The Prestige of Sport and Sport as a Source of Prestige*

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Summary

The aim of the study is an attempt to characterise prestige as an important descriptive term, explaining the phenomena and processes occurring in (post-) modern sport and to answer the question regarding the sources of sport prestige and sport as a source of prestige.

The work is based on an analysis of the literature on the given subject in the field of humanities and social sciences, especially sociology, devoted to the interesting issue of prestige and sport. In the analysis, the dominant scientific theories were implemented, including, inter alia, structural and functional, social interactionism, Weber’s and Warner’s theory of prestige, and the theoretical assumptions of Henryk Domański and Piotr Sztompka.

Through the analyse, it is shown that sport itself, in relation to other areas of life, enjoys relative prestige. Access to the stock of prestige in sport is unequal. Some disciplines, sporting activities, sport groups and individuals have greater access to it, while others do not. Sport in (post-) modern societies is a source of prestige. This is confirmed by the pro-sport nature of informal social control, as a result of which, participation in sport is subject to positive social sanctions, while lack of such participation is deprived of such sanctions.

Keywords: sport, prestige: source and conditioning

Introduction

Prestige can be treated as one of the most important social resources to which, a part of the community has access. This privileged group has some special characteristics and social qualities, making others express their respect, appreciation and often admiration. Prestige results from the hierarchical structure of the community in which some are higher and others are lower. This different positioning may be a consequence of custom, formal regulations or the application of a specific religious code.

In traditional societies, differences in prestige were clear, unambiguous and perfectly defined. Prestige was inherited and resulted from caste, state, stratum, class or professional affiliation. In this regard, social mobility was severely restricted or, more often, almost impossible. In modern societies, the sphere of prestige has undergone a profound transformation. The market economy and the equality of individuals before the law had huge impact on these changes. The role of prestige resulting from a noble birth has diminished, and the importance of individual effort and merits has increased. This state of affairs has intensified social mobility, in which individuals from the bottom of the community, due to talent, work and investing in one’s own development, gaining access to valued social resources.

Prestige was present in the sports culture of the ancient Greeks. Most of the games of that time were attended by only well-born and respected social circles. The Games were class-related and even aristocratic. Slaves, barbarians and criminals could not take part in them (Wroczyński, 2003: 43-45; Lipoński, 2012: 81-84; Lanowski, 2000; Miller, 2006; Zuchora, 2016: 38-76). Prestige is also an important descriptive concept, allowing to explain various phenomena and processes occurring in (post-) modern sport, the origins of which date back to the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries (Dziubiński, 2016: 15-41).

The aim of the study is an attempt to characterise prestige as an important descriptive and explanatory term for phenomena and processes taking place in (post) modern sport. We will try to answer the question concerning the sources of sport’s prestige, but also sport as a source of prestige. In the analysis, dominant scientific theories will be used, i.e. structural and functional, social interactionism, including those related to prestige, such as Weber’s and Warner’s theory of prestige, and the theoretical assumptions proposed by Henryk Domański and Piotr Sztompka.

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Characteristics of the social prestige concept

Prestige is one of the dimensions of social inequality (next to wealth and power) and it means honor, respect, recognition, but also honour, dignity, respect and pride (Węglan, 1983: 80). Henryk Domański defines prestige as a vast sphere of evaluations regarding other people on the basis of their intelligence, knowledge, positions held and social roles played, appearance and life successes (Domański, 1999: 9-10). Piotr Sztompka treats it as an independent social power next to power, wealth and education. Prestige is respect and social recognition shown to an individual or a group. Its highest figure is fame. Social prestige can be understood as showing privilege, symbolically demonstrating and taking away prestige or the right to expect and receive it (Sztompka, 2002: 331-336).

In theoretical analyses of prestige, 2 approaches are distinguished: structural and functional (Reszke, 2000: 201-204). The structural approach includes an analysis of prestige in the stratification system as a privilege of higher-ranking communities due to the possession of valued social resources. An example of such an approach may be the theory posed by Stanislaw Ossowski, according to which prestige is a privilege resulting from the social role of an individual (Ossowski, 1968: 24-26). In functional terms, prestige coordinates the actions of individuals within a community and thus, ensures the effectiveness of a social system. Thanks to the community of norms and values, it is possible to assess which positions and roles deserve higher prestige (Parsons, 1972; Domański, Sawiński, 1991: 224). This approach is well-exemplified by the theory of social stratification according to Kingsley Davis and Willbert Moore, in light of which, prestige is a reward for expenditure related to obtaining education and various competences, and is a factor inspiring the development of potency and giftedness (Davis, Moore, 1975: 464).

Regardless of this, the majority of researchers agree that in a post-modern (post-industrial) society, the most important factor in shaping prestige is the profession or occupation performed within it. The prestige of the profession-gained independence and new foundations as well as rules for the formation of prestige were developed (Wesołowski, Domański, 2000: 197-198; Słomczyński, Domański, 1998: 125-142).

Classic sources of prestige in sport

The main theorist dealing most detailedly with prestige in capitalist societies was Max Weber. He recognised wealth, power and knowledge as the basic sources of prestige. The mentioned factors, in his opinion, directly generate social power, which is reflected in social prestige.

The regularities discovered by Weber also apply to the field of sport, in which the prestige is determined by money, shared by individual and collective sports participants. Let us begin by analysing the issue from an individual point of view, placing individuals active in sport on the Warnerian ladder of social stratification (Warner, 1952), according to access this social resource, which is wealth. With high probability, it can be said with high probability that at the very bottom of the ladder, we may find the most numerous group of sports participants who do not have prestige due to the fact that they obtain financial benefits in sport. This mainly applies to the so-called amateur athletes, participants in sports for all, common sports and various types of volunteers who selflessly carry out different jobs and tasks without obtaining financial gain. At the intermediate levels of this ladder, there is a numerically smaller community which derives some financial benefits from sport. This group includes a large number of semi-amateur athletes, instructors, coaches, administrative staff, judges, doctors, physiotherapists and many others who obtain financial benefits, but because of them, receive no or little prestigious benefits. Finally, on the highest rung of the ladder, there is the smallest group of those who derive very significant financial benefits from sport, which, in turn, give them prestige. This applies to both professional athletes, coaches training the most outstanding sports units and teams, owners of sports clubs, presidents of these clubs, sports federations, associations and organisations, as well as owners of companies and enterprises operating in the field of sports and in connection with sports (owners and directors of television stations, CEOs of companies producing goods and services, sponsors and donors).

The second prestigious factor is power, which Gerhard Lenski analysed within the context of prestige, basing it on the assumptions of the theory of functionalism and social conflict (Hamilton, Hirszowicz, 1995: 40-44). The power in question, related to the field of sport, plays a fundamental role. Exercising it in sport (we are not talking about authority exercised in an authoritarian or totalitarian manner) obviously generates prestige for individuals and communities who exercise such power.

Power in sport can be analysed, both from the macro- and microsociological perspective. In sport, as in other areas of life, it occurs on a macro scale when dealing with formal organisations of international and global nature, such as the International Olympic Committee, the International Football Federation (FIFA), the International Athletics Federation (IAAF), but also on a micro scale and in the simplest as well as most elementary and everyday human interactions in sport. It manifests itself as the authority of the national sports federation over athletes, employees and volunteers, acting in a specific sport discipline, the owner or president of the club over its members and employees, a coach over players, etc. This is primarily with interest in prestige and personal respect, which is most often due to direct individual or small-group interactions. Prestige understood in this way, thanks to stereotypes, can be transferred to a wider community. Numerous researchers of the issue, such as Peter Berger, Jacek Sztamka, Dawid Wagner or Kinga Wysieńska, point out that each individual behav-
Our research demonstrates the order of power and prestige. According to Berger, the lack of symmetry in the interaction reveals the hierarchy of power and the distribution of prestige related to it in the group (Szmata, Wagner, Wysięńska, 2002: 202; Ridgeway, Walker, 1995).

This mechanism is present in the field of sport, where power is formal and, in a way, assigned to people occupying specific positions in the power structure. However, the distribution of power and personal prestige in sports (social) circles, which, according to Piotr Satompska, are homogeneous collections of very similar social positions and roles, is very interesting. It can be a group of presidents of Spanish football clubs playing in the LaLiga, referees of volleyball in the PlusLiga, basketball coaches working in teams playing in the NBA (National Basketball Association) or players of the leading Bundesliga team, such as Bayern Munich. In the aforementioned collectives, an informal hierarchy of power and prestige is created, resulting from personal advantages and values. In sport, such an advantage in power and prestige is achieved thanks to distinctive professional competencies, but also personal and social advantages and virtues, such as professional diligence, accuracy and honesty, civil courage, intelligence and comradeship. An example is the power and prestige of Robert Lewandowski on the Polish national team (Influential people of sport, 2018).

Weber points to knowledge as the third prestige-generating factor. This factor plays an extremely important role at all levels of sports organisation, starting with the knowledge of the trainer and organiser of a local sports event for children and youth, and ending with the management of large sports holdings operating in the global space and arranging interactions with many companies operating in various sectors of the world-wide economy.

Knowledge is an extremely significant concept of sociology used for the general analysis of society and has emerged as a subdiscipline, which is the sociology of knowledge (Ziolkowski 2002: 308-314). Within its framework, depending on the theoretical perspective represented by the researcher, the concept of knowledge is analysed in many different ways. However, the approach of symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology is definitely dominant, with such principal representatives as Durkheim, Weber, Thomas, Znaniecki, Mead, Levi-Strauss, Parsons and Habermas. They were of the opinion that between reality and the socialising and acting people ascribe to particular fragments of reality. They are grounded in their knowledge and act consciously and purposefully (Giddens, 1984).

Therefore, Weber’s knowledge, as one of the hard variables influencing social prestige, we understand here more broadly, namely – as knowledge and practical skills, but also competences related to functioning in the sports community and sports culture, obtained and acquired in the process of socialisation to sport and in sport. We can immediately say that the effects of this process, with regard to individual units, are different. Some achieve the highest level of internalisation and assimilation of knowledge, skills and competences in sports, while others – only some lower level. The former, achieving sports perfectionism and sports championship, enjoy social prestige, recognition and respect, while the latter, have to be content with limited or no prestige at all. The former are usually the best players in the world, tennis players, Formula 1 drivers, golfers, boxers, basketball players, baseball players, while the latter, in their sports disciplines, are at the lower levels regarding the hierarchical structure of the presented sports level. The names of the former are heavily exploited in the colloquial discourse, they are present in the space of mass culture, their names are used for various elements of sports infrastructure (centres, halls, swimming pools, stadiums, etc.), schools, sports academies as well as city streets, while the latter, in the majority of cases, are devoid of symbolic recognition and prestige.

The prestige of sport and sports disciplines

So far, our attention has been focused on prestige of the sports participant himself, and we have tried to indicate, using Weber’s classic concept, the basic factors determining social prestige and their importance in accessing it. We have decided that procedures for the acquisition of prestige by individuals in sport are governed by general social regularities. Currently, we will try to establish the prestige of sports institutions, i.e. the prestige of sport in relation to other institutions, but also the prestige of individual sports, treating them somewhat conventionally as types of professional specialties (football, basketball, swimming, ski jumping, speedway racing, tennis, etc.), similarly as in medicine (internist, ophthalmologist, surgeon, cardiologist, diabetologist, etc.).

When we evaluate the prestige of sport in comparison to other institutions, such as education, religion, economy, art, politics, alike most of the mentioned institutions, its presence is not essential, that is, it is not necessary and needed for the duration and general life of people. Certainly, the other mentioned institutions are of a more basic nature, because without them, human life would be in danger with regard to its biological dimension.

When analysing the prestige of a sport institution, one should also pay attention to the issue of its presence in mass culture, which, in a sense, may be a measure of prestige or something close to prestige. Włodzimierz Węsolowski and Henryk Domański are of the opinion that the presence of sport in mass culture does not build its prestige, but only its popularity (Węsolowski, Domański, 2000: 195-201). However, this popularity and the recognition often associated with it may, as a consequence (but not as a rule), transform the temporary attractiveness of sport into more or less permanent admiration and, consequently, recognition for the field of sport.

The fact is that individual sport disciplines enjoy different social prestige. This diversity has both historical and socio-cultural determinants. For example, the most
popular sport in Europe and many other parts of the world is European football (soccer), in the United States it is American football and baseball, in Norway, skiing, and in Japan, judo. Regardless of these historical and cultural differences, taking into account numerous studies devoted to the prestige of competition, it is possible to establish a relatively universal prestige of sports disciplines.

It may be stated, analysing the issue from the perspective of functionalism, that the importance of a given profession is determined by its function in the social system. Assuming a specific professional position is the consequence of a specific educational career and acquired competences with a view towards professional work. The more complicated work performed as part of a specific profession and requires above-average and specialised preparation, the smaller the supply of specific professional qualifications on the market, and furthermore, the more appreciated the given profession is, the more the people performing it are highly gratified, enjoy significant power, and consequently, recognised and socially respected (Domański, 1981).

The same is in the case of sport with regard to individual disciplines. If the production of a product in the form of a sports event requires the highest professional competences, which are confirmed each time by a high share of society in direct and indirect consumption, then a discipline, a specific player or team receive the highest financial rewards and are recognised for all investments related to development of a sports career and their objective effects. The produced, high-quality spectator product is followed by further benefits in the form of sponsorship agreements and contracts with television stations defining the rights to broadcast. Such a situation causes certain sports competitions, for which there is a social demand, to enjoy great prestige. When we talk about prestigious sports disciplines and social demand for sports events, we obviously mean such events in which the best and most titled athletes and teams compete for prestigious trophies (Lenartowicz, 2011: 424-443).

**Sport as a source of prestige**

A characteristic feature of (post-) modern societies is a high level of wealth, education, knowledge, employment in office (intellectual) jobs and a high level of consumption. Taken together, the above-mentioned factors change social awareness of health and physical fitness and, at the same time, create opportunities for the realisation of these values. Social elites who have the greatest access to valued social resources share the belief that one of the basic factors influencing the accumulation of health and physical fitness is physical activity, participation in broadly understood sport. In this way, participation in sport acquired elite attributes that became attractive and desired by wide masses of society. It happened on the basis of a certain mechanism, the presence of which in (post-) modern societies was noted by researchers, such as Thorstein Veblen, Max Weber, and Jean Baudrillard (Veblen, 1971; Weber, 1984; Baudrillard, 1998).

Observing the life of people in this type of society, they came to the conclusion that class and stratum membership not only determines wealth, power, education, etc., but also the manner of consumption, ways of spending free time and patterns of life organisation. Therefore, since participation in sