routinely derogated and objectified, and homosexuality has been scorned if it is discussed at all (Clayton and Humberstone, 2006; Gregory, 2015; Holden, 2013).

Theberge's study shows us that playing sports is both a physical and a social experience. Hockey



To understand the impact of sport experiences it is necessary to study them in connection with the meanings they are given and how those meaning are integrated into athletes' lives. (*Source*: © Lara Killick)

was a site for memorable experiences, but it was only *through social relationships* that those experiences were given meaning and incorporated into the women's lives. Theberge also gathered data on relationships between the athletes and others, including coaches, managers, trainers, friends, family members, sport reporters, and even fans. She realized that if she wanted to know what happens in sports, she had to understand the relationships and interaction through which socialization occurs among athletes.

Example 2: Coming Out Then and Now The meanings given to sport experiences vary from one person to another because social relationships are influenced by social definitions given to age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, skin color, (dis)ábilities, and sexuality. This point has been made by sociologist Eric Anderson in his two decades of research on sports and homosexuality (Anderson, 2008a, 2008b, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d; 2014; Anderson and Bullingham, 2015; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Magrath et al., 2013).[1] Anderson's studies cover multiple topics related to the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes, and he has recently investigated how those experiences changed between 2000 and 2010. In 2010 he interviewed twenty-six openly

[1]Most of Anderson's research focuses on gay men. However, if we combine the work of Pat Griffin (1998) with recent studies by Anderson and his colleagues (Anderson and Billingham, 2013), the trends discussed in this section are similar for lesbian athletes. That is, openly lesbian athletes face less homohysteria today than even a decade ago.

gay U.S. high school and college athletes and compared what they said about their experiences with statements made by twenty-six openly gay athletes interviewed in 2000 (Anderson, 2002, 2011b). The athletes in both samples were predominantly white and middle class.

The athletes interviewed in 2000 generally feared that coming out would result in their being marginalized, excluded, or physically threatened, but their counterparts in 2010 did not express the same fears. Typical of the 2002 athletes was Jason, a track and cross-country runner who said this about coming out: "One of the things that was holding me back . . . was . . . my own fear of locker room situations. . . . I didn't want to make other people uncomfortable around me in the locker room, and I didn't want them to make it an issue. . . . I'd heard some horror stories from some of my friends. . . . One of my friend's friend was beaten to a bloody pulp because they thought he was gay" (2002, p. 868).

Most of the athletes in 2000 faced an unstated "don't ask, don't tell" norm. This was noted by Ken, a champion college runner who said, "Even to this day, people know, but people just won't say it. . . . It's like they just can't talk about it. It makes me so uncomfortable knowing that some people know, but then they still ask me about girls . . . it's really frustrating. . . . Not one time on the team did anyone ask me, 'Ken, are you gay?' " (p. 870).

After analyzing the data collected in 2000, Anderson explained that the widely accepted homophobic, anti-gay discourse during that time assumed that being gay was an inferior form of masculinity. This pushed gay athletes to the margins of their teams and prevented them from merging their sexual and athlete identities and feeling fully comfortable as team members. Even though Anderson was encouraged by the gay athletes who had confronted homophobia by coming out and generally had positive experiences, he concluded that it would take years before heterosexual athletes would accept gay males as their equals.

Now fast-forward to 2010. When Anderson interviewed Neil, an openly gay soccer player attending a Catholic college in the rural Midwest, Neil described his teammates as very supportive of him after he came out. He went on to say, "I think it's good that we played together for a long time. So they got to know me before I came out. But they have been amazing. Absolutely nothing has changed since I came out. . . . I should have come out earlier" (2011d, p. 257).

Similarly, Tom, a high school runner, said that he was confident that coming out would not be a problem because there were "at least a dozen openly gay kids at my school." He explained that they had no problems, "so I knew I wouldn't either." He also added, "It just doesn't make sense to be homophobic today, everybody has gay friends" (2011d, p. 258).

Many of the athletes in the 2010 study also explained that they talked openly with teammates who acknowledged their identity and discussed it in ways that made them feel comfortable. In fact, Mark said, "I think it's fair to say that I'm known as 'the gay hockey player' at my high school. I'm the only gay athlete who is out, even though I suspect a few more. . . . It's funny. I'll be at a party, and meet someone new and they will be like, 'Hey, I heard of you. You're the gay hockey player, huh?' " (2011d, p. 260).

