

Editorial. Sport in the Context of Migration and Health Crises

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Editorial. Sport in the Context of Migration and Health Crises

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Abstract

Recent crises, from the economic and migratory to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, have dramatically affected all areas of individual and collective life – and sport and physical activity are no exception. The main aim of this special issue is to bring researchers interested in sports and physical activity to propose their works. The focus of this special issue lays in the new challenges that sociology of sports and physical activity have to face to understand these new complex scenarios, the main issues we had to face, the successes, the criticalities and the lessons learned.

Keywords: sociology of sports, sports, physical activity, migrations, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The 2020s began with the COVID-19 pandemic, which completely distracted societal attention, thus ‘miraculously’ ending (the social perception of) the ‘refugee crisis’. Both crises have had a dramatic impact on all areas of collective and individual life – sport and physical activity (PA) are no exception. How can sociology contribute to the understanding of social phenomena related to sport in times of crisis? Wright Mills (2000, orig. ed. 1959) would reply that sociological imagination has the ability to describe, analyse and interpret social phenomena in fundamental, differentiated, systematic or surprising ways. In its own small way, this special issue pursues this aim through its individual

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articles, which assess different facets of sport in relation to the migration and the health crisis. Before turning to the articles, this editorial provides an overarching theoretical framework for the topic at hand.

Luhmann's systems theory (2003) guides the ensuing discussion. Accordingly, 'systems are based on a difference between system and environment. Therefore, system differentiation means the repetition of this difference within systems' (Luhmann, 1984: 63). From this perspective, one of modernity's main characteristics is functional differentiation. Function systems are interconnections of communication related to a given social domain and specific societal problem. Sport is a function system that is differentiated within modern society (Bette, 1989; Cachay, 1988; Cachay, Thiel, 2000; Schimank, 1988). It communicates human physical performances (Stichweh, 1990) that are observed and compared in the activities of sports clubs and sport events through the code 'victory/defeat' (Schimank, 1988: 185). Nonetheless, Stichweh (1990) describes sport in modernity as being internally divided into different fields, for example into elite, amateur and leisure sport, where competition may play a minor role only. Each system is autopoietic, i.e. each system has the capacity of self-reproduction and self-maintenance (Maturana, Varela, 1987), but is also closely coupled to the other systems by contributing to the (re-)production and integration of society (Luhmann, 2008). Despite these close couplings, the autopoiesis of function systems implies that no single system can dominate another or exert direct influence over another without itself being influenced (Moeller, 2006). Moreover, all systems continuously redefine their present reality based on the reproduction of their constitutive elements and adaptation to events (Luhmann, 2003; Stichweh, 2018).

2. Crisis

The designation of events – which in this editorial entails the forced mass displacement of people from Western Asia and North Africa and on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic – as critical implies that these social phenomena have had an impact on society, organisations, interactions and, consequently, on individuals (Luhmann, 1995, 2003).

Crisis is a basic and over-inflated concept of political and social vocabulary (Koselleck, Richter, 2006). It is of ancient Greek origin (*κρίνω* - 'decide') and its usage has been plurivalent from early on (Holton, 1987; Koselleck, Richter, 2006; O'Conner, 1981). From a historical perspective, Koselleck and Richter (2006: 358) observe that:

since 1780, [crisis] has become an expression of a new sense of time which both indicated and intensified the end of an epoch. Perceptions of such epochal change can be measured by the increased use of crisis. But the concept remains as multi-layered and ambiguous as the emotions attached to it. Conceptualized as chronic, “crisis” can also indicate a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different. “Crisis” can announce a recurring event, as in economics, or become an existential term of analysis, as in psychology and theology.

Their analysis identifies four prevailing ways of understanding the concept of crisis as:

- (1) a chain of events that culminates in a situation that requires decisive action;
- (2) a turning point after which the human condition will change forever;
- (3) a situation that endangers the existence of an entity, system or status quo;
- (4) a transitional phase necessitated by the inherent logic of prior developments.

