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Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On age and ability

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Abstract:	<p>On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, a leading scholar on ageing, sport, and physical activity, ISSA President Elizabeth Pike considers the increasing numbers of "Third Age Societies" and the trajectory, challenges, and future directions of sociological research on sport, age, and ability. Noting longstanding interest in sport and ageing dating back to the late 1800s, the trajectory of research in this area has accelerated with both longer life spans and evidence of a more 'heroic' model of the possibilities of aging. A continuing challenge for sociologists of sport is to critique dominant perceptions of ageing that suggest many activities are inappropriate for the ageing body. Future inquiry in the area of sport, age, and ability needs to expand in coming years in recognition that people over 60 constitute the fastest growing segment of the population in many societies and many received conceptions about the roles and possibilities for physical activity and sport need more careful interrogation in companion with more nuanced understandings of both the populations and processes.</p>

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Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Age and Ability

The fiftieth anniversary celebration of the International Sociology of Sport Association, and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, presents an opportune moment to reflect on issues related to 'ageing' in sport and society more widely as we reflect on the ageing of the association and journal. There are increasing numbers of 'Third Age Societies', those in which the majority of the population can expect to live beyond the age of 70, as a result of which the general study of ageing and later life, and the specific understanding of the role and experiences of sport for older adults, have become increasingly important. This paper will trace the trajectory of the sociology of sport, age and ability; consider some of the ongoing challenges presented by the demographic shift to an ageing population; and outline some future directions for scholars in the sociology of sport field who have an interest in the meanings given to sports participation throughout the lifecourse.

Trajectory of Sociology of Sport, Age and Ability as a Field of Inquiry

The study of age and ageing have becoming increasingly prominent topics in academic research, the media and government policy debates as scholars and professionals have developed their interests in the rapid growth of the ageing population. Social gerontologists indicate that while ageing is an irreversible process of inevitable decline, it is the social significance attributed to this process that is important in developing understanding of ageing, ability and the meaning given to engagement in activities such as sports as we grow older. Old age tends to be conceptualised in terms of two phases: the third age which is a period of withdrawal from paid work during which people continue to enjoy active lives in good health; and a fourth age marked by increased health difficulties and decline in social

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3 participation (Smeaton and Vegeris, 2009). Historical studies suggest that, from Ancient
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5 Greece when old age (*geras*) was mostly viewed as ugly and tragic, through to the modern
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7 era in which age discrimination is reported more than any other form of prejudice, older
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9 people are presented as a threat to social values and interests (Pike, 2011).
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14 Sociology of sport research into ageing informs us that when sports were first organised
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16 during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the focus was on young people engaging in organised
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18 physical activities for physical and character development, while it was widely believed that
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20 older people were frail and should avoid vigorous activities to preserve their energy and
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22 strength. These studies have identified important dimensions of the experiences of sport
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24 while living longer in contemporary societies, dominated by stereotyping and
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26 marginalisation, but with evidence of a more 'heroic' model of the possibilities of ageing
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28 (see, for example, Dionigi et al., 2013; Pike, 2011; Tulle, 2008). For example, population
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30 surveys indicate that people in many countries continue to reduce physical activity as they
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32 age, such as evidence from the UK that less than 18 percent of people aged 65-74 are taking
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34 sufficient exercise to meet recommended guidelines, declining to 6 percent for those aged
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36 over 75 (Townsend et al., 2012). Exceptions to this trend are seen in Nordic countries where
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38 participation in some organised competitive sports actually increases with age but, on the
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40 whole, sociology of sport research demonstrates that older people experience cultural factors
41
42 limiting their involvement including embarrassment and fear about doing sport in later life,
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44 insufficient culturally appropriate facilities, and a lack of relevant role models. Sociologists
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46 of sport have understood this as an ageing habitus (Dumas and Turner, 2006), to explain how
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48 people take a different view of their world and the capabilities of their body as they grow
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50 older.
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3 Furthermore, while there is evidence of increased encouragement for older people to engage
4 in exercise, this is often framed by an anti-ageing agenda. Physical activity appears to be
5 promoted for older people largely as a way of addressing the perceived burden and
6 dependency of the increasing ageing population, that ageing is something to be delayed
7 and/or avoided rather than celebrated (Pike, 2011; Tulle, 2008). As a result, some older
8 people engage in sporting activities to appear younger and meet current societal expectations.
9
10 The style of these activities is varied. Sociology of sport research in Europe has found that
11 sports participation among people over the age of 50 involves less competition and more
12 diversity in terms of how they are organised (Klostermann and Nagel, 2012). There is often a
13 preference to participate in environments that combine physical activity with social
14 experiences, although some older people prefer to play physically active video games in order
15 to exercise in the comfort and safety of their own homes (Diaz-Orueta et al., 2012).
16
17 However, there is also growing demand for elite Masters and Veterans competitions in a
18 range of sports. For example, the World Masters Games are a multi-sports event focusing on
19 the health advantages of life long sports participation, held every four years, and involving
20 four times as many participants as the summer Olympic Games from over 100 nations.
21
22 These social trends provide contrasting ideologies about what is natural and normal for older
23 people, and can challenge the ways that sports are organised. Evidence from the sociology of
24 sport helps us to understand that enabling people to continue to participate in sports provides
25 an alternative to traditional perceptions of ageing as a period of frailty and decline, and helps
26 people to negotiate the process of growing older. While they may well accept that their
27 performance will likely decline, staying in sports can help people to maintain their sense of
28 physical competence, and so they can simultaneously accept and resist the ageing process
29 (Dionigi et al, 2013).
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The Challenges Ahead for the Sociology of Sport, Age and Ability

A challenge for sociologists of sport is to critique dominant perceptions of ageing that suggest that many activities are inappropriate or beyond the ability of the ageing body, while not contributing to the neoliberal agenda evident in many societies that older people should use time 'productively' and engage in anti-ageing activities to reduce the impact of ageing on their own bodies, and on the economy and social services. Such agendas contribute to the monitoring, surveillance and even control of older people. It is particularly worthy of note that, while traditional culture in many regions of the world has ensured honour and respect for older members of its population, globalisation processes have eroded and replaced celebratory views of the ageing process with an over-riding sense of the challenges that ageing populations present and expected behaviours of this population (see Han, 1996).

A further consideration for sociology of sport scholars is to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which the role and experiences of sport in later life is complex: while many older persons often have considerable leisure time in the years post-retirement, there are variable experiences of ageing influenced by access to economic and cultural capital. Those less likely to have extensive opportunities to take part in sports include those with disabilities, the very frail, some minority ethnic groups, those confined to care facilities, and those living in rural areas (see Pike, 2010). Most of the extant sociology of sport research focuses on white middle-class people, and we know little about the experiences of black and minority ethnic people or those who often lack material resources to understand the meanings they give to their experiences of sport in later life. In particular, while there is a trend toward a 'feminisation of ageing', with many women living longer than men, gender has been

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2
3 traditionally neglected as a focus for analysis. This remains a challenge for the field,
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5 particularly as physical activity levels among women decline significantly in later life, in part
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7 due to societal expectations to maintain their role as carers for grandchildren and their own
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9 parents (Pike, 2010; Wilinska, 2010). Furthermore, the varied experiences of ageing raise
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11 questions regarding the very terminology of 'age', being 'old', and what is meant by 'ability'
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13 (Coakley and Pike, 2014).
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18 **Future Directions for the Sociology of Sport, Age and Ability**

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22 People over 60 constitute the fastest growing segment of the population in many societies.
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24 Many see themselves as capable of engaging in sports and vigorous physical activities, and
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26 older athletes present an interesting illustration of the multi-dimensional experiences of
27
28 ageing. To many, they provide an inspirational case study of 'successful' ageing, in part by
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30 resisting dominant constructions of the ageing process and contributing to a counter-
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32 discourse encouraging physical activity in later life, and from whom we can learn much about
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34 the limits of human potential. However, their experiences remain framed within limiting and
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36 marginalising stereotypes, and negative labelling of those who are unable or unwilling to
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38 meet exercise expectations. Ageing is particularly problematic for those with limited access
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40 to economic and cultural capital, and especially for older women who often live on the
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42 margins of society isolated by widowhood and perceptions of appropriate gendered norms of
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44 behaviour and appearance. As people age, choices often seem to be taken away through a
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46 lack of encouragement, over-protection, and poor and inappropriate policies, planning and
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48 provision.
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3 It remains the case that we still know very little of the meaning, significance and implications
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5 of involvement in sport, intense competition and athletic success in later life (Coakley and
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7 Pike, 2014; Pike, 2012; Tulle, 2008). Sociology of sport research is important if we are to
8
9 grasp what it means to 'be old', to better understand older athletes and what their stories
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11 might tell us is possible for older people in general (see Roper et al., 2003), and to make
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13 appropriate policy recommendations for physical activity in later life for ageing populations
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15 (cf. Nilsson et al., 2000). A greater challenge for sociologists of sport is to raise serious
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17 questions about how policy-makers and practitioners might best support and facilitate
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19 appropriate sport and exercise provision for older people to enable alternative and
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21 empowering ways of growing old.
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