THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND SPORT (FOR DEVELOPMENT)

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Over the past decade, there has been a huge increase in interest in what anthropology can bring to the study of sport, recreation, and physical activity. Despite this, sport has traditionally occupied a tenuous position within anthropology (Besnier et al. 2018). Within anthropology, sport has tended to either be perceived as detached from the seriousness of everyday life and therefore not a viable area of study, or, when deemed to be socially relevant, it has typically been viewed as undeserving of serious contemplation due to its associations with play, and is therefore seen to be frivolous (Carter 2002). In order to explain the increased interest in the anthropology of sport, in this commentary piece, I will discuss the innate connections between anthropology and sport. I suggest that anthropology is suitable for studying various phenomena within sport and that considerations of sport can also inform broader questions within anthropology. I will highlight Sport for Development (SfD) as a specific area of sport that anthropology is particularly well suited to researching, but has received relatively little attention to date. Of particular relevance for this publication, the study of SfD also has important implications for the anthropology of children and young people, given that young people are the focus of most SfD interventions. Finally, by way of a conclusion, I will discuss the increasing formalisation of the sub-discipline of the anthropology of sport.

The Anthropology of Sport

Modern sport has become a global phenomenon. This geographical spread is one of the fundamental connections between sport and anthropology. Anthropologists have historically studied societies in the Global South, making them well equipped to study sport in diverse cultures and locations. 'Universal' or 'modern' sports were imposed upon many Global South countries by the Global North, and as such have clear ties with colonialism (Bale & Sang 1996; Carter 2002). However, it has been shown that indigenous people adapted colonial forms of sport to suit their own aesthetics and conditions (Cunningham 2016; James 2013 [1963]). In many contexts, these adaptations of 'universal' sports are played alongside indigenous sports and movement practices. Such cultural and embodied practices have long been the remit of anthropology. As Carter (2002, 413) notes, "sport is one way for people to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities."

The challenge of reconciling and understanding both local sport practices and global sporting power chains reveals another way in which anthropology is useful for studying sport.

Anthropologists are concerned with the details or the "imponderabilia of everyday life" (Malinowski 2014 [1922]) in defined communities, while attempting to place these concerns within larger global processes and movements. While anthropologists have not traditionally been concerned with sport, ethnographic methods as well as holistic and cross-cultural theoretical perspectives common in the discipline can provide critical insights into the study of sport at both the local and global scale (Carter 2002).

'Sport *for* Anthropology'

Besnier et al. (2018) suggest that sport can be used *for* anthropology, meaning that we can ask broad questions through the lens of sport. They contend that "a distinctly anthropological approach, with its specific research methods, theoretical frameworks, and holistic thinking, can utilize insights from the constitution of sport as human action to illuminate important social issues in a way that no other discipline can" (Besnier et al. 2018, 7). In support of this contention, recent research within the anthropology of sport has explored issues that have played a central role in anthropological theory such as global mobility (Besnier et al. 2020; Hopkinson 2020), kinship (Hopkinson 2019), trust (Crawley 2024), and gender (Sehlikoglu 2021; Willms 2017). These concerns are also fundamental aspects of sport, indicating that the central concerns of anthropology and sport are interwoven. As such, anthropological approaches to studying sport may help us better understand the social relations, economic webs, political processes, and symbolic structures in which sport operates and is embedded (Besnier et al. 2018).

Anthropology and Sport for Development

The anthropology of development is an established subdiscipline of anthropology, and one that is intimately linked with the anthropology of sport in the context of the growing field of SfD. SfD can be defined as "a global field of activity that uses sport and physical activities as tools or areas of social intervention, primarily with young people, to promote non sporting social goals, such as gender empowerment, peace-building, health education, employment skills, and the social inclusion of marginalised communities" (Giulianotti et al. 2019, 412). SfD differs from broader development in that it tends to focus its efforts primarily on children and young people. As such, ethnographic methods are well-suited to studying SfD, as they capture everyday practices rather than relying only on interview data or monitoring and evaluation reports, which inevitably provide only a partial picture of participants' lived realities. SfD interventions also often claim to have a wider sphere of influence than solely the participants themselves. An anthropological approach allows researchers to engage with community members beyond the intervention, allowing them to understand broader perspectives and gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact that SfD interventions may have on the communities in which they operate. In my own research, a socio-anthropological approach to studying SfD enabled me to establish meaningful relationships with my interlocutors and interact with both young participants and community members, gaining insights that likely would not have been possible had I taken a different methodological approach.

The Formalisation of the Anthropology of Sport

The growing interest in the anthropology of sport (or sport *for* anthropology) and the inherent connections between anthropology and sport, which I have highlighted above, have led to the subdiscipline beginning to formalise. In 2020, the International Network of Sport Anthropology (INSA) was founded and now has over 200 members. While there is no peer-reviewed journal for the anthropology of sport, a growing number of articles from within the sub-discipline are being published in both sport and anthropology journals. Additionally, INSA aims to establish a journal dedicated to the anthropology of sport in the future. While sport traditionally held a tenuous position within anthropology, the growth of the subdiscipline seems unstoppable, and the inherent connections between sport and anthropology are undeniable.

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Author Biography

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