Chapter 3: Socialization

# 3.1. Socialization and sports: A brief overview

Since about the mid-1900s, people have conducted research on socialization and sport. The roots of this research are grounded in three sources:

1. Theories of play and child development
2. Beliefs that team sports are sites at which valuable lessons can be learned
3. The assumption that playing sports is an inherently character-building experience.

Studies of socialization and sport date back to the 1950s when the initial cohort of baby boomers in North America inspired parents, educators, and developmental experts to seek optimal conditions for teaching children, especially boys, the skills needed to succeed as adults in rapidly expanding, competitive, national and global economies. The structured experiences in competitive sports were seen by many people in Western Europe and North America—especially suburban parents in the United States—to be ideal contexts for adult-controlled socialization of children. It was widely assumed that sports taught young people about teamwork, competition, achievement, productivity, conformity to rules, and obedience to authority. Consequently, organized youth sports and interscholastic sports grew dramatically, although the pace of this growth varied by nation and regions within nations.

The growth of organized sports for young people inspired questions about the benefits of sport participation and ways to attract and retain participants. The people who asked these questions were often associated with organized sports programs, and they usually had vested interests in recruiting participants and promoting their programs by linking sport participation to positive developmental outcomes. Scholars in physical education also used these questions as a basis for research, and their studies were usually designed to examine sport participation as an experience that shaped social and personal development in positive ways. Most of these studies found correlations between sport participation and positive character traits, although research designs were generally flawed and provided little information about the dynamics of specific socialization experiences in sports compared to other activities.

Studies of socialization and sport have also been done in psychology and anthropology. Psychology studies have focused on the socialization effects of sport participation on personality characteristics, moral development, achievement motivation, sense of competence, self-esteem, and body image. Anthropology studies have focused on the role of play, games, and sports in the formation of value orientations in particular cultural contexts, especially those in pre-industrial societies. Sociological studies, published mostly by scholars in North America, have focused on three main topics:

1. Socialization into sports, dealing with the initiation and continuation of sport participation
2. Socialization out of sports, dealing with termination and changes in sport participation
3. Socialization through sport, dealing with participation and social development.

Through the mid-1980s, most sociological research on socialization and sport was grounded in structural-functionalism or forms of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and conflict theory. This research was based on the assumption that socialization was a process of role learning through which people internalized values and orientations enabling them to participate in established social systems. It was also based on the assumption that sport was a social institution organized in connection with the social system of which it was a part.

Since the mid-1980s most research has been grounded in various combinations of interactionist and critical theories. The approach used in these studies assumes that:

* human beings are active, self-reflective decision-makers who define situations and act on the basis of those decisions
* socialization is a lifelong process characterized by reciprocity and the interplay of the self-conceptions, goals, and resources of all those involved in social interaction
* identities, roles, and patterns of social organization are socially constructed through social relations that are influenced by the distribution of power and resources in particular cultural settings
* sports are cultural practices with variable forms and meanings

This shift in the theoretical approaches and the assumptions used to guide research on socialization and sport is represented in the ways that scholars have studied socialization into sports, out of sports, and through sports.

Studies based on an internalization approach clarified that socialization into sport is related to three factors:

* a person’s abilities and characteristics
* the influence of significant others, including parents, siblings, teachers, and peers
* the availability of opportunities to play and experience success in sports

Most of these studies provided little information about the social processes and contexts in which people make participation decisions and in which participation is maintained on a day-to-day basis at various points in the life course.

Studies based on an interactionist-social process approach have focused on the processes through which people make decisions to participate in sports, including;

* the ways that gender, class, race, and ethnic relations influence those decisions
* the connections between participation decisions and identity dynamics
* the social meanings that are given to sport participation in particular relationships and contexts
* the dynamics of sport participation as a “career” that changes over time

These studies indicate that sports participation is grounded in decision-making processes involving self-reflection, social support, social acceptance, and culturally based ideas about sports. Decisions about sports participation are made continually as people assess opportunities and consider how participation fits with their sense of self, their development, and how they are connected to the world around them.

These decisions are mediated by changing relationships, the material conditions of everyday life, and cultural factors, including the sport-related social meanings associated with gender, class, race, age, and physical (dis)abilities.