These responses did not surprise Anderson, because his many studies in 2000–2010 had found a trend of declining homophobia. In his analysis he explained that as homophobia declines, men would feel increasingly free to define masculinity in more varied, fluid, and flexible terms. In turn, this would reduce the compulsion to strictly police gender boundaries and would open up cultural space for different ways to be men and express manhood. In his conclusion, Anderson prophetically noted that as of 2011 we had reached a point where there was "acceptance of gay male athletes" (2011b). It took another two years for an athlete in one of the major men's sports in the United States to come out, but when NBA player Jason Collins announced that he was gay, he experienced widespread acceptance (Beck and Branch, 2013).

These findings do not mean that homophobia no longer exists in sports or society (Gregory, 2015). It continues to exist, but its social significance and meaning is changing in many sport cultures. This, in turn, changes relationships and socialization experiences for many athletes.

Social Worlds: Living in Sports

Sociologists also study socialization processes in connection with the social worlds in which they occur. In Chapter 1, a **social world** is defined as *an identifiable sphere of everyday actions and relationships*. These actions and relationships revolve around a focus and "worldview" that unites people in terms of a shared mind-set. For example, "the tennis world," "the football world," and "the motocross world" each can be viewed and studied as a unique social world.

Qualitative research methods are most often used to study social worlds. Researchers use participant observation and interviews to view sport participation in the overall context in which it occurs. Studies are based on the assumption that we can't understand who athletes are, what they do, and how sports influence their lives unless we also understand the social worlds in which they give meaning to sport experiences and integrate them into their lives. This is especially true when the lives of athletes revolve completely around a particular sport—that is, when the social world of their sport is their entire world.

Studies of the social worlds created around specific sports provide useful information about socialization processes and experiences. The following summaries of two ethnographic studies are representative of this type of research.

Example 1: Learning to Be a Hero Sociologists Patti and Peter Adler spent nearly ten years studying the social world of a high-profile college basketball team. Much of their data, presented in the book *Backboards and Blackboards* (1991), focuses on how the self-conceptions of young men changed as they lived in the social world of big-time college basketball. The Adlers found that the young men, about 70 percent of whom were African Americans, usually became deeply engulfed in their roles as athletes. This influenced how they viewed themselves and allocated their time between basketball, social life, and academics. This "role engulfment" intensified as the young men became increasingly committed to their identities that were formed around relationships with teammates, coaches, and others associated with basketball. Everyone they met supported and reinforced their athlete identity. As a result, college basketball became the context in which the young men identified themselves, set their goals, and viewed the rest of the world.

The Adlers noted that the young men learned to set goals, focus their attention on specific tasks, and make sacrifices to succeed in basketball. However, there was no apparent evidence that the athletes applied these lessons to other aspects of their lives. The social world of basketball separated them so much from the rest of life that the lessons they learned in that world stayed there.

The Adlers' study raises an important point about socialization: When the social world in which athletes play their sport is so separate from other spheres of life and role engulfment confines athletes to that world, it is difficult to take the learning that occurs through sport participation and transfer it to nonsport worlds.

Example 2: Surviving in a Ghetto Sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1992, 2004) spent three years studying the social world of boxers in a gym located in a black neighborhood in Chicago. His observations, interviews, and experiences as a boxer helped him uncover the ideas and meanings that constitute the life and craft of boxing. He explained that the social world of the boxing gym was very complex: It was created in connection with social forces in an ethnically segregated ghetto and its masculine street culture, but it also shelters black men from the full destructive impact of those forces.

To learn the "social art" of boxing, the men at the gym engaged in an intense regimen of body regulation focused on the physical, visual, and

mental requirements of boxing. They had to "eat, drink, sleep, and live boxing," and in the process, they developed what Wacquant described as a *socialized lived body*, which was at the very core of their identities and actions.