They conclude their examination of the concept of crisis with an admonition for scholars to approach it with caution before adopting the concept for analytical aims (Koselleck, Richter, 2006). Yet the crises this special issue deals with were indubitably socially perceived as such, and the editors do not use this word as a catch-term.

The frequent usage of the term ‘crisis’ might indicate ‘semantic-bleaching’ (Meillet, 1912/1965) or a contemporary trend to describe society as being permanently afflicted by crises (Holton, 1987; Luhmann, 1984). Alternatively, this could mirror a concrete increase in crises in our ‘high-speed society’ (Rosa, 2003) or might reinforce Biggs et al.’s (2011) suggestion that we are indeed entering an era of concatenated global crises. In any case, if we consider a crisis to be a state that is contrary to normality, we will witness a paradoxical normalisation of the crisis-state (Holton, 1987). That is, the elusive concept of crisis can be understood in different ways. However, at the core of its various definitions lies the notion of radical change with far-reaching impacts on different areas.

Luhmann’s analysis of crisis (Luhmann, 1984) does not concern the definition of crisis or its underlying mechanisms of genesis, and instead deals with its social function. ‘Crisis’ is a description of a social phenomenon (1) that requires urgent and swift action, (2) that spreads across function systems and affects society as a whole, and (3) whose self-description functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Luhmann, 1984). All of these elements can easily be related to the ‘refugee crisis’, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way these events were

described from a European perspective. They constitute important environmental novelties that have caused radical changes and have had far-reaching implications for society. While the sport system approached these irritations through its own code and operational closure, the adaptations to sport itself were visible. Many aspects of sport, physical activity, health, and leisure have been affected: sports for health, the use of sports as a means of social inclusion of immigrants, professional sport events, their media coverage, the position of sport and PA in the welfare system, and so on. This special issue addresses these and other social changes in the domain of sport and the following two sections examine them theoretically with a separate section on the ‘refugee crisis’ (first) and on the COVID-19 pandemic (second).

3. Migration Crisis and Sport

The concepts of nation state and citizenship are crucial to the modern social order. Therefore, migration – particularly when it is massive, unexpected and cross-national – is a major disruptive power (Maehler, Brinkmann, 2015). As previous migration crises have in the past, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ had an impact on society and, consequently, on the sport system.

Particularly between 2015 and 2016, high numbers of migrants arrived in the European Union (EU) via the Mediterranean Sea or overland through Southeast Europe (Eurostat, 2020). Many of them were Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans escaping from countries riddled by ongoing armed conflicts (UNHCR, 2020). The often-politicised expression ‘refugee crisis’ (Sigona, 2018) was coined to describe this massive displacement of people to the EU, which evolved as a total social fact (Mauss, 2002) with widespread social implications.

Following the ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015, controversial political debates in many European countries were dominated by discussions about the social integration of refugees. These discussions also involved the role of sport, which is often perceived as an engine of integration (Council of Europe, 2020; European Commission, 2007). This assumption was considered to be self-evident long before the ‘refugee crisis’ emerged, and is continuously being echoed, amongst others, by the mass media and by the sport system itself. However, a large part of the sociological community agrees that a univocal positive view of the effects of sport is distorted and romanticized (Coalter, 2008; Dowling, 2020; Hoberman, 2011). Moreover, the relationship between the ‘refugee crisis’ and the sport system is not limited to the abstract political discussion on integration and involves – amongst other phenomena – the introduction and enrichment of niche sport disciplines, the adaptation

processes of sport clubs and the pro-/anti-refugee movements among sport fans.

4. Health Crisis and Sport

Strong evidence associates physical inactivity with an increased risk of chronic diseases, which are the leading causes of death worldwide (Lee et al., 2012). As a founding element of sport, PA is defined here as ‘any bodily movement produced by the skeletal muscles and resulting in a substantial increase over the resting energy expenditure’ (Bouchard, Shephard, 1994). As such it comprises activities as diverse as working, playing in school, carrying out household chores, traveling from one location to another (walking or cycling), and engaging in recreational pursuits like gardening, dancing, yoga, swimming, running and team sports. (WHO, 2010, 2018). Starting from the assumption that PA can prevent epidemic spreads of chronic diseases and improve the population’s general health, PA has for decades been the guiding rationale for, and an element of, the promotion of healthy lifestyles (Palfrey, 2018). This is a key objective of health strategies and policies globally. This assumption lies at the core of a tight structural coupling between the health and the sport system (Michelini, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, created contradictions within this assumption. The ongoing health crisis was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. Since its outbreak, amongst other outcomes, the pandemic has most notably affected people’s lifestyles, their health (Faulkner et al., 2021) and their social relationships (Chu et al., 2020). The mandated restrictions on outdoor activities, including sport and exercise, disrupted the PA routine of millions of people around the world and created a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, most PAs were perceived as being risky behavior, as it might facilitate transmission of the virus. On the other hand, while taking precautions, regular PA was still essential for maintaining the population’s physical and mental health despite the lockdown (Chen et al., 2020).

The coronavirus crisis has altered the condition of reciprocal ignorance that exists between function systems (Tyrell, 1978). According to Stichweh (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a ‘simplification of the social’ and has enhanced the social relevance of the health system and its code ‘health/illness’ (Luhmann, 1983: 169-170). The prohibition of engaging in outdoor PA was an extraordinary interference in the health system through the mediation of the political system on sport. Due to the state of emergency and the legitimization of both the economic and health systems, the political system

could successfully exert its power. Indeed, these restrictions met with little resistance from the population, which leveraged both the medical and the moral discourses (Michelini et al., 2021).

5. The contributions of this special issue

Starting from this premise, this special issue is structured into two parts, with the final article integrated in the Notes & Discussions section.

The first part consists of four articles written by (1) Ivana Matteucci, (2) Barbara Mazza, (3) Giorgio Borghi, Maria Caire and Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto, and finally (4) Giovanna Russo and Loredana Tallarita. They focus on the relationship between sport and PA, with the COVID-19 crisis deemed an influential factor, mediated, in general, by the opportunities offered by the digital world.

The second part comprises three papers and is dedicated to the second topic of this editorial, namely the relationship between the migration crisis and sport, with articles by (1) Betelihem Brehanu Alemu, Siegfried Nagel and Hanna Vehmas, (2) Anna Elia and Valentina Fedele, and (3) Michael Fingerle, Mandy Röder, Kim Olmesdahl and Jan Haut.

A final paper by Anne Morillon, Arine Kassabian and Stéphane Héas is included in the Notes & Discussions section.

The first two papers in the issue's first section which explores the health crisis, investigate the impact of the lockdown on PA and the opportunities the digital world offers. The introductory paper by Ivana Matteucci examines the integration between the physical and digital worlds to include PA in everyday life during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy. The author interprets the experiences of a group of web users, namely their multi-faceted digital identity, social interactions, and the emerging relationship between their offline and online lives, using a mixed method approach. Picking up on the theme of the first paper, Barbara Mazza focusses more specifically on the new environment digital media has created for socialising and practicing sports, how digital devices are being used to play home sports and what types of players encourage people to exercise at home. Building on these objectives, she launched a two-phase research study at the Sapienza Sport centre to investigate sports habits during the lockdown and to understand whether and in what ways physical activity has changed.

In contrast to the first two papers, the third one deals with the impact of the health crisis on sport workers. Giorgio Borghi, Maria Caire and Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto analyse data from an online survey with coaches, athletic trainers, and other sport workers from three sport sub-fields: a team sport

(basketball), an individual one (tennis) and fitness and wellness. Specifically, they focus on the impact of 'going online', exploring the different attitudes and practices adopted to adjust sport training by providing exercise sessions through online communication devices without physical co-presence.

