Community

Community is a broad concept that can refer to many different types of social groups and collectivities, ranging from small to large, virtual or concrete. In sport scholarship, it usually appears in three different contexts: (1) as a certain type of sport ("community-based"); (2) as an outcome, where sport is a force for social solidarity and collective identification; and (3) as a mediating force on sport participation and consumption.

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*C*ommunity is one of the most common and multivalent concepts in the social sciences. At one end of the spectrum, community can refer to small, close-knit groups in which individuals have much in common, know each other intimately, and interact regularly. This is the definition made famous by Ferdinand Tonnies in his classic nineteenth-century characterization of *Gemeinschaft* as community under siege by the organization and force of modern societies (*Gesellschaft*). At the other extreme, community can denote extremely large and diverse collectivities of people who share little more than an idea or place of residence as in Benedict Anderson's influential reconceptualization of nationalism as an "imagined community." And conceptions of community vary not only in terms of size and type of interaction but also in terms of what communities are organized around and how organized they are. The community label can be applied, for example, to a neighborhood or a block club, a religious congregation or a social movement, to people who share a lifestyle or ethnic background.

In the popular vernacular—where the language of community also has remarkable currency—these various meanings are often indiscriminately employed and can thus obscure as much as they reveal. But what really stands out about everyday usage is how much moral weight and political baggage the term carries. No matter how defined or applied, "community" is invariably a good thing, a value in and of itself. This idealism actually reflects and reproduces tensions in liberal democratic social theory, where community is not just an abstract analytic category but often serves—as it did for the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim a century ago and does for communitarian social theorists still today—as moral imperative or some larger, public good.

Community is, in short, a warm and fuzzy concept— "warm" in the sense that the term invokes good feelings and (in)tangible rewards, "fuzzy" in that the concrete empirical object of its affections is often vague and amorphous—and as such one of the more problematic terms in the social sciences to utilize properly much less summarize briefly.

In the field of sport studies, the term community appears in three fairly well-defined contexts. One is as an adjective describing a certain type of sport: namely, community sport or community-based sport. The other primary uses of the term come in the context of more analytical questions about the relationships between sport and various forms of social interaction and collective identification. They can be usefully divided into two main bodies of work—one that focuses on the impact sport has on social life, the other that attends to the ways in which community context and background affect peoples' experiences in sport and the social outcomes of those experiences. Each of these variations on the community concept in sport studies has its own issues, assumptions, and challenges; cutting across all of them, however, are cultural conceptions of sport that can be just as idealized and amorphous as the concept of community itself.

We've dominated sports and we've dominated entertainment, but our problem has been we've never been able to dominate money. We still don't own our share of business, and it's killing us. It's killing our communities.

Earvin "Magic" Johnson, on African Americans

Community-Based Sport

The idea of community sport or community-based sport is the most concrete usage of the term community in the field of sport studies. It refers to active, participatory forms of sport organized (more or less) and practiced at the local, grassroots level. Just how "local" and formally organized community-based sport is understood to be varies from person to person, from scholar to scholar, and across different social settings and cultural contexts. For some, it may involve simple recreational athletics—pickup basketball games at a local park, exercise classes, or swimming lessons at a recreational center. For others, it connotes more organized youth leagues or club sports sponsored by small businesses, civic organizations, or public parks and recreation programs. What these various forms of community sport all have in common may be best captured by contrasting them with what they are not, what they can be distinguished from: namely, high-performance, elite-entertainment sport.

The distinction between community-based sport and high-performance sport is not just a matter of how serious and skilled the players are, how structured their play is, or how many people pay attention to it. It is also and perhaps more importantly a matter of the purported values and rewards of the two sets of athletic practice. With its emphasis on intensive training, formal coaching, and high-level competition and accomplishment (not to mention spectatorship, marketing, and mass-media coverage), high-performance sport is understood as an end unto itself, with values and rewards intrinsic and self-evident for participants and spectators alike. In contrast, community-based sport typically puts the emphasis on the more intimate and immediate personal pleasures and long-term social rewards of physical activity: health and fitness, recreation and leisure, socializing with family and friends. In view of these commitments, community sport advocates typically stress mass participation and healthy practices, preferring to cultivate and support the participation of as many people in as many activities as possible regardless of athletic skill or ability.

In actual practice there is a good deal of overlap between community sport and high-performance sport. In part this is because community-based athletics often serve as training grounds and feeder systems for more competitive, performance-based sport, arenas for promising young athletes to be discovered, hone their skills, and thus move up the highly competitive, elite sport ladder. The blurry boundaries between community and elite sport also have to do with the way in which the priorities of high-performance sport creep into community-based forms. Winning becomes more important than participating; formal structure and routinized practice push out the more pleasurable, playful aspects of physical activity; spectatorship and consumption are chosen over active participation. Advocates are so sensitive to these incursions that they often say community-based sport is not just different from high-performance sport but inherently in competition with high-performance sport and deeply threatened by it.

Low and decreasing rates of participation in healthful physical activity have been documented in recent years and have accentuated fears about the vitality and viability of community-based sport. Of particular concern for scholars and advocates are those social groups typically marginalized or excluded by sport's historic masculine, middle-class biases—women, minorities, the poor, and the disabled. And what critics call "bad practices" are not the only barriers these groups encounter. Equally problematic are the deteriorating facilities and declining levels of fiscal support that have resulted from the ascendance of neoliberal public policies. These cutbacks have been offset in more affluent communities by market-based, pay-to-play leagues, private health clubs, personal trainers, and the like. Elsewhere, community sports have become more dependent upon funding targeted at risk reduction, crime prevention, and public safety—objectives that skirt the traditional ideals of community-based sport and are in addition deeply racialized. Clearly, the future of healthful and equitable community sport depends not only on a recognition of the personal and social value(s) of mass participation, it also requires the infrastructure and funding to turn these ideals into institutional realities.

Sport and Community Building

A second sport-oriented context in which the community concept is present is in discussions about the impact that sport has upon groups and other social collectivities. This use of the term most often appears under the label of "sport and community building" and, more importantly, usually comes with the strong assumption (or even outright assertion) that sport builds, nurtures, and sustains communities. The belief that sport builds community is, at least in Western contexts, extremely broad and pervasive. It applies to virtually all types of sport, levels of sport, and forms of participation, and to the broadest and most elastic possible conceptions of community. The communities believed to be built by sport can be as small as block clubs or office groups, as large as the whole of humanity itself, and anywhere in between—as exemplified by the language of civic pride, school spirit, and national identity that often appears in accounts of the communal value of sport.

Community building in and through sport can occur in many different ways. Recreational athletic activities can provide an environment and activity that bring individuals from disparate backgrounds and otherwise disconnected contexts into contact with one another. Recreational forms of sport can also provide a venue for people who already know each other from some specific context or social sphere—such as school, church, or work—to get to know each other better and think of themselves in more collective terms. The theory is that in moving people out of the narrow, one-dimensional roles they are accustomed to and into a collective activity stripped of tangible meaning and consequence, individuals will come to trust and understand each other and develop a stronger sense of themselves as a whole group, thus enabling them to work better together toward common ideals and objectives.

These community-building functions can be served through watching and following sports—and cheering for individual teams and players, and even in buying sports-related merchandise and apparel—as well as by playing them. Sometimes the more spectator-oriented interactions are concrete and face-to-face, as when workers in an office or members of a fraternity attend a sporting event together. But much of the community building that occurs in the context of elite-entertainment sport is of a different quality and type, usually more applicable to social entities that are larger and more diffuse. Interscholastic athletics, for example, provide a unique venue for student bodies to come together, and can generate unparalleled positive public attention. In many cities and towns, school sports teams take on even larger meaning and significance. Indeed, US public universities claim that over half of the interactions they have with ordinary citizens come via intercollegiate athletics. That these connections are typically mediated through mass communications and market-based consumption makes them no less real; quite the contrary, such interactions can be the basis of community itself. It is no accident that sports and nationalism are so closely linked: sports teams or star players or even entire sports (think: hockey in Canada) provide an embodied form and rallying point for the otherwise intangible boundaries and sentiments of the nation. Anthropologist John MacAloon has argued that the popularity of the modern Olympic Games involves their success (in contrast to other global organizations and movements) in creating symbols and rituals that draw the various nations and peoples of the world together.

In each of these cases, the community-building powers of sport derive not only from the way in which sport draws diverse people together but also from its ability to cultivate among these people deep and abiding feelings of solidarity and belonging, unity, collective identity, and common purpose. Here, all of sport's unique cultural qualities—its inherent drama, its immediate physicality and emotion, its ultimate absolute clarity—are almost miraculously transferred to or even merged with the social groups teams or players are said to represent. No better evidence of this mysterious phenomenon may exist than the fact that sports fans the world over speak not of "my team" or "our team" but of "us" and "we." They feel the successes (and failures) of their favorite teams and players as their own.

There is a temptation to ignore the more problematic aspects of its relation to social collectivities. This is dangerous and inaccurate on several counts. In a very basic sense, sport can (and often does) break down community; it can, in D. Stanley Eitzen's terms, "divide as well as unite." This is frequently witnessed when a team has a disappointing performance or suffers an unexpected loss. Finger-pointing can

take hold among players and coaches, fans begin to lose interest and disengage from the team and the larger collective entity it is said to represent. It can also happen when friends and acquaintances play against each other or root for opposing teams. And if athletic competition can bring out differences and animosities among people who already know each other, it isn't difficult to realize that sport's purported community-building properties may fall short of the mark for people who have little in common to begin with. Sport's agonistic, winner-take-all structure doesn't just reproduce the social dynamics of group conflict and competition, it requires them and seems designed to bring them out.

Given that the competitive qualities of sport are so pervasive and pronounced, the real question may be why the community-building possibilities of sport are so idealized in the first place. The explanation has as much to do with utopian liberal democratic ideals about community as with sport itself. For one, the making of a community is not as simple and straightforward as it first might appear. Bringing people together in a common space or collective enterprise does not automatically or inevitably generate social harmony. Indeed, it can accentuate the differences that distinguish one group of people from another—especially when the activity is competitive and there are tangible rewards to be won and lost.

On a deeper level, almost all communities are posited on social distinctions that marginalize or exclude others. That is, any sense of communal "we-ness"—who we are—also implies and requires a sense of otherness—who we are not. And this otherness not only differentiates one group from another but often turns into a struggle for dominance (which of us is better?). Furthermore, most communities are far more multifaceted and internally differentiated than Western thinking usually allows. While these differences can be the source of divisive infighting, the bigger point here is that they can be used by one group to exercise power and authority over others, all in the name of a larger, communal good. One person's sacred "community," to put it succinctly, can be another's source of marginalization, subordination, or oppression.

All too often sport has been directly involved in privileging one set of community interests and claims over others. Some of this is built into the inflexible, one-dimensional structure of agonistic competition. Olympic athletes, for instance, must compete for their countries and cannot represent collective identities based upon race, religion, or gender. But it also results from sport's own exclusionary history and troubled complicity with the forces of power. The 1920s American play movement is a case in point: mostly white, middle-class reformers used sports ranging from Major League Baseball to neighborhood recreation to turn new European immigrants into "good Americans," thus creating one community (the nation) even as they were controlling, containing, and erasing various ethnic and immigrant minority cultures. In fact, a great deal of sport scholarship has been devoted to showing how hierarchies and stereotypes relating to race, class, gender, and sexuality have been perpetuated in and through sport, and how mass sport has been used as a tool for legitimating political power and the social status quo.

It can be difficult to square these scholarly critiques with the popular conception of sport as a positive, community-building social force. But instead of choosing one approach over the other, it may be better to think of sport as a socio-cultural practice where people are constantly put together and pulled apart, where communities—in the plural—are made and often simultaneously unmade, where community construction occurs at multiple levels and often includes cross-cutting ties and allegiances that can have social implications far beyond the formal boundaries of sport itself. And what gives sport its unique power as a site for community building is not just its inherent agonistic structure; it has also to do with the paradoxical way in which sport is experienced and understood by so many of its participants and practitioners: as deeply significant, on the one hand, and yet ultimately trivial, playful, and unimportant. This peculiar attitude dictates that the consequential drama of community formation unfolds without the full knowledge and awareness of the players and audiences themselves.

Community as Mediating Social Force

A third and final line of work is focused on the role of communities—however defined and operationalized—in shaping and determining the experience of sport participation and its broader social impacts. In this context, the causal relationships between sport and community are

reversed from the sport-as-community-building context. Here, "community" becomes the factor or force (or independent variable) that impacts the form, quality, intensity, and social consequence of athletic participation.

Although not all of it uses the language of community explicitly, a great deal of research on this topic has been conducted. One of the first findings of sport sociology was that access to sport participation was clearly and predictably influenced by social factors such as class and education, race, and gender. Sport scholars have also found that the best determinants of whether young people will have fun in sports and continue to participate in them are social factors such as peers, parents, and coaches. More recently researchers interested in how sport participation is related to personal quality of life indicators such as mental health, self-esteem, educational aspirations and attainment, and social mobility have discovered that the relationship can be positive or negative and that the variation is shaped and determined by the way sports participation matches up (or interacts) with the communal context in which individuals are situated.

Important in its own right, this research serves as a counterpoint to Western tendencies to romanticize sport as an autonomous, pure-play realm, an arena uncorrupted—even unaffected—by the forces of the external world and whose own social impacts are always positive and progressive. The social force of sport is not one-dimensional or unidirectional but in fact variable and, moreover, largely dependent upon how sport interacts with other forces in the social environment. The relationships between sport and community are thus complex and multifaceted not only because of the many different (and often idealized) ways in which both community and sport can be conceived and experienced but also because of the reciprocal ways in which they interact. One cannot be studied or understood without the other—which is why the more we really learn about the deep structure and significance of sport in communities, the more we know about those communities and about modern, global society itself.

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See also Clubsport Systems; Country Clubs; Fan Loyalty; Gay Games; Maccabiah Games; Play vs. Organized Sport; Playgrounds; Social Class and Sport; Spectators; Sports and National Identity; Youth Sports

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