***Socialization into sports usually begins in the family***

Studies of altering or ending sport participation are difficult to characterize in terms of the theoretical and methodological approaches they’ve used. Even the terminology describing “socialization out of sport” has been confusing. The vocabulary in these studies refers to attrition, disengagement, desocialization, withdrawal from roles in sports, dropping out, nonparticipation, burnout, transitions, alienation, “social death,” exits, retirement, and involuntary retirement (i.e., being “cut” or denied access to participation opportunities). Collectively, these studies have focused on many issues, including;

* the relationship between participation turnover rates and the structures of sport programs, the attributes and experiences of those who terminate or change their sport participation
* the dynamics of transitions out of sport roles, the termination of participation in highly competitive sport contexts as a form of retirement or even as a form of “social death”
* the connection between declining rates of participation and the process of aging

Before the mid-1970s, socialization *out of sports* was seldom studied. Altering or ending sport participation was treated more as a fact than a problem. It became a problem only when baby-boom cohorts younger than 13 years old declined in size and growth trends in organized programs slowed relative to the rapid increases that characterized the 1960s. Additionally, many parents during the 1970s had defined participation in organized sports as crucial for the development and social status of their children. A growing emphasis on physical fitness in most post-industrial nations also heightened general awareness that physical activities, especially the strenuous activities common in sports, were important to health, fitness, and overall well-being. Additionally, there was a growing emphasis on elite sport development, and it led to an expansion of youth sports and interscholastic teams that served as a feeder system for increasing the pool of highly skilled young athletes. As these multiple interests in participation grew, so did studies on the processes related to terminating and changing participation in sports.

This research indicates that terminating or changing sport participation occurs in connection with the same interactive and decision-making processes that underlie starting and staying involved in sports. When people end their active participation in one sport context, they often initiate participation in another context—one that is more or less competitive, for example. Terminating active participation due to victimization or exploitation is rare, although burnout, injuries, and negative experiences can and do influence decisions to change or end participation. Changes in patterns of sport participation often are associated with transitions in the rest of a person’s life, such as moving from one school to another, graduating, initiating a career, marriage, and becoming a parent. And for people who end long careers in sports, adjustment problems are most common among those who have weakly defined identities apart from sports and lack the social and material resources required for making transitions into other careers, relationships, and social worlds.

The belief that sport builds character has its origins in the class and gender relations of mid-nineteenth-century England. Although the history of beliefs about the consequences of sport participation varies by society, the notion that sport produces positive socialization effects has been widely accepted in most Western societies, especially England, Canada, and the United States. For nearly a century the validity of these beliefs was taken for granted and promoted by those associated with organized competitive sports in these countries. It was not until the 1950s that people began to use research to test the validity of these beliefs.

Most studies between the 1950s and the late 1980s consisted of comparisons of the attributes of “athletes” and “nonathletes,” usually consisting of students in US high schools. The focus in these studies included academic achievement, occupational mobility, prestige and status in school cultures, political orientations, rates of delinquency and deviance, and various character traits such as moral development. However, research findings were usually qualified in light of questions about “socialization effects” (i.e., the attributes that were actually “caused” by sport participation) versus “selection effects” (i.e., the attributes that were initially possessed by those who chose to play organized sports or were selected to play by coaches and program directors). Additionally, most of these studies simply divided all respondents into so-called “athlete” and “nonathlete” groups, thereby ignoring their participation histories and the effects of participation in a wide range of non-sport activities offering experiences closely resembling those offered by playing on school-sponsored varsity sports teams, such as the marching band.

A problem with many of the studies on socialization and sports is that researchers have assumed that;

* everyone who plays sports has similar experiences
* all sport experiences have a measurable impact on participants
* everyone playing sports learn the same lessons
* the lessons learned in sports are unavailable when participating in other activities

These assumptions lead researchers to overlook the fact that;

* sports are social constructions and offer diverse socialization experiences
* participants give meanings to sport experiences and those meanings vary with the social and cultural contexts in which participation occurs
* the personal implications of sport participation are integrated into people’s lives in connection with other experiences and relationships
* sport participation involves agency in the form of making choices about and altering the conditions of participation

Focusing strictly on socialization outcomes leads researchers to ignore the interactive processes that constitute the core of socialization itself. Therefore, their studies miss the tension, negotiation, misunderstanding, and resistance that characterize lived sports experiences.

These methodological problems have led researchers to report contradictory and confusing findings, leading to the conclusion that little can be said about socialization through sports. However, more recent studies in which researchers use interactionist and critical theories have focused less on socialization outcomes and more on the social processes associated with sport participation and the social and cultural contexts in which sports experiences are given meaning and integrated into people’s lives. The findings in these studies indicate the following:

* Sports are organized in many different ways across programs, teams, and situations offering many different socialization experiences, both positive and negative, to participants.
* People who choose to play sports, those who are selected to participate by coaches, and those who remain on teams generally differ from others in terms of their characteristics and relationships.
* The meanings that people give to their sport experiences vary by context, by gender, race/ethnicity, social class, age, and (dis)ability, and they change through the life course as people redefine themselves and their connections with others.
* Socialization occurs through the social relationships and interaction that accompanies sport participation, and patterns of social interaction in sports are influenced by many factors, including those external to sport environments.
* Socialization through sports is tied to issues of identity and identity development.