The fourth paper in this special issue by Giovanna Russo and Loredana Tallarita, takes an entirely different approach, exploring the challenges faced by sport brands' communication during these unprecedented times. The authors analyse how the storytelling of sports' brands has influenced values, shifting towards new socially responsible commitments in terms of global health and security. Their aim is to present sport and PA as a form of pandemic 'domestication' process of current social reality.

The first paper by Betelihem Brehanu Alemu, Siegfried Nagel and Hanna Vehmas in the second section of this issue explores sport as a tool for enhancing migrants' overall well-being, their active participation and social integration. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the authors show how socio-cultural differences in the host community, discrimination, the high cost of sport participation and structural barriers are influential factors that prevented the participation of Ethiopian and Eritrean migrant women in sport in Switzerland.

Anna Elia and Valentina Fedele's qualitative field research – the second paper in this section – analyses the relationship between young unaccompanied young migrants and football, focussing, on the one hand, on the prospect of football in supporting their path towards inclusion, and on the space, it offers to these migrants to articulate their subjectivity, on the other. Their analysis reveals that while the nexus between football and the production of social capital that reinforces their integration is questionable, it represents a safe space for subjectivities to be expressed and enhanced.

The third paper by Michael Fingerle, Mandy Röder, Kim Olmesdahl and Jan Haut focusses on the mutual fit between refugees' expectations and the offers provided by voluntary sports clubs. The results reveal that the majority of refugees already actively participated in sports offers in their countries of origin. After arriving in Germany, their sport habits changed, mostly due to organisational and financial reasons. As regards functionalities, the authors found that the idea that sport is integrative per se is widely accepted in the field.

The final article in this issue by Anne Morillon, Arine Kassabian and Stéphane Héas is perhaps somewhat atypical compared to the other articles in that it places the role of the researcher and his or her emotions at the centre of its reflections. Therefore it has been integrated into the Notes & Discussions section. Starting from the frame of an interventional research study on health promotion among people in precarious situations, who also have a sedentary lifestyle, the authors analyse the potential contribution of sociologists to the

normalisation of behaviour, like moral entrepreneurs, and the role this particular sentiment and discomfort played in the data production process during the fieldwork.

6. Conclusion

Based on an overarching theoretical model, this editorial considers the relationship between sport and crises. The eight articles contained in this special issue constitute pieces of a research ‘puzzle’ (Eckstein, 1975: 91), which contribute to knowledge about the topic at hand. Taken together and in their distinctiveness, they cover an important part of the recent debate on the challenges that our discipline, sociology, and in particular the sociology of sport and physical activity, has encountered in the times of health and migration crises: the question of well-being, social integration or inclusion, the role of digital technologies, the resilience of sports organisations and their professionals, the role and responsibility of the researcher, of his or her body and emotions. However, these articles can only partly be interconnected a posteriori and only furnish a limited picture of the phenomena considered, which are complex, dynamic, and ongoing.

At the end of this journey, the term crisis once again becomes an element of guidance and orientation to better understand what can legitimately be expected soon, at least with respect to the topic addressed in this special issue. As postulated in the well-known Schumpeterian approach, crises, together with cycles, often in spite of themselves produce elements of innovation that constitute the fuel of contemporary society (Courvisanos, 2012). In that sense, the various elements considered here can be understood as system/environment ‘possibilities’, in which the examined social systems adapt to their environment by modifying, simplifying or enhancing their internal complexity.

This editorial ends with an appeal to the scientific community in general, and to sport sociologists in particular, to continue their intensive and productive work on the topic sport and crises, which has been carried out in recent years. The ‘refugee crisis’, the COVID-19 pandemic and their intersections have had a major impact on sport at all levels and in ways that have to date only been partially unveiled.

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