

SPORT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SOCIAL THEORIES AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

This systematic review of the literature sheds light on the generative construction of sociology of sport as an academic field, shaped by power relationships, struggles for legitimacy, and gatekeeping disciplines. Acknowledging Malcolm's (2014) seminal critique, theoretical lenses from Bourdieu, Abbott, and Lamont are brought forth to assess how academic capital, jurisdictional claims, and evaluation systems conspire in the configuration of disciplinary boundaries. A PRISMA-guided screening of 15 post-2020 articles published in respected journals produces results suggesting that sociology of sport was never generated organically as a disciplinary response to cultural interest in sport but rather was strategically carved within the academic hierarchy-inexcusable resulting in exclusions from feminist, decolonial, and Global South perspectives. Through the interplay of Wacquant's embodied sociology and Connell's Southern Theory, the study offers a critique to the Eurocentric and disembodied posture of dominant paradigms. It also adopts the stirrings of Slaughter and Rhoades' academic capitalism to illustrate how neoliberal evaluation regimes (e.g., REF, ERA) constrict research agendas, thereby impeding critical or practice-based scholarship. Findings further show that sociology of sport, as a smaller entity, epitomizes the broader academic fight for epistemic authority, disciplinary legitimacy, and the imbalances afforded by knowledge on a global scale. The review ends by suggesting that the study of the sociology of sport be taken forward in a manner that is more reflexive, inclusive, and politically aware.

Keywords

sociology of sport; academic capitalism; field theory

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Introduction

In the past, culture pursued sport as something peripheral and relatively unimportant, but with the advent of sport pedagogy, it now is a weapon for the modern scholar to evaluate how power, identity, and institutional legitimation are forged in contemporary society. Sport is not merely a contest to entertain the masses; it is also a very complicated social institution; it constitutes part and parcel of national identity, capitalism, race, gender politics, and academic discourse (Andrews, 2021; Carrington, 2020). Thus, sociology of sport as an academic site of inquiry has not only developed; it has emerged as one more locus of contestation for knowledge production that is simultaneously constructed through political, party, and epistemological struggles.

This literature review explores how the sociology of sport has been socially constructed as an academic discipline. The review builds upon Dominic Malcolm's foundational critique (2014), which holds that the field did not arise through spontaneous scholarly activity but rather through a calculated professional project aimed at carving a niche of legitimacy within the broader arena of social sciences. While Malcolm's work is essentially a retrospective critique, this review broadens his work by incorporating more recent work on academic field construction, issues of interdisciplinary legitimacy, and evaluation systems to situate sociology of sport as a case within a broader theoretical framework, which includes Bourdieu's field theory and Abbott's system of professions.

Particularly, this review explores questions such as:

How has sociology of sport negotiated legitimacy within academic institutions?

What role has interdisciplinary tensions played in rather invisible politics of assessment for the development of the field?

To what extent can we view the sociology of sport as a microcosm for bigger struggles within the academy over prestige, capital, and epistemic control?

According to recent work, the theoretical conversation has been pushed farther; conversely, Thorpe and Olive (2022) have articulated how the problems faced by interdisciplinary do not merely continue but may well deepen for sociology of sport since it precariously straddles the edges of physical education, health studies, and cultural theory. Concurrently, from a decolonizing perspective of sport knowledge, Hylton (2021) unveils the systemic exclusions that have shaped the canon of the discipline. Furthermore, evaluation systems in academia (Kauppinen, 2021; Biesta, 2022) show how citation-based metrics and upward tiers of funding generally favor some epistemologies with a consistent tilt against feminist, postcolonial, or practice-based approaches. This review, thus, does not only repeat Malcolm's historical critique but uses a multi-source, systematic literature review to trace the broad history of sociology of sport while looking at it as a case study of academic field building. By crossing the historical alongside the contemporary, this review contributes to ongoing debates regarding disciplinary gatekeeping, the politics of academic capital, and the future of interdisciplinary legitimacy.

The Social Construction of Sociology of sport

Dominic Malcolm raises fundamental questions about the historically narrated accounts of sociology of sport. While in mainstream accounts, the birth of the sociology of sport is often narrated as somehow going hand-in-hand with the coming into cultural prominence of sport and with its being taken seriously as an intellectual pursuit (Raise the fourth wall here, please), Malcolm (2014) claims something sharper: the discipline did not emerge naturally or neutrally. This was created through deliberate effort by a cluster of academic's intent on legitimating the niche in the social sciences. These scholars strategically placed themselves and their work in a position bestowing professional and institutional credibility and epistemic authority (Bourdieu, 1993; Abbott, 1988).

The politicization is very much evident in its constitution, for sociology of sport was to be defined through an explicit distancing from physical education while simultaneously an alignment with "mainstream" sociology. Malcolm (2014) lays out how physical education was cast as being intellectually inferior whilst sociology was praised as being academically the highest standard-this criticism is echoed by Hylton (2021) and Carrington (2020) insofar as they highlight how this alignment historically has curtailed the prominence of non-dominant epistemologies, especially those dealing with race and coloniality.

The struggle of the objectification of a "legitimate" field would thus echo Bourdieu's (1993) description of symbolic capital and field formation. In that respect, Malcolm elaborates: the early sport sociologists engaged in a struggle to accumulate symbolic capital by redefining sport as a legitimate sociological object, publishing in the "right" journals, affiliating themselves with powerful institutions, and invoking respectable theorists such as Weber or Simmel (Thorpe & Olive, 2022).

The early field literature reviews would highlight sociological works, whereas works by physical educators and politically oriented scholars such as C.L.R. James or Harry Edwards would be minimized or totally excluded (Carrington, 2020; Hylton, 2021). Such exclusion reflects wider processes of epistemic exclusion described by de Sousa Santos (2014) under the label of "epistemicide" the destruction of subaltern knowledges in favor of hegemonic frameworks.

Malcolm's account also resonates with Abbott's (1988) theory of professions, whereby academic disciplines put forward jurisdictional claims by building professional infrastructure-journals, associations, training pipelines-whatever sociology of sport did with bodies like ISSA and ICSS (Malcolm, 2014).

Methodology

Research Design

As a systematic review in the literature, this investigation critically reviews how the sociology of sport came to be an academic field through intellectual negotiation, professional legitimation, and disciplinary boundary work. The SLR approach uses a replicable and transparent method of synthesizing evidence, yet with allowance for conceptual depth and theory refinement (Booth et al., 2016). This review is not just a summary of individual findings; instead, the review uses the theory-building SLR approach (Suri, 2020) by studying one specific instance- sociology of sport -to interpret the construction of disciplinary legitimacy in general.

Malcolm's (2014) much-cited critique of the sociology of sport constituted a starting point, but the present study goes further by systematically introducing into the study of field construction, interdisciplinary conflicts, regimes of academic evaluation, and critical sport studies recent (post-2020) literature. Its purpose is to place

sociology of sport as a kind of microcosm of the processes by which academic fields emerge and evolve based on internal and external pressures.

Inclusion Criteria and Search Strategy

To ensure academic rigor and relevance, the review applied the following inclusion criteria:

- Publication Date: 2020–2024
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Language: English
- Topic relevance: Must focus on at least one of the following themes:
- Sociology of sport
- Academic legitimacy or professionalization
- Bourdieu's field theory or similar sociological models
- Interdisciplinary tensions in knowledge production
- Academic evaluation systems (e.g., metricization, research quality frameworks)

Databases used:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- Taylor & Francis Online
- SAGE Journals

Search terms used (individually and in combination):

- “sociology of sport” + “field theory”
- “academic legitimacy” + “discipline construction”
- “interdisciplinarity in academia”
- “Bourdieu” + “knowledge production”
- “evaluation systems” + “higher education”
- “sport studies” + “disciplinary gatekeeping”

This yielded a total of 152 results, which were screened by title and abstract. After removing duplicates and unrelated studies, 34 full texts were reviewed. From these, 15 articles were selected based on relevance and theoretical contribution.

Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, the exclusion criteria were: for non-English language (n = 21), grey literature or conference proceedings (n = 19), for lack of theoretical contribution (n = 39), for duplication (n = 23), and for articles published before 2020 (n = 11). A comprehensive PRISMA 2020 flowchart is exhibited in Figure 1.

Analytical Framework

The selected literature was submitted to thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008), emphasizing recurring conceptual patterns, theoretical positions, and somehow field-specific controversies. Data were coded into one of four large themes:

- Professionalization and legitimation of sociology of sport.
- Interdisciplinary tensions and boundary politics.
- The marginalization of race, gender, and physical education.
- The effect of evaluation systems on disciplinary trajectories.

The idea behind these four themes was to both support and challenge some of Malcolm's (2014) claims while contextualizing ideas about sociology of sport within a few broader theoretical frameworks, such as Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1993), Abbott's system of professions (Abbott, 1988), and Foucault's discourse-power nexus.

The document selection was carried out with a PRISMA-style flow diagram, shown in Figure 1.

Limitations

The study champions conceptual saturation over exhaustive source inclusion. This is why it draws from only 15 articles after 2020, which were handpicked for their analytical richness and relevance to field construction theory, thus providing depth rather than breadth. No grey literature was included, nor texts that are

not in English; this may hamper the global perspective and is, of course, a decision meant to focus on academically peer-reviewed discourse.

Ethical Considerations

All resources in the literature review are publicly available through academic databases and were cited accordingly. No human subjects were involved; thus, no ethical approval was warranted.

Sample Justification and Theoretical Saturation

While 15 may seem limited, this sample was selected for conceptual richness to build theory. As Sandelowski (2015) puts it, sizes in qualitative synthesis should be guided by the principle of information power, not quantity. With respect to this review, each article selected brings forth a different understanding of disciplinary legitimization, exclusion, and boundary construction in sociology of sport.

Moreover, the sample stands as a balanced platform for key theories (Bourdieu, Abbott, Lamont), empirical case studies, and critiques from feminist, decolonial, and interdisciplinary standpoints. This combination of literature would therefore allow for theoretical saturation; at which point further contributions would produce little, if any, new insight beyond the categories already present. Thus, the chosen sample size has methodological justification in being sufficiently deep to address core questions concerning field formation, disciplinary politics, and legitimacy in sociology of sport.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram - Literature Screening

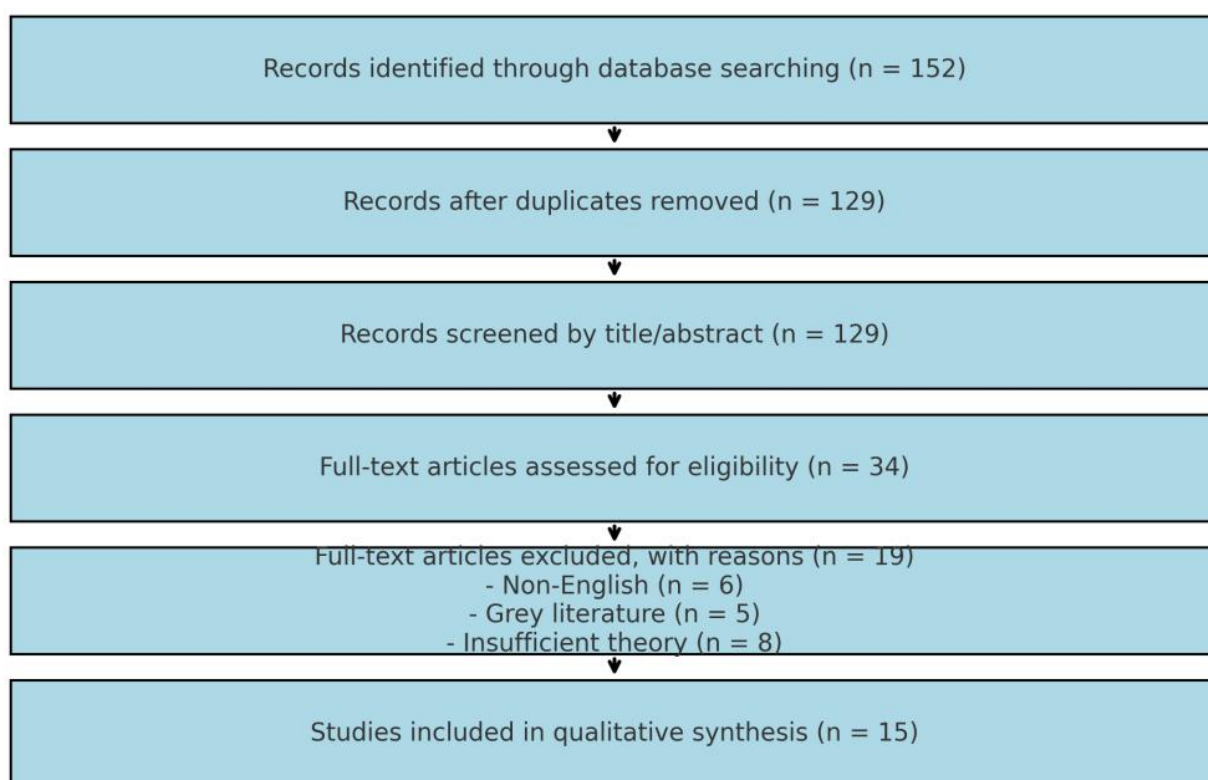


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the literature screening process for the systematic review. Out of 152 initially identified records, 129 remained after removing duplicates. Title and abstract screening led to 34 full-text articles assessed for eligibility. Of these, 19 were excluded based on language, relevance, or lack of theoretical depth. The final synthesis included 15 peer-reviewed articles selected for their conceptual richness and relevance to disciplinary legitimacy in sociology of sport.

Theoretical Framework

Considering sociological theories of knowledge production and disciplinary formation, the framework then looks at sociology of sport as an emerging and evolving academic field shaped by power, capital, and legitimacy. Bourdieu, Abbott, and Lamont supply the theoretical tools needed to show that the formation of sociology of

sport was not only an intellectual event but was strategically seen and shaped socially by the manner in which the competing forces inside academia worked.

Bourdieu's Field Theory

The field theory (1993) of Pierre Bourdieu provides the primary view of the development of sociology of sport. Bourdieu conceptualized academic disciplines as fields of struggle where agents (researchers, institutions, journals) compete for symbolic and material capital. From this perspective, the sociology of sport might be considered as a peripheral subfield that seeks to assert itself in the broader field of sociology by detaching itself from physical education and identifying with a dominant epistemological wing, such as critical theory or post-structuralism (Malcolm, 2014; Thorpe & Olive, 2022).

According to Bourdieu, "a field is an arena in which agents and institutions engage in a determinate set of social relations, the nature of which is dependent upon the access to specific capital" (1990, p. 97). In this conception, political power may rarely be exercised according to empirical inventions but rather in proximity to the norms of dominant knowledge. In that sociology of sport has tended to exclude practitioner-oriented knowledge, feminist interventions, and works arriving from outside the Global North" (Carrington, 2020; Hylton, 2021). Thus, legitimacy had to be sought in accordance with the dominant "rules of the game" including publishing in elite journals and adopting theoretical modes recognized by the mainstream sociology.

Abbott's System of Professions

Complementary to Bourdieu is Andrew Abbott's System of Professions theory (1988), which treats academic disciplines as jurisdictional projects. According to Abbott, professional groups seek to enlarge their domain by claiming exclusive rights to certain problems and methods. Therefore, the emergence of sociology of sport can be read as an attempt to carve a jurisdictional space over the analysis of sport - separate it from physical education, media studies, or even anthropology - to claim epistemic authority.

Malcolm (2014) highlighted how sport sociologists have acted as jurisdictional maneuvers, creating associations, launching journals, and aligning themselves with the wider sociological discourse. These measures are precisely parallel to Abbott's view that disciplines grow not just through theoretical innovation, but equally through organizational and institutional development - creating avenues for publication, graduate training, conference networks.

Lamont's Boundary Work and Evaluation

Lamont's (2009) research on academic boundary work and evaluation culture offers some complementary insights into how inclusion and exclusion operate within fields. Lamont emphasizes that disciplines are upheld through cultural standards, symbolic distinctions, and evaluation mechanisms that decide what counts as "serious" knowledge. This boundary work in sociology of sport has historically meant the exclusion of research into areas such as play, leisure, or women's sports in favor of doping or professional male sports (Thorpe & Olive, 2022; Hovden & Tjøndal, 2023).

As academic institutions increasingly depend on quantitative systems of evaluation, including metrics relating to publication, impact factors, or research funding audits, these systems themselves simultaneously begin to serve as boundary-enforcing tools. Kauppinen (2021) and Biesta (2022) have demonstrated how regimes such as this exclude interdisciplinary or practice-based scholarship, which has been a pattern seen in the difficulties sociology of sport faces when claiming academic legitimacy.

Table 1: Theoretical Frameworks Applied to the Sociology of Sport

Theorist	Theory	Key Concepts	Relevance to Sport Sociology
Pierre Bourdieu	Field Theory	Struggles for capital and legitimacy in academic fields	Explains the marginal status of sport sociology and its quest for academic legitimacy
Andrew Abbott	System of Professions	Jurisdictional claims over knowledge and methods	Illustrates sport sociology's attempt to claim intellectual territory from PE and other disciplines
Michèle Lamont	Boundary Work & Evaluation	Disciplinary boundaries shaped by cultural norms and evaluation criteria	Highlights how certain topics (e.g., leisure, race, women's sport) are excluded through institutional gatekeeping

Theoretical Conversation

Capital, Jurisdiction, and the Struggle for Space in the Disciplines While Bourdieu, Abbott, and Lamont have typically been considered in isolation in an effort to understand academic field formation, it is the confluence of their different frameworks that illuminates a deeper dynamic-an interplay of symbolic capital and

jurisdictional claims in the constitution of the sociology of sport. In Bourdieu's logic of capital-theories-especially symbolic capital, cultural capital, or institutional capital-is the currency with which disciplines seek to assert their legitimacy. Abbott's theory of jurisdiction, best examined at the claim-making level, focuses on the professional strategies by which such claims are sanctioned.

In sociology of sport, being an intellectually based domain has not meant farce and straw dog argument for resources and academic space, often on behalf of separate domains such as physical education and health sciences. For example, professing to distinguish themselves from practice-oriented disciplines such as kinesiology or physical education by critically theorizing their work, sport sociologists have accumulated symbolic capital. In parallel, they have acted in concert to build professional associations (such as ISSA), found journals, and create graduate programs, all of which reflect Abbott's view of the institutionalization of explanatory control over certain domains of inquiry.

This interplay is particularly worth observing when one shifts the negotiation of sociology of sport vis-à-vis health sciences. While both domains may regard, for instance, the well-being of athletes, sociology of sport has claimed the cultural and power-laden dimensions of such matters and advocated a sociological outlook that resists the reductionist discourse that is the hallmark of biomedicine. Hence, the pursuit of jurisdiction here is far from epistemic-it is institutional and financial as competing disciplines struggle for consideration, prestige, and student enrollments. From this perspective, Bourdieuan capital logic and Abbottian jurisdiction logic are not only complementary but indeed mutually reinforcing paradoxes describing this very divide, in which sociology of sport has struggled to position itself as a legitimate middle ground within an academic subfield.

To further criticize the inner limits of this Eurocentric and disciplinary logic, it becomes necessary to bring in Wacquant's idea of "embodied sociology." Wacquant (2004), building upon Bourdieu, highlights the corporeal and affective dimensions of social life and argues that researchers must account for the way in which bodies experience and perform structures of power. Applied to sociology of sport, this lens introduces another irony: a field deeply concerned with the body has often theorized the body at an abstract level and precisely not centered the lived-, embodied-, and racialized experiences of athletes and their communities. This critique goes along with Southern Theory (Connell, 2007), which contest the dominance of Northern epistemologies and calls for increased engagements with postcolonial, Indigenous, and Global South knowledges. In the case of sociology of sport, Wacquant and Connell both urge scholars to move beyond Euro-American academic canons to include voices that will unsettle existing boundaries on theory and method.

These theoretical perspectives shed light on the processes through which the sociology of sport has been socially constructed-not only through theoretical refinements but have also been advanced through strategic exclusions, embodied erasures, and jurisdictional politics. Placed in dialogue, these perspectives allow us to open panel discussions on a more dynamic and critical rendering of the field's emergence and ongoing contests.

Contemporary Themes in Sociology of Sport: Interdisciplinary, Marginalization, and Gatekeeping

The sociological study of sport, as Malcolm (2014) contended, was not merely a poetic conception arising from the minds of academics. Contemporary scholarship has reaffirmed this claim by showing how the discipline is ever evolving across time through interdisciplinary negotiations, structural exclusions, and academic evaluative cultures. Such dynamics are not peculiar to sociology of sport but are symptomatic of larger-scale trends in the political economy of knowledge production.

Interdisciplinarity as a Site of Conflict

Interdisciplinarity is a noble idea in higher education policy and research funding but generally leads to friction and jurisdictional anxiety. Thorpe and Olive (2022) note that sociology of sport exists within a "disciplinary in-between" space of sorts, drawing from sociology, education, psychology, media studies, and health sciences. Indeed, this hybridity enables great insights, but it also leaves that field open to challenges, particularly from traditional departments and journals, which tend to favor disciplinary purity (Lamont, 2009; Brewer, 2021).

Further, Kauppinen (2021) and Biesta (2022) reveal that evaluation systems often become a burden for interdisciplinary fields because they valorize narrow specialty, impact publication measures, field-specific language norms, among others. Hence, even when sociology of sport engages with pressing matters say gender justice or athlete mental health theorizing may ultimately be regarded as peripheral by gatekeepers in sociology, psychology, or health research.

Marginalization of Non-Dominant Voices

Recent literature echoes Malcolm's position about the sociology of sport historically marginalizing alternative epistemologies, particularly those informed by feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives. Both scholars argue that race remains largely under-theorized in mainstream scholarship, and it is only now that

figures like C.L.R. James are receiving their due. Hovden and Tjønndal (2023), likewise, emphasize additional structural exclusions within knowledge production, such as the exclusion of women and gender-nonconforming scholars from editorial boards and citation networks.

Thorpe, Ahmad, and Goto (2023) also point out that Global South and Indigenous sporting epistemologies continue to be marginalized; they are often introjected in cross-cultural research merely as window-dressing or for instrumental reasons, without any real epistemic engagement offered on their own terms. This kind of treatment looks very much like fingerprint marks of what de Sousa Santos (2014) refers to as epistemicide that is, the systematic closing-off of local and situated knowledges in favor of hegemonic Western paradigms.

Calls for epistemic justice not only need to critique tokenism but also to place methodologies and theorizing based upon Global South frameworks at their center. For example, the incorporation of Indigenous ontologies (such as relational worldviews or collective agency) or Afro-Caribbean philosophical traditions (such as Ubuntu or Creolization) can radically alter the understanding and valuation of sporting practices. In addition, restructuring research collaborations to favor South–South networks, multilingual scholarship, and regionally based citation practices would be a concrete step toward epistemic pluralism. Moving these approaches beyond inclusion-as-representation positions Global South epistemologies not as an appendage, but as essential constituents of the very theoretical core of the discipline.

Academic Gatekeeping and the Politics of Recognition

The marginalization of certain topics is not just cultural; rather, it is institutionalized through gatekeeping mechanisms. The process of peer review, the establishment of journal prestige, and the creation of impact metrics all, in Lamont's (2009) and Brewer's (2021) words, serve as symbolic control. In sociology of sport, this leads to an almost obsessive preoccupation with male-dominated professional sports (e.g., football, rugby) and a parallel neglect of such topics as recreational play, physical education, adaptive sports, and various community-based initiatives (Thorpe & Olive, 2022; Hovden & Tjønndal, 2023).

In addition to deciding on topics of inquiry, academic gatekeeping dictates who receives funds and whose career gets a leg up. Scholars advocating in favor of racial justice in sport, for instance, encounter additional difficulties in securing grants or in attracting invitations to speak at flagship conferences (Carrington, 2020). This in turn strengthens what Bourdieu (1993) described as the process of misrecognition—the process by which the unequal distribution of capital is made invisible by appeals to meritocratic principles.

Table 2: Exclusions in Early Sociology of Sport

Category Excluded	Example(s) Ignored	Why Excluded	Implication
Gender	Ellen Gerber, M. A. Hall	Seen as less "scientific"	Male-dominated framing of sport
Race	C.L.R. James, Harry Edwards	Politicized perspectives	White/Western epistemology
Fields	Physical Education, Play	Too applied or informal	Narrow object of study

Academic Capitalism and the Global Politics of Evaluation

Having focused on symbolic exclusion and disciplinary gatekeeping in previous sections, greater attention must be paid to the political economy of academic knowledge production. Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) theory of academic capitalism would suggest that neoliberal reforms have run universities as market-oriented institutions and research priorities increasingly dictated through rankings, grant cycles, and audit cultures, as with the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom or Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). These ranking systems, which by name suggest the promotion of quality, tend to promote topics that have links to economic utility or international competitiveness, especially at the expense of areas like sociology of sport, particularly where there exists a connection with race, gender, or community-based knowledge.

Given this socioeconomic climate, those working in sociology of sport may have to adapt their research topics to fit performance-based funding criteria instead of focusing on critical, practice-based, or under-represented issues. Topics such as athlete labor exploitation, grassroots-level physical education, or postcolonial sport structures are often ranked below data-rich studies that measure “impact” in recent years. This equating of intellectual legitimacy with marketplace value is a direct modification of market claims made by Slaughter and Rhoades in asserting that the academic disciplines are being reordered along capitalist lines according to what is regarded as worthy or worthy of funding.

From an international perspective, Almeida (2022) also shows how such globalized metrics reinforce knowledge outsourcing, where intellectual labor is extracted disproportionately from scholars of the Global South with little and often unequal institutional recognition. Research emanating from the West, and often studying Southern contexts, is valorized by high-impact journals, while Southern scholars themselves get

structurally excluded through mechanisms of institutional prestige hierarchies, language biases, and other barriers to publication.

The implication of this twin critique is that the academic evaluation system is not neutral but is deeply implicated in politics of inclusion and exclusion away from entrenching epistemic inequalities both within and between national boundaries. Thus, in addition to fighting for legitimacy within local academic ecosystems, sociology of sport is implicated in a global system that marginalizes the non-Western view. If this economic and geopolitical myopia goes unchallenged, the discipline may well reproduce the very hierarchies it purports to dismantle.

Discussion

Sociology of Sport as a Mirror of Disciplinary Struggles

The sociology of sport is not only interested in the study of performance, fandom, or institutions but in wider socio-cultural issues. According to Malcolm (2014) and subsequent literature, it reflects the truth that academic disciplines are not born they are built. The historical marginality of sport within mainstream sociology reflects the struggles faced by every emerging or interdisciplinary field. Hence, attempts to understand how sociology of sport has carved out legitimacy should shed light on the universal mechanics of field formation in the academy.

One of the clearest parallels lies in gender studies, another sister discipline that faced early dismissals as “non-serious work” or “too activist” to merit scholarly attention. However, gender studies advanced by employing the same strategic mechanisms Malcolm has identified for sport: organization of scholarly associations, creation of specialized journals, and mobilization around cultural moments like second-wave feminism or debate over Title IX for immediate academic goal. As with sport, alignment with dominant paradigms of thought, say, post-structuralism and critical theory, was paramount in keeping gender studies alive. What both disciplines share is the experience of having to justify their existence within the university framework that rewards conformity with established hierarchies of knowledge.

Further resonances are seen through the rise of digital humanities, a movement which, despite extreme methodological innovation, continues to be haunted by disciplinary skepticism emanating mostly from bordering disciplines like traditional literary studies. Following the examples of sociology of sport, digital humanities continue to be increasingly militarized relative to resources, tenure, and evaluation of research (Biesta, 2022). Moreover, digital humanities is commonly perceived as lacking “real theory” or “deep thinking,” a dismissal that once glazed over sport studies as “journalism” or “something too near to physical education” and continuing to haunt both from a non-evidenced institutional habitus.