These findings indicate that sports are most accurately viewed as sites for socialization experiences rather than causes of specific socialization outcomes. This distinction acknowledges that sports and sport participation may involve powerful and memorable experiences, but that those experiences take on meaning only through social relationships that occur in particular social and cultural contexts.

Since the early-1990s a growing number of studies viewed sport socialization as a community and cultural process. Researchers have focused on sports as sites where people construct and tell stories that can be used to make sense of their lives and the worlds in which they live. In the process, culture is produced, reproduced, reformed, or transformed. Much of this research analyzes media-based discourses (discussions) by deconstructing the images and narratives used in connection with sports and the personas of sports figures, especially high-profile athletes.

This research acknowledges that the discourses that constitute sports, sports experiences, and sports events have become influential narratives in twenty-first-century culture. They are implicated in struggles over meanings, processes of ideological hegemony, and the expansion of global capitalism and neoliberal consumer culture. One of the goals of this research is to understand sports in ways that contribute to informed explanations of the political, economic, and social issues that influence people’s lives.

# 3.2. Making decisions about sports participation during adolescence

How do young people make decisions about whether they will participate in sports? This is a question that Anita White and Jay Coakley asked when they discovered that a major British campaign to attract teens into sports programs was a failure. There was a high youth unemployment rate during the mid-1980s in England and the government wanted to keep young people occupied with activities that were believed to teach discipline and work-oriented values.

To do this, the British Sports Council, a public agency, enlisted the services of a commercial marketing agency to put together an intensive, nationwide publicity program aimed at "selling" sport participation to young people. The result was the *Ever Thought of Sport?* Campaign.

The campaign consisted of a wide array of promotional materials including posters, billboards, brochures, booklets, television and radio ads, and even a telephone "hot-line” with pre-recorded messages in which a celebrity popular among young people explained how information about local sports opportunities could be obtained. The visual theme underlying the entire campaign was a radiant light bulb over the heads of adolescents who had just been "switched on" to the "bright” idea of sport participation. Accompanying the "clean" and positively portrayed "switched on" young people in the marketing materials was the ever-present campaign slogan: *Ever Thought of Sport?*

The target group for the campaign was 14-18-year-olds from working-class backgrounds. In the marketing campaign it was assumed that young people in this group were likely to have “switched off” sport, and in the absence of structured opportunities to release adolescent energy, were also likely to be experiencing a "void in their existence" that could lead to vandalism and disruptive, antisocial behavior. This meant that the marketing focus was directed at “dropouts" and "nonparticipants” who, in the promotional materials, were characteristically portrayed in unflattering terms (i.e., they were portrayed as “unenlightened" and unintelligent-looking young people over whose heads light bulbs were conspicuously absent – they were “switched off”).

Although the campaign was designed to encourage these seemingly "uninvolved” young people from working-class backgrounds to participate in sports, it was also intended to urge local providers (i.e., regional divisions of the Sports Council and local recreation centers) to develop their programs to recruit as many young people as possible into organized programs.

Launched in January of 1985 with massive support from television, radio, and commercial sports stores, the campaign proceeded throughout the year. Bursts of publicity were scheduled to coincide with school holidays, especially the summer vacation break.

## White & Coakley’s Research Project

The purpose of their study was to explore the dynamics of how young people make decisions about their sport participation. Attention focused on the actual processes young people go through when they make decisions about what to do with their “free” time. That is, how young people defined and interpreted their sport experiences, how their definitions and interpretations influenced participation decisions, and bow participation was integrated into the rest of their lives. 60 in-depth interviews were conducted with mostly 13-18-year-olds. Half of the interviews were done with those who had recently become regularly involved in one of 5 different local sports programs, and half were done with those who had either dropped out of those initiatives or knew about them and never became involved. Interview questions focused on what, when, and how things happened in young people’s lives. Researchers were looking for descriptions for what happened in their lives rather than justifications for “why” they did what they did.

### The Findings and Conclusions

Analysis of the interview data indicated that young women and men made choices about sports participation based on the following factors:

1. A consideration of the future, especially the transition to adulthood
2. A desire to display and extend personal competence and autonomy
3. Constraints related to money, parents, and opposite-sex friends
4. Support and encouragement from parents, relatives, and/or peers
5. Past experiences in school sports and physical education

It was learned that sports participation was not a separate experience in young people’s lives. Decisions to participate in sports were integrally tied to the way young people viewed themselves and to their relationships with other people and the social worlds in which they lived. They saw sports activities in terms of how they were related to self-conceptions and what they wanted to do with their lives.

Identity was a major factor in the decision-making process, but simply being an athlete was not an identity that the young people in the sample saw as satisfactory or satisfying in light of their self-conceptions and overall life goals. In other words, these young people did not see sport as central to their lives. Sport participation and sport skills were peripheral to more central and urgent issues and concerns. Therefore, their commitment to sport participation shifted over time depending on new opportunities and changes in their lives and self-conceptions.

The young men and women were especially sensitive to making the transition into adulthood, and they shared concerns about the futures they could create for themselves, and the people they would become. They also shared a desire to develop and display personal competence in sport, or more important, in activities having occupational relevance for them. These concerns and desires were worked out within the constraints of the social worlds in which they lived.

Access to money and other material resources as well as the dynamics of class relations influenced the range of choices and the decisions these young people made when it came to sport participation. For example, working-class youths not only lacked resources to participate in certain sports, but they were not eager to participate in sports identified with the middle class because their participation might evoke ridicule or rejection from those whose support was valued and needed as they made the transition into adulthood.

Although economic factors were important, constraints related to gender and gender relations emerged as especially influential in decision-making processes. As part of the everyday reality of social life, traditional cultural practices related to gender seem to have been taken for granted by most young men and women in our sample. Resistance to traditional cultural practices was minimal. None of the young men and only a few of the young women interviewed demonstrated awareness of issues or inequities related to gender, even though their decisions about sports participation reflected how traditional gender definitions had been incorporated into their identities.

Gender distinctions relative to sport had traditionally been made explicit in British schools through sex-segregated physical education curricula in which females and males were usually taught different activities in single-sex groups, by same-sex teachers. Within the social organization of the schools, sporting prowess generally brought high status to young men, but not young women. This seemed to be reflected in the fact that young men were more likely than young women to be ridiculed if they were physically inept and clumsy, while young women were more likely to see sport as irrelevant in their lives. Co-ed physical education classes in the later secondary years were welcomed by some of the young people, but there were others, mostly young women, who were not keen on such an idea because they perceived their competence in sport and physical activities to be especially low.

Many of the young women in the sample had quit sports long before they left school. But even for those whose school experiences had been positive, continued participation in sport was unlikely unless they were directly involved with other individuals who could sponsor and protect them. If a family member or close family friend was involved in sport, then it was considered appropriate and safe for a young woman to participate in a program or an activity. If this was not the case, young women, even if they wanted to participate, would not be likely to receive the necessary support and encouragement from others who generally sanctioned their activities.

For young men, there was usually no problem in being out and away from home after dark. Interview data indicated that groups of young men were free to decide, on the spur of the moment, to engage in whatever activities appealed to them such as an informal game of football, or a visit to a snooker (pool/billiards) hall. As they explained this, it was clear that they did not feel that they had to make arrangements in advance that would then be “submitted” for approval from parents, girlfriends, or anyone else.

Parents were not the only people who restricted the freedom of young women in our sample. Brothers and boyfriends also took a “protective” (and controlling) stance in their relationships with their sisters and girlfriends. In their eyes, venues such as snooker halls were considered unsuitable places for “girls” to go, particularly if they went alone. It was permissible for the young women to go to such places with their boyfriends or brothers, but when they went with men, they would generally end up as spectators and supporters rather than participants in games or activities.

Most young women accepted this form of “protection” that ultimately limited their active participation in games and sports and destined them to be passive spectators. However, there were a handful of exceptions. For example, an unemployed young woman took pleasure in weight training because it gave her a forum in which she could demonstrate toughness and strength to men who might want to “push her around.” Two other young women felt an enhanced sense of pride and self-esteem when their physical abilities enabled them to compete effectively with men in sport contexts. This suggests that sports participation can be a means for individual women to extend and display competence in ways that give them more personal control over their lives relative to men, or at least a feeling of more control. However, few of the young women in our study saw or used sport in this way.

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***Making decisions to play sport occurs in context—it is linked with friends, access to safe spaces, and to families in which permissions and encouragement are given to play sports.***

The findings on how gender is related to decisions about participation extended what was already known about how socialization is related to sport participation. Young people do not “get socialized into sport” by simply internalizing or responding passively to external influences, such as a media campaign. Nor do young people “get socialized out of sport” in the sense that they drop out in response to external influences. Instead, sports participation (and nonparticipation) was the result of decisions negotiated within the context of a young person’s social environment and mediated by the young person’s view of self and personal goals.

Neither participation nor nonparticipation was a “once and for all time” decision explainable by a cause-effect approach. This means that instead of focusing only on sport participation, nonparticipation, or dropping out of sports, those of us in the sociology of sport should also study decision-making processes in the lives of young people.

When the focus is on decision-making rather than sports participation or nonparticipation, it is clear that there must be a concern with process, context, and human agency. Studies that report lists of sport participation patterns with accompanying lists of variables associated with those patterns for particular people at particular points in time can be useful, but there is also a need for accounts of ongoing actual experiences and the decisions related to those experiences.

The ultimate goal of White & Coakley’s study was to provide sports administrators and staff, as well as coaches and recreation workers, information about how sports were integrated into the lives of young people. From the results, it was clear that an appreciation of how gender relations operated to restrict women’s sports choices can help teachers, coaches, organizers, and sport providers to design opportunities for girls and young women, and become increasingly sensitive to the need for overall changes in gender relations.

Furthermore, an awareness of how activities preferences among young people are influenced by socially imposed gender and class cultures provided a basis for insights about how to introduce new participation opportunities into the lives of young women and men. If the goal of sports provision is to make available to young people what they have experienced in the past, the constraints related to gender and class relations would be reproduced again and again.

Care and sensitivity are needed to provide young people opportunities to raise questions and move beyond what has traditionally been available and accepted. Only then would sports and sport participation become avenues for eliminating socially imposed constraints grounded in gender and class. For adolescents looking toward becoming adults, this would make sports participation a more attractive alternative in their lives than it was when we did our study.

# 3.3. Sports and character development among adolescents

For three generations researchers in North America and Europe have done studies testing the validity of the belief that “sport builds character.” Most research on this issue involves comparisons of the traits, attitudes, and actions of those who regularly play organized sports and those who don’t play them.

These comparisons have produced inconsistent findings due, in part, to two problems. First, researchers have used different definitions and measures of *character* in their studies, and *second*, they have mistakenly assumed that *all* young people who play sportshave the same experiences and that *all* organized sports provide experiences that are unavailable to young people who do not play them. Therefore, current research does not support a general statement about the impact of sport participation on character development among adolescents, but it does provide other useful information about the character-building potential of sports in the lives of young people.

## Researchers have used many different definitions of “character” when studying sports

In Europe and North America, most definitions of character refer to a person’s moral qualities as expressed through their attitudes and actions. In general terms, a person with good character moderates and controls self while acting fairly and ethically in everyday relationships. When studying sport, most researchers assume that character refers to moral or ethical strength, but when they collect data, they use widely varying operational definitions to measure character.

Research also suggests that young people who play competitive sports for a long time are more likely than their peers to accept rule violations and certain aggressive and potentially injurious actions as acceptable in sports. However, most adolescent athletes learn to distinguish between sports and other spheres of life when it comes to definitions of moral action.

In general, when compared to their peers who do not play sports, adolescent athletes appear to have more self-serving approaches to ethics and moral decision-making. This is especially true for boys when compared to girls, for athletes in contact sports when compared to athletes in non-contact sports, and for athletes who have played organized, competitive sports for many years compared to those who have played for a short time.

These findings show that conventional norms are set aside in sports and that athletes often use an “egocentric morality” in which competitive success assumes dominant importance. Therefore, young people who regularly play organized, competitive sports see the rules of their sports as important but they are willing to break them for strategic purposes. Scholars debate what this means in terms of the character-developing potential of sport participation.

## Sports offer diverse developmental possibilities

The second issue that has created contradictory findings in studies of sport participation and character development is that researchers overlook one or more of the following facts about sports, sports participation, and sport participants:

*First*, sports offer many *different experiences* to adolescents because programs and teams are organized in vastly different ways. Given diverse experiences among athletes, it is unrealistic to seek a single conclusion about sports participation and character development.

*Second*, adolescents who choose or are selected to play sports often have different character traits than peers who are not interested in sports or are not selected onto teams by coaches. For example, coaches perceive certain traits as necessary for success and evaluate young people favorably when they possess these traits before participation. This makes it difficult to determine if people certain traits are selected into sports or if certain traits are developed while playing sports.

*Third*, the meanings that adolescents give to sports experiences vary from one person to the next, even when they play in the same programs and on the same teams. Therefore, the possibilities for character development vary widely as young people interpret sports experiences and apply them to their lives in different ways. Interpretations and applications vary with perspectives that are influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, level of (dis)ability, family and peer relationships, and past experiences, among other factors.

*Fourth*, the meanings that adolescents give to sports experiences often change as they mature and view themselves in new ways. Therefore, young people revise their evaluation of past experiences as they develop new ideas and values; furthermore, as their sense of self changes, they may revise their interpretations of how sport participation has contributed to their character.

*Fifth*, character development occurs through the relationships and social interaction that accompany sport participation. Therefore, the impact of participation depends on the social context in which participation occurs; the physical act of merely playing sports is not what influences character.

*Sixth*, the character development that may occur during sports participation may also occur in other activities. Therefore, adolescents who do not play sports can develop the same traits as their peers who play sports.

When these factors are not taken into account by scholars who study sports it becomes difficult to conclude how sport participation impacts character development. However, despite the methodological problems raised by these oversights, it is possible to draw useful conclusions about sports participation in the lives of adolescents.