The social world of the boxing gym was a workplace, a refuge, and a place where dreams were pursued by men dedicated to disciplining their bodies and souls (Wacquant, 2004). Immersing themselves in this world separated the men from their peers on the streets and kept them alive by helping them navigate their lives in dangerous neighborhoods devoid of hope or opportunity. For these men, boxing was a powerful socialization experience, but it can be understood only in connection with social and material conditions that constituted the social world of their everyday lives. In fact, the gym studied by Wacquant would never exist in an upper-middle-class white neighborhood; it would make no sense there.

In summary, these two studies of social worlds created around sports help us understand more fully the contexts in which athletes and others connected with sports form identities, make decisions, and give meaning to their experiences. Research that takes us into those worlds helps us make sense of actions that sometimes appear strange or even irrational from an outsider's perspective. This doesn't mean that we approve of everything that occurs in those worlds, but insightful research provides the information needed to make sports more humane and healthy activities.

Ideology: Sports as Sites for Presenting Ideas and Beliefs

Socialization research has focused mostly on what occurs in the lives of individuals within bounded social worlds. However, researchers now use a combination of cultural theories and text analysis to do studies of *socialization as a community and cultural process*. These studies go beyond investigating the experiences and characteristics of athletes and the organization of social worlds. Instead, they focus on sports as sites at which people collectively create and learn "stories," which they use to give meaning to and make sense of realities outside of sports. These stories are sociologically relevant because so many people use them as vehicles for presenting ideas and beliefs about everything from morality and work to capitalism and lifestyles of consumption. They often have their own vocabularies and images and the meanings in these stories shift, depending on who tells and hears them. Researchers in the sociology of sport conduct studies to identify these stories, explain how they fit into the culture, and show how people use them as a guide for what they think and do.

Researchers using cultural theories and a poststructuralist approach are primarily concerned with whose stories about sports become dominant in a culture and whose stories are ignored. The dominant or most widely told stories are important because they are based on ideological assumptions of what is natural, normal, and legitimate in social worlds; therefore, they promote ideas and beliefs that often privilege some people more than others. For example, sports stories often revolve around heroic figures—warriors who are big, strong, aggressive, record-setting competitors. As researchers have deconstructed these stories to examine the logic, values, and ideological assumptions on which they are based, they've found that many of them celebrate ideas and beliefs that serve the interests of unregulated capitalist expansion and traditional notions of masculinity based on the ability to dominate others through the use of physical strength, power, and speed (Burstyn, 1999).

Researchers using a poststructuralist approach also study more privately told stories representing voices that are silenced or "erased" from the widely circulated and accepted stories in the dominant culture. Additionally, they've analyzed sports media coverage to learn what *is* and what *is not* contained in commentaries, images, and other representations that spectators consume during mediated sport events. These studies are important because they give us a fuller understanding of the ways that sports influence how people think and what they do.

This type of research is difficult to do because it requires a deep knowledge of history and the conditions under which sports and sport stories become a part of people's lives. But it is important in the knowledge-building process because it deals with the ways that sports influence culture, society, and the lives of people even when they don't participate in or care about sports.

Socialization as a Community and Cultural Process Critical research on socialization as a community and cultural process is partly inspired by the ideas of the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci. When the fascist government in Italy imprisoned Gramsci for speaking out against their oppressive policies, he used his time in prison (1928–1935) to think about why people in Italy and elsewhere had not revolted against exploitive forms of capitalism in Western societies. Gramsci concluded that revolutions had not occurred because popular notions of common sense and widely accepted ideas about organizing society were actually supportive of the powerful people who exploited and oppressed the general population.

After carefully studying historical evidence from around the world, Gramsci explained that leaders often maintained power by convincing the people that they governed of three things: (1) that life was as good as it could be under present conditions; (2) that any positive things that people experienced were due to the goodwill and power of current leaders; and (3) that changing the current structure of their society would threaten everything that people valued.

Although Gramsci never talked about sports, he used historical data to conclude that current leaders could most effectively maintain their power by providing people with exciting and pleasurable experiences that promoted particular ideas and beliefs in support of their positions. In other words, by sponsoring forms of popular entertainment that perpetuated ideological perspectives supportive of current economic and political structures, leaders could retain their power without using coercion and fear. If this was done successfully, there would be little support for radical or structural changes because people would not want to undermine the primary sources of excitement and pleasure in their lives (Chappell, 2007).

Gramsci's analysis explains why large corporations spend billions of dollars every year to sponsor power and performance sports and present their commercial messages in connection with them. For example, Coca-Cola and McDonald's each spent close to $2.5 billion sponsoring and presenting advertising messages during the Olympic Games from 2000 through 2016. These expenditures were made to promote sales, but more important, they were made to use the Olympics as a site for delivering cultural messages that encouraged people to see these transnational corporations as benevolent sources of excitement and pleasure. If these messages were widely accepted, people would be less likely to criticize these corporations or support legislation that would curb their power and influence. Therefore, the corporate executives who made the decisions to sponsor the Olympics wanted people watching the events to agree that competition was the fair and natural way to allocate rewards. They realized that this belief and the free market ideology that it supported were the foundation of their personal status and wealth as well as the success of the corporations for which they worked. For them, Olympic sports provide a model of life that fits their interests.

The people who run Coca-Cola and McDonalds want to sell Coke and fast food, but they don't spend billions of sponsorship dollars only to boost sales figures. Their more important goal is to effectively promote lifestyles organized around consumption and the use of corporate brands and logos as status and identity symbols. They want to convince people that corporations are the source of their excitement and pleasure, and the sponsors of the athletes, teams, and sports they love so dearly. Coke and McDonalds executives want people to associate their good and memorable times with corporations and their products and to use consumption as the primary measure of progress and prosperity. To the extent that people in society

accept this ideology, the power of corporations is nearly guaranteed. This is why the marketing departments of major corporations often use power and performance sports as sites to promote their interests.

TV viewers of the Super Bowl may not realize it, but the biggest stakes associated with that event have nothing to do with the score and everything to do with how viewers integrate into their lives the cultural messages that are deeply embedded in the narratives and images presented in everything from the pregame show through the game, commercials, and postgame shows.

Many sociologists refer to this process of forming consent around a particular ideology as the process of establishing hegemony (heh-ǧem-ō-nee). In political science and sociology, **hegemony** is a *process of maintaining leadership and control by gaining the consent and approval of other groups, including those who are being led or controlled.* For example, American hegemony in the world exists when people worldwide accept U.S. power and influence as legitimate. Hegemony is never permanent, but it can be maintained as long as most people feel that their lives are as good as can be expected and there is no compelling reason to change things.

Similarly, corporate hegemony is maintained as long as most people accept a view of the world that discourages them from objecting to corporate policies, profits, and executive pay packages. Like Gramsci, corporate executives know that preserving corporate power depends on establishing "ideological outposts" in people's heads. Sports, because they are exciting and pleasurable activities for so many people, are important sites for constructing these mental outposts. Once established, they serve as relay terminals for delivering corporate messages directly into the popular psyche. To highlight Gramsci's conclusion about hegemony, it can be said that "it is difficult to fight an enemy that has outposts in your head."[2]

[2]This phrase was popularized by Sally Kempton, a feminist and spiritual teacher.

Research on Socialization as a Community and Cultural Process It is difficult to understand socialization as a community and cultural process unless we see it in action. The following examples of research highlight this approach to sports and socialization.

When anthropologist Doug Foley (1999a) did an ethnographic study of a small town in southern Texas, he focused part of his attention on the connection between sports and community socialization processes. High school football games were the most visible and popular events in the town, and the local team was important in the lives of many townspeople.

As Foley observed social dynamics in the town and interviewed people about local events, he discovered that the stories created around high school football reaffirmed established ways of thinking and doing things in the town. As a result, sports served as a site for maintaining forms of social inequality that made life good for a few and difficult for many residents. For example, even though a young Mexicana could become a cheerleader and a young Mexicano from a poor family could be a star on the football team, this did nothing to improve the political and economic status of women, citizens with Mexican heritage, and low-income people in the town.

The experiences and meanings associated with football reproduced ideologies that supported and justified inequalities of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Even though particular individuals benefited from sport participation, the vocabularies and images associated with sports perpetuated actions and forms of social organization that maintained existing patterns of power and privilege. Foley summarized the findings of his ethnography in this way:

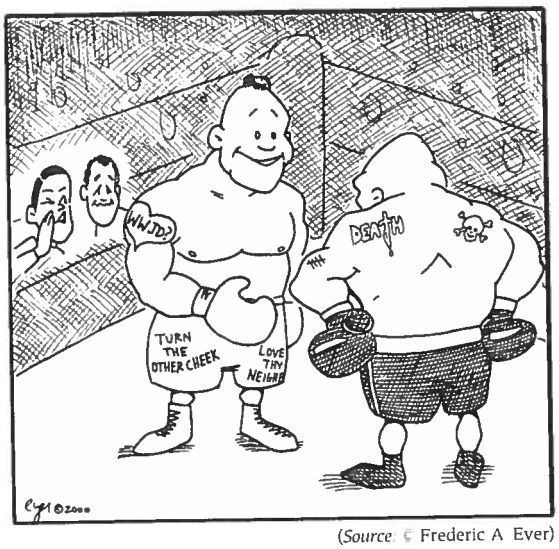
> Local sports, especially football, socialize every new generation of youth into the local status hierarchy, both inside and outside the school. Each new generation of males learns to be individualistic, aggressive, and competitive within a group structure. . . . (1999a, p. 138)

When corporations invest money to have their names, logos, and products associated with sports, they are looking for more than sales. In the long run, their executives hope that people will believe that their enjoyment of sports depends on corporations. This will make people more likely to support and less likely to interfere with corporate interests. (*Source*: © Jay Coakley)

Other studies have used a similar methodological approach and focused on the ways that popular images connected with sports become influential cultural symbols as they are represented in the media and everyday conversations. For example, physical cultural studies scholar David Andrews and his colleagues have studied Michael Jordan as an iconic figure that influenced the attitudes and experiences of people worldwide, especially a generation of young people in the United States (Andrews, 1996a, 1996b, 2001; Andrews and Jackson, 2001; and McDonald and Andrews, 2001). These researchers meticulously deconstructed the cultural stories that were created around Jordan, mostly between 1982 and 1995. This involved analyzing commercials, commentaries, and various forms of media coverage. One of their findings was that the "Jordan persona" was severed from African American experiences and culture so that white America, seeking evidence that it was color blind and open to all, could comfortably identify with it and approve of their children hanging Jordan posters on bedroom walls in their all-white neighborhoods. Race and skin color were strategically erased from Jordan's public persona thereby allowing it to become a sign that could be attached to any corporate brand, including Nike, Wilson, Hanes underwear, Jordan brand apparel, Bijan (the Michael Jordan fragrance), Coca-Cola, Gatorade, McDonald's, Wheaties, Ball Park Franks, Quaker Oats, Sara Lee, CBS SportsLine, MJ's sports videos, MCI telephone long-distance service, General Motors, Chevrolet, Rayovac, and others (Andrews, 2001; McDonald and Andrews, 2001). This strategy continues to be successful today as Jordan makes more money annually on endorsement deals than any current or former athlete (Badenhausen, 2015).

In the United States, Jordan's persona was shaped in connection with capitalism and traditional family values, and he was represented as both a brand sign and a family man (Andrews, 2001; Andrews and Jackson, 2001). As the media transmitted the Jordan persona around the world, it was often associated with American capitalist expansion and the power of transnational corporations such as Nike. However, among Black Britons striving to transcend the legacy of being colonized by white people from England, the Jordan persona represented black empowerment and resistance to white supremacy. Among whites in New Zealand, it represented the NBA, American popular culture, and African American prowess in sports. In Poland, the Jordan persona represented the American Dream, freedom, independence, the self-made man, opportunity, wealth, and other American values that stood in opposition to the communism that Poles had recently rejected in their lives.

The research by Andrews and his colleagues shows that sports and celebrity athletes are given multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings by different people in different cultural contexts. Therefore, the significance of sports in the socialization that occurs at the community and cultural level can be understood only in connection with local history, ideologies, and power relations. In other words, the influence of sports on people's lives cannot be captured in a single statement about building character, bringing people together, creating responsible citizens, promoting conformity, or



(*Source*: © Frederic A Ever)

"I think these guys give different meanings to their boxing experiences."

The meanings given to sports vary from one person to another. However, many power and performance sports are organized to encourage orientations that emphasize domination over others. Those who do not hold this orientation may not fit very well in these sports.

fostering warfare. The connection between sports and socialization is much more complex than that and can be explained only by studying sports in the contexts in which people give them meaning and make them a part of their lives.

summary

WHO PLAYS AND WHAT HAPPENS?

Socialization is a complex, interactive process through which people learn about themselves and the social worlds in which they participate. This process occurs in connection with sports and other activities in people's lives. Research indicates that playing sports is a social experience as well as a physical one.

Becoming involved and staying involved in sports occur in connection with general socialization processes in people's lives. Decisions to play sports are influenced by the availability of opportunities, the existence of social support, processes of identity formation, and the cultural context in which decisions are made.

Research also indicates that people do not make decisions about sport participation once and for all time. They make them day after day, as they set and revise priorities throughout their lives. Research on sport-related decisions indicates that significant others influence those decisions and that reasons for staying in sports change over time as people's lives change. Therefore, to understand sport participation it is important to study the changing contexts in which decisions are made.

Changing or ending active sport participation also occurs in connection with general socialization processes. These processes are interactive and influenced by personal, social, and cultural factors. Changes in sport participation are usually tied to a combination of identity, developmental, and life course issues. Ending sport participation involves a transition process, during which a person disengages from sport, redefines personal identity, reconnects with friends and family members, and uses available resources to become involved in other activities and careers. Just as people are not socialized into sports, they are not simply socialized out of sports. Research shows that changing or ending a career as a competitive athlete occurs over time and is often tied to events and life course issues apart from sports. These connections are best studied by using research methods that enable us to identify and analyze long-term transition processes.

Socialization that occurs as people participate in sports has been widely studied, especially by people wanting to know if and how sports build character and promote positive development. Much of this research has produced inconsistent findings because it has been based on oversimplified ideas about sports, sport experiences, and socialization.

Reviews of this research indicate that the most informative studies of sports and socialization take

into account variations in the ways that sports are organized, played, and integrated into people's lives. This is important because different sports involve different experiences that influence socialization outcomes. For example, the experience and meaning of playing power and performance sports is different from the experience and meaning of playing pleasure and participation sports. The continued visibility and popularity of power and performance sports are related to issues of wealth and power in society because they promote an ideology that supports the interests of existing leaders and wealthy people.

We know that sports have an impact on people's lives. The most informative research on what happens in sports deals with (1) the everyday experiences of people who play sports; (2) the social worlds created around sports; and (3) community and cultural processes through which ideologies are created, reproduced, and changed. As we listen to the voices of those who participate in sports, study their lives in sports, and identify the ideological messages associated with sports, we learn that there is a complex relationship between sports and socialization.

Most scholars who study sports in society now see sports as sites for socialization experiences, rather than the causes of specific socialization outcomes. This distinction recognizes that powerful and memorable experiences can occur in connection with sports, but the impact of those experiences depends on the relationships through which they are given meaning and the social and cultural factors that influence how those meanings are integrated into people's lives. Therefore, the most useful research in the sociology of sport focuses on the importance of social relationships and the contexts in which sport experiences occur.

SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS

Reading 1. Socialization and sports: A brief overview

Reading 2. Making decisions about sport participation during adolescence

Reading 3. Burnout among adolescent athletes: A sociological approach

Reading 4. Sport and character development among adolescents

Reading 5. Why do people believe that "sport builds character"?

Reading 6. Using Mead's theory of the self to organize youth sport programs

Reading 7. Saving the world with youth sports: Who is doing it and are they succeeding?

SPORT MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- You work in the parks and recreation department of a city with a high rate of obesity among people of all ages. Your job is to create programs that will increase the physical activity rate across the general population. Using research as support, outline your plan and specify how it will interface with sport programs in the city.
- You are the athletic director of a new private school with a student body of fewer than 600 students. The parents and teachers want to discuss with you whether the new sports program will emphasize power and performance sports or pleasure and participation sports. You plan to identify the pros and cons of each alternative from the perspective of the students' overall educational experience. Create a handout that does that.
- You are now working for an NFL team, and you want to thoughtfully consider the ideological impact of the team on its fans and the surrounding community. Identify at least three of the ideological messages that are highlighted in the media coverage of the NFL and discuss who is most likely to be advantaged or disadvantaged by each of them.