Essentially, the struggle for legitimacy in all these fields is not simply about scholarly content: it is a struggle over what counts as knowledge. As Bourdieu urges, fields reproduce themselves via implicit norms, capital, and gatekeeping structures. The very history of a sociology of sport, therefore, helps bring to light the manner in which academic legitimacy is thrust upon an institution — and is not really a matter of intellectual merit — through strategic accommodation to changing evaluation systems, funding landscapes, and cultural politics (Kauppinen, 2021; Thorpe & Olive, 2022).

It is increasingly becoming reflexive about the position in which it finds itself, its method, power structures—the change much demanded by critical race theorists and decolonial scholars (Hylton, 2020, 2021). This reflexivity is not merely a defensive measure but instead provides inroads for the creative interrogation of race, gender, coloniality, and capitalism through the global visibility and emotional resonance of sport. By turning its critical eye upon the everyday practices of sport, the discipline affords an extremely potent means by which to interrogate social formations, cultural mythologies, and institutional hierarchies.

Table 3. Comparative Synthesis of Field Formation Dynamics

Discipline	Origins	Legitimacy Strategies	Challenges
Sociology of Sport	Emerged from physical education; sought legitimacy via mainstream sociology	Formed journals, associations, adopted critical theory and Bourdieu	Marginalization, gatekeeping, evaluation biases, exclusion of non-Western topics
Gender Studies	Grew from feminist activism and social movements; resisted marginalization in traditional disciplines	Institutionalized through women's studies programs, interdisciplinary alliances	Political labeling, resource scarcity, disciplinary gatekeeping
Digital Humanities	Evolved from computing and humanities collaboration; often critiqued for lack of theory	Established dedicated labs, projects, and leveraged digital literacy discourse	Skepticism from traditional humanities, undervaluation in tenure/promotion metrics

Conclusion

This review of literature has been prepared with a view to study and understand the critical sociological issues facing the world of sport, not really as an area of enquiry but as an academic construct shaped by repeated struggles for acceptance, internal disciplinary tensions, and the evolution of cultural politics. Extending Malcolm's (2014) key argument, it is clear that the sociology of sport has never been a neutral or inevitable discipline; it, rather, came about from concerted efforts to distance itself from physical education while at the same time aligning itself more closely with mainstream sociology to claim its rightful place in the intellectual universe of the academy. The development, therefore, is analogous to broader disciplinary formation politicking, cultural alignment, and theoretical positioning.

This review, drawing upon Bourdieu's field theory, Abbott's system of professions, and Lamont's view of academic evaluation and boundary maintenance, speaks more closely to the nuanced process of constructing, contesting, and actualizing legitimacy. These paradigms also provide a dimension that explains how certain bodies of knowledge, particularly those dealing with leisure, racial studies, gender analysis, and postcolonial critique, have systematically been put into the margins by gatekeeping mechanisms and regimes for academic evaluation.

A key issue traversing this review is that the development of the sociology of sport is concomitant with developments in other interdisciplinary or emerging fields such as gender studies and digital humanities. These parallels thus reveal that forces shaping academic legitimacy are context-dependent and arise under certain material constraints, political priorities, and discursive power. Exclusionary practices, institutionalized hierarchy, and resource disparities provide for the construction and maintenance of the two. Therefore, sociology of sport must be viewed, not only as a study but, equally as a case study in the sociology of knowledge production processes.

Furthermore, this review brings to light the necessity to retain an uninterrupted reflexive stance by scholars. Academics have to somehow keep vigilant of their positioning and the power-laden structures toward the configuration of what counts as "valid" knowledge. For scholars of sport, this means interrogating not only the cultural practices around sport but also the scholarly frameworks and institutional logics that legitimize or dismiss particular topics, methodologies, or perspectives.

This means that the sociology of sport needs to do more than just acknowledge Global South perspectives—it has to actively embed them within its epistemic core. This action is inclusive of engaging indigenous, and locally grounded, conceptual frameworks (Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, or relational ontologies); building South–South networks of scholars; publishing in non-Eurocentric outlets and languages; critically reflecting upon citation practices reproducing Northern academic hegemony; and funding structures, and institutional partnerships, that favor equitable collaborations over extractive knowledge flows. In so doing, the sociological study of sport, contrary to the elitist attitude it frequently projects, could acquire that pluralistic and global engagement that the discipline has been claiming to embrace.

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