## Current knowledge about sports and character development among adolescents

A careful review of research indicates that sports participation is most likely to have positive consequences for character development when it does one or more of the following things:

1. It extends a young person’s knowledge about realities beyond sports.
2. It facilitates new interests and identities apart from playing sports and being an athlete.
3. It involves young people in new relationships that are not connected with sports or organized around their identity as an athlete.
4. It provides explicit information about the ways that sports experiences teach skills that are transferable to non-sport situations.
5. It provides opportunities to develop and display competence that is observed by people who become mentors and advocates for a young person.

In general terms, this means that playing sports is most likely to have positive consequences for development when it *expands and diversifies* normal developmental opportunities. On the other hand, when it *narrows and* *constricts* normal developmental opportunities, it is likely to have negative consequences. Therefore, neither positive nor negative character traits are automatically or systematically developed in sports.

This conclusion does *not* mean that sports and sport participation are irrelevant in the lives of adolescents. We know that sport-related discourses, images, experiences, knowledge, identities, and relationships are vivid and powerful in many regions of the world today. However, the influence of sports cannot be summarized in terms of a single or dominant pattern, nor can it be separated from the ways that young people define sports and integrate them into their lives.

## What we don’t know about sports and development among adolescents

Knowledge about sports participation and character development in the lives of young people can be extended with more research, especially research that studies the experiences of adolescents over a long period. Unfortunately, the unquestioned belief that “sport builds character” has partially undermined support for this research and led many people to resist research that critically examines sport and may lead to findings that contradict their belief. Topics that are in need of research include the following:

* What factors influence young people as they make sport participation choices, give meaning to sports and sport participation, and connect sports experiences with family, peer relations, education, work, occupational aspirations and opportunities, economic decisions, and media consumption?
* What are the conditions under which marginalized segments of the population, such as adolescents with physical and intellectual disabilities, and from particular social and geographical backgrounds feel welcome and valued as sport participants?
* How are long- and short-term sport participation patterns among adolescents influenced by highly publicized national and international sports and sports events?
* What is the relationship between elite competitive sports and the cultures of play and informal games that support other types of sport participation among young people? For example, under what conditions do adult-organized, competitive sports undermine the spontaneity, playfulness, and relationship skills needed to sustain a wide range of physical activities that foster fitness and social connections among young people?
* To what extent and under what conditions does specialization in a single sport restrict the experiences of adolescents in ways that compromise character development?

## The policy implications of current knowledge

Current knowledge about sports and development provides a useful starting point for recommendations about sport policies that affect adolescents. Important recommendations include the following:

* Encourage young people to participate in diverse types of sports so that experiences, relationships, and identities are expanded in ways that prepare them for adulthood in a changing world. For example, sports organized around an “obedience model” have different developmental implications than sports organized around a “responsibility model.” The former model emphasizes surveillance and conformity to rules determined by coaches and team administrators, whereas the latter emphasizes autonomy and allowing athletes to make decisions about training and team strategies. This difference is important because athletes many not see their experiences as being developmentally meaningful when they are closely monitored and regulated and primarily the result of forced conformity and obedience.
* Use the informal games of young people as a guide for designing sports programs that are exciting and fun. For example, when North American adolescents organize their games and sports they give priority to (1) action, (2) personal involvement in the action, (3) controlled competition and challenges, and (3) the reaffirmation of friendships. Therefore, organized sports possessing these elements are attractive to young people.
* Use resources to maintain the culture of play and games that exists in local communities, so that it is not replaced by the culture of organized, competitive sports. The developmental implications of sports become increasingly limited when a young person’s experiences are exclusively focused on sports performance and competitive success and are not characterized by the joy and creativity that characterize more playful sport forms.
* Emphasize *inclusion* in sport programs so that the social worlds created around sports do not cause potential participants to feel unwelcome. Sport participation patterns often reflect and reproduce existing social divisions in society. Therefore, participation can be increased when sports are organized to help young people transcend those divisions. Similarly, it is important to provide equitable participation opportunities across all social classes and other social categories so that certain sports are not seen by young people as representing class-based interests or other divisions that subvert participation.

In conclusion, we have much to learn about the relationship between sports and character development among adolescents. However, we do know enough to make informed decisions about sport policies and programs on both national and local levels. As policies are considered, it is important to remember that all sports do not provide the same developmental opportunities and that the developmental implications of sport participation are significantly influenced by the ways that young people give meaning to sports and integrate them into their lives.

# 3.4. Why do people believe that “sport builds character”?

Although research has not supported the belief that sports competition builds character, many people continue to accept this belief in some form. Their acceptance is likely related to one or more of the following five factors.

