


# Assessing the sociology of sport: On ageing, somatic culture and gender

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## Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, one of the leading scholars of the sociology of sport in Germany, Ilse Hartmann-Tews, considers research on ageing, somatic culture and participation in sport in the contexts of diversity and gender. She reflects first on the increasing interest with regard to research on ageing and somatic culture, and that the broader issues of 'gender blindness' and the 'paradox of the absent body' have also been evident in the sociology of sport research agenda. The challenges for this agenda can be seen in three key areas of enquiry: (1) the social dimensions and determinants of successful aging, (2) understandings of gendered bodies and the 'double standard of ageing', and (3) understandings of diversity in ageing and intersections with gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. It is argued that future research on cultural representations of ageing in the sociology of sport need to focus on narratives, images, and media representations of ageing and somatic culture.

## Keywords

ageing, diversity, gender, participation in sport, somatic culture

Let me start by giving you a brief overview of the sociology of ageing and its development over the last decades, before turning to the scholarship of sociology of sport, in order to put the focus on sport, physical exercise and activity into a more general sociological framework. To do so I draw upon the concept of somatic culture which was developed by Luc Boltanski (1971) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984). This concept analyses how individuals manage their body and act with it – such as eating habits, personal hygiene routines, physical activities – in correspondence to the culture of their social environment or group to which they belong. Thus, physical activities and sport are an integral part of somatic culture.

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## Reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the sociology of sport with regard to ageing studies

When one looks at the sociology of ageing and somatic culture, it soon becomes clear that over the past 20 years or so there has been an exponential growth in research and publications on social aspects of ageing, giving rise to the academic field of social and cultural gerontology. A growing number of journals and handbooks with a social science perspective on ageing give special attention to the social forces that shape human ageing, the social consequences and policy implications. As Settersten and Angel (2011) conclude, classical and contemporary sociological theories have become tools for analyzing the social dimensions and determinants of ageing; in some areas these tools have been developed even further (e.g. Bengtson et al., 2009). At the same time there has been a shift in methodology from qualitative descriptive studies or quantitative cross-sectional studies, to wider longitudinal datasets and advanced quantitative data-analysis emphasizing explanation (Settersten and Angel, 2011).

However, two epistemological deficiencies have largely characterized these theoretical approaches and their conceptualization of ageing: one is gender blindness (Venn et al., 2011); the other is a failure to consider the ageing body (Öberg, 1996). Gender blindness is due to the fact that although women have frequently been objects of research in social gerontology, men have been taken as the reference point in theory and conceptualization which, in turn, has given way to a gender bias 'othering' females (Krekula, 2007). At the same time gender studies have seldom taken older women and the social construction of gendered ageing into account. The second epistemological deficiency was identified by Öberg (1996) with his notion of the 'paradox of the absent body' in ageing studies. Although the body has increasingly become an arena for sociological study in contemporary societies, it is only in recent years that the ageing body has received attention as part of sociocultural conceptions of the ageing process. This indeed is a paradox: despite its neglect in scholarly and professional discourses, the ageing body is surely the central reference point of individual identities and of social representation of ageing anywhere in the world (Katz, 2010). In this context the concept of a 'mask of ageing' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991) suggests that people feel alienated towards their own ageing body as a result of today's consumer culture, and that there is a growing asymmetry between subjective experiences of age and the body's outward ageing appearance. However, empirical data have revealed the complex relationship between ageing identities and ageing bodies. As we are all aware in our consumer culture, there is a lot of evidence that body work techniques are primary means for successfully growing older; paradoxically, 'success' often means denying and resisting ageing (Katz, 2010).

Turning to the scholarship of sociology of sport one would expect that there has been no exponential growth in research on ageing, because the social system of sport is a body-centred system in which physical performance is the all-important, central message. At the same time one would expect current sociology of sport research on ageing to follow the trend and reference a broad spectrum of theories and a move towards large datasets and sophisticated quantitative analyses.

Indeed, sociologically based research on ageing and somatic culture among elderly people has not increased significantly over the past decades. At the same time the research

papers have been spread over a variety of journals dealing with sociology, sociology of sport and ageing studies, with the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* representing most of the articles found in sociology of sport journals. Across this small field of research there is a diversity of concepts and theoretical approaches which could be regarded as a constraint on the cumulative growth of knowledge and theoretical development. The methods used vary with regard to their focus: either qualitative interview studies are conducted, or cross-sectional data sampling is carried out. As far as the relevance of gender is concerned, research on ageing and somatic culture is either gender neutral or focused primarily on the ageing female body (Twigg, 2004).

One consistent strand of interest has been identification of the level of physical activity of elderly people based on quantitative cross-sectional studies (Agahi and Parker, 2005; Földesi, 1989; Kolland, 1992; Tischer et al., 2011; Vanreusel et al., 1983). According to cross-sectional studies in various countries the level of participation in physical exercise and sport activities has increased over the past decades. In some countries the increase is more prominent with the middle- and old-aged than with youth. Most recently more sophisticated analyses of sports activity over the lifespan offer us some additional challenging results. On the basis of longitudinal datasets, findings in Germany indicate that the level of sports activity is not declining during the course of a lifetime but is instead stable or even increasing in some cohorts (the generation effect) and some periods (the cultural expression and change effect) (Breuer and Wicker, 2009). Improved accessibility, health promotion campaigns and shifting gender roles seem to have fostered a culture of physical activity across all age groups.