* Their perception is influenced by a “halo effect” that leads them to assume that if athletes do great things on the playing field, they must be great people. It is much easier for people to see skilled athletes as heroes when they think this way, and they tend to ignore information that would tarnish or defame their heroes, even though much of what they hear about athletes strongly suggests that sport has not built character.
* They are unaware of the selection processes in sports that lead people with certain character traits to become athletes and to remain on teams. Highly competitive sports are organized to attract and select people with high levels of self-confidence and other attributes valued by those who select athletes. Those with low self-confidence usually do not try out for teams, and those with traits not valued by coaches are cut from teams. We can illustrate the effect of this selection process in sport by discussing physical traits rather than character traits. For example, if high school basketball players are taller than other students, is this so because basketball builds height? This is not the case.
* Coaches select tall people. However, we should recognize that tall people often improve their ability to use their height as they play basketball. The same is true with character traits: sports give people settings in which to use them in new ways.
* They focus their attention on successful top-level athletes and then generalize about what happens in sports as a whole. Of course, using such a limited and biased “sample” of sport participants leads to faulty conclusions. This is like studying people with doctoral degrees and making conclusions about education, or studying millionaires and making conclusions about capitalism: it guarantees positive findings and excludes information from the 99 percent who played sports but didn’t make it to the top.
* They overlook the possibility that athletes may be perceived as different from others only because sports provide them with a stage on which to display the traits they have developed in the course of normal maturation. This often occurs when parents and other adults see young people publicly display their abilities in sports. Without opportunities to see their children perform in non-sport situations, they often conclude that the “character” the children display in sports is the product of sport participation itself. However, what usually happens is that sports provide people public opportunities to display traits that they have developed over several years and across a variety of different experiences.
* They focus their attention on limited media portrayals of athletes in which athletes tend to look and sound knowledgeable and self-confident. Without any supporting evidence, they may conclude that this knowledge and self-confidence exhibited by athletes extend to all areas of life outside the sports arena.

The tendency to believe that sports build character may be grounded in deeper political and cultural issues as well. For example, this belief leads people to expect athletes to be role models, to condemn athletes when they fail to exhibit model behavior, and to ignore problems related to the structure and organization of sports. This diverts attention away from the need to assess sports critically. In the process, it enables those who benefit from sports to maintain their privileged positions, and it prevents sports from being changed in ways that might change the socialization experiences of sport participants.

Dominant forms of sports have been shaped and organized in connection with the values and experiences of men in society. In fact, for many men, playing sports has been used as proof of masculinity. Coaches even urge their male athletes to “go out and prove who the better men are.” This means that according to the cultural logic of sports, especially power and performance sports, women must be aggressive, unemotional, willing to play in pain, and willing to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of a victory, to be seen as having “character.” In other words, to show character they must be “male-like” in terms of traditional definitions of masculinity. However, if they do not strive to dominate opponents, are sensitive to others, show emotion, are sensitive to the risk of injury, and prize health over competitive success, they are seen as lacking character as it has been defined in the power and performance sports that are dominant today.

The meaning of character in many sports is tied to a long history of male participation and female exclusion. This way of thinking has created serious problems both in and out of sports. Women are told that to get ahead in the occupational world, they must demonstrate they are qualified, but men have defined qualifications to fit the way they have done things for years. This means that a woman is qualified only to the extent that she does her job like a man. The problems this has caused for women outside of sports should alert us to the negative implications of saying that sports build character when sports have reflected special interests throughout history, interests connected with the power and status of men with resources.

# 3.5. Saving the world with youth sports. Who is doing it and are they succeeding?

“Sport for development” is a key buzz phrase at this point in the 21st century. Today, people are working and volunteering in hundreds of programs worldwide that use sport as a key component in their efforts to intervene in the lives of children and adolescents perceived to be in need.

Many of the children served in these programs face challenges related to poverty, war and dislocation, and a range of medical, psychological, and social problems believed to be more than they can handle by themselves. The stated missions of these programs vary, depending on where they are, who they serve, and the priorities of organizational sponsors.

Programs involving participants from low-income and poverty areas in wealthy nations often focus on providing activities that young people can do after school, on weekends, and during school breaks in a safe environment where there is adult supervision and access to sports facilities, equipment, and coaching.

These programs have a long history, but they grew rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s in the United States when a social problems industry emerged in response to the public services vacuum created by cutbacks in national and local programs. Sports programs previously supported by public resources became increasingly dependent on “soft money” from public and private sources.

To obtain money from sources having conservative orientations, those who proposed programs usually argued that youth sports would reduce character deficits among young people from low-income, predominantly ethnic minority families—a population that potential funders often perceived as threats to the status quo. As a result, “Midnight Basketball” programs and their youth sports equivalents were funded to take ethnic minority males off the streets and keep them in gyms in the evenings and weekends when they were apt to get into trouble.

According to those proposing the programs, sports would simultaneously control and inculcate discipline among “disadvantaged” and “at-risk” youths who lacked the attributes needed to obtain socially acceptable goals in mainstream institutional. In other words, playing sports would compensate for what was missing in the lives of “disadvantaged youth”

In parts of the world where there are desperately low standards of living, sport-for-development programs often focus on fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem, changing gender attitudes to reduce gender inequities, increasing knowledge about HIV/AIDS to change sexual practices, and providing leadership training to create local staff members who could work alongside existing staff and possibly become involved in their communities as well.

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***Sport for Development programs often focus on poor and at-risk children.***

***But there is little evidence showing that these programs change the lives of***

***young people or their communities. (Photo compliments of Kevin Young)***

There are so many of these programs today that it is difficult to count them accurately. Like domestic programs in wealthy nations, their goals and program designs vary in terms of where they are, who they serve, and the orientations of people in sponsoring organizations. However, their mission statements and fund-raising narratives are generally similar to those used previously in the social problems industry in the United States: that is, they are organized around a deficit reduction model with children portrayed as innocent victims of drought, civil war, the oppressive or genocidal actions of national and tribal leaders, and general social disorganization caused by widespread corruption and a lack of individual irresponsibility.

People who favor structural transformations find these sports programs to be ineffective. The focus on individualism and making “good choices” fails to help children living in conditions where survival depends on collective rather than individual actions, and where real choices are few and far between.

But the people who fund and manage sport-for-development programs often stress that change will come if young people learn that their lives are products of their own choices and that improving their lives depends on learning the right values, working hard, and being individually responsible and accountable.

## Bringing Sociology to Youth Sport-for-Development

From the perspective of the sociology of sport, an interesting aspect of youth sport-for-development programs is that they are based on the idea that personal attributes and skills are the foundation for positive youth development. But this ignores the need to on larger issues of social and structural change at the neighborhood, community, and society levels.

It appears that young people in the United States who become increasingly skilled athletes and compete at progressively higher levels in club-based youth sports see themselves as individuals sponsored by their parents with little or no reference to or awareness of their membership in a community that transcends family and sports club.

If this is the case, youth sports programs are unlikely to produce forms of development that link young people with their local communities or encourage them to identify as citizens with vested interests in collectivities that go beyond family and team. This creates a situation in which positive youth development comes to be a matter of personal achievement rather than engaged citizenship. If a young person succeeds as an athlete under these conditions and “wants to give back,” as elite athletes often proclaim, to whom do they give back when parents and elite clubs were the primary, if not the only, sponsors and support system in a sport structure that progressively separated them from their communities and from opportunities to engage themselves in civic actions?

Fortunately, there is a tradition of youth organizing and critical youth empowerment programs that critical scholars in the sociology of sport can use as models for sports programs that define development in ways that go beyond personal attributes. For example, one of the most important indicators of development among young people is their ability to see the connections between their actions and contributions to their neighborhoods and communities.

Therefore, the most effective youth development programs are those that facilitate civic engagement in a supportive context. These programs promote community-based leadership, decision making, and action. Their success depends on a safe and supportive environment, personal participation and engagement, youth-adult relationships characterized by equality, critical thinking about interpersonal and political issues, participation in efforts to create community-based change, and the awareness that change requires both individual- and community-level empowerment.

Effective programs combine youth development with community development and social change strategies. This alerts young people to the ways that power relations affected local communities and the lives of individuals. This outcome is crucial, although it is generally ignored by most sport-for-development programs that serve relatively powerless populations of young people.

Although youth organizing and critical youth empowerment have not been linked with youth sports programs, there is no reason that such a link is not possible or would not be helpful in producing positive developmental outcomes for individuals and communities. Of course, it is important not to be naïve and romantic about the so-called power of sport to promote change, but at the same time, there is a need for theoretically informed explanations of the ways that sports and sport participation can be organized and combined with other activities to empower young people to make choices about change-oriented civic engagement based on a critical awareness of the factors that negatively affect their lives.

Finally, it is admittedly difficult to develop programs designed to enhance the agency of young people (ages 12-18). However, the people who work in youth organizing and critical empowerment programs may be willing to form cooperative and mutually supportive relationships with scholars who want to engage in forms of action research to test the efficacy of including sports participation in those programs. There is no research on how this might occur, but the recent growth in the visibility and popularity of sports in many parts of the world creates a more amenable climate for such relationships.

Fortunately, we already know that outcomes associated with sport participation are contingent and vary with contextual factors that have been identified in many studies. Most of these factors overlap with key factors in youth organizing and critical youth empowerment – another reason to make connections with these organizations and programs. Without these and similar connections, sport for development programs miss opportunities to extend and evaluate their impact on communities as well as individuals.