At the same time the traditional gender gap in participation in sport and physical activities seems to disappear, at least with respect to the age-groups 50+ (TNS Opinion & Social, 2010). The statistical findings from Eurobarometer datasets show that in the age group 55 to 69 10% of the population exercise or play sport on a regular basis (men 10%, women 11%) and 23% with some regularity (men 24%, women 21%). These findings of a diminishing gender gap or even a gender balanced participation rate of older people is in agreement with quantitative and qualitative data about their concept of sport. These indicate that there is a shared concept of sport as 'wellness' on the one hand and 'performance and attractiveness' on the other. While this concept of sport is shared unanimously by older men and women of all social strata, the motives for taking part in and playing sport vary between the sexes. Older women are far more devoted to sport as a means of anti-ageing and they are far more driven by the motives of 'functional fitness and autonomy' (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2012). These findings shed light on a gendered somatic culture and the so called 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag, 1978). While there is a trend towards a 'feminization of age', with women living longer than men and being given the role of nursing and caring for their relatives – independent of age – older women develop a different perspective on old age and ageing than men.

Social and cultural processes of the embodiment of age and its relevance for the involvement in physical exercise and sport have not been given prominence in the sociology of sport in recent years. However, there are informative analyses on performance and competitive cultures of sport – for example, on veteran Masters long-distance runners and swimmers – that reveal strong links between the ageing self and the ageing body (Dionigi and O'Flynn, 2007; Pike, 2011a; Tulle, 2003). Within the contexts of

competitive sport individuals must face and adapt to the encroaching limitation of their physical abilities while being aware that their training and status as Master athletes defy traditional images of ageing, declining ability and retirement. The physically ageing body becomes a shared frame of reference for ageing athletes and a source of physical and social capital.

## **Assessing the challenges of a sociological approach to ageing and somatic culture**

Of all the challenges that sociology of sport faces with regard to ageing, somatic culture and gender, I would like to highlight three that need academic reflection: the social dimensions of successful ageing; gender and ageing; and diversity of somatic cultures. All of these could be placed under the umbrella of a professional awareness of the critical potential of sociology and science as social endeavors.

### *Reflecting on the social dimensions and determinants of successful ageing*

The academic discipline of sociology of sport has evolved in the wake of research conducted across two academic fields: sociology and sport sciences. Sport sciences have successfully sought to play a key role in the fight for healthy ageing. They reject the metaphor of decline long used to make sense of ageing and body and brain are now constructed as malleable and trainable objects, open to improvement. There is increasing evidence and a range of narratives that underline the positive relationship between exercise and physical and cognitive functions. These promote exercise as an instrument for individualized risk management, an idea endorsed by (neoliberal) government policy in many Western countries. Sociology – and sociology of sport – should be critical towards this development and reflect on the social significance and implications of what has been coined ‘successful ageing’ or ‘active ageing’ given that, for example, public and academic discourses target and empower the healthy ‘young old’ but tend to exclude and stigmatize the ‘oldest old’ (Pike, 2011b; Tulle, 2008).

### *Reflecting on gendered bodies and the ‘double standard of ageing’*

Referring to an essay by Susan Sontag (1978), several authors have used the notion of the ‘double standard of ageing’ which states that old age definitions shift according to gender and that women are perceived to age physically sooner than men. Because women are more exposed to inflated expectations of beauty, appearance and sexual attractiveness than men so cultural judgments concerning the ageing body seem to affect women more negatively than men. Some academics tend to (uncritically) generalize the notion of a double standard of ageing, which in turn has led to a double gender blindness: academic discourses on ageing women’s bodies have emphasized negative ascriptions and self-perceptions and have appeared to ignore the challenges confronting ageing men. However, there are more recent findings which suggest the need to reconsider the double standard of ageing, pointing to the complexity of gendered somatic culture and social influences that frame the decisions about whether to continue, give up or even take up physical activity when growing older (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2012).

## Reflecting on diversity

Applying a constructivist perspective raises awareness of the need not only to include women and men in ageing studies but also to incorporate gender relations and other dimensions that intersect with age, such as ethnicity, race, class and sexual orientation (Venn et al., 2011). Although the analytic deconstruction of 'ethnicity and gender' seems to be *en vogue*, the same cannot be said for the intersection of age and gender, nor for the intersection of age, gender and class or other sociocultural differences. Sociologists should widen the lens of 'successful ageing' by highlighting how particular social environments and socio-cultural frames promote or inhibit successful ageing and physical activity (e.g. Dumas and Laberge, 2005). These reflections should be sensitive to organizational cultures as well, reflecting on the way sport clubs, fitness centers and health clubs are (more or less) open to and appreciative of diversity of their membership and clients.

## Future directions for the sociology of sport on ageing, somatic culture and gender

The imperative to grow older without the visible signs of ageing permeates our cultural and social life and is driven not only by the (cosmetic) industry but also by government policy. With this in mind, future research in the sociology of sport could or should take into account the cultural representation of ageing and somatic culture. Narratives, images and media representation of ageing and elderly people very often refer to the body as the central marker of ageing. Such images are the means by which we organize our knowledge about ageing, old age and elderly people and they have real consequences in terms of individual, social, political and cultural practices. Therefore it is worthwhile critically analyzing such images presented in our cultural industry, sport system and government policy in greater detail (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2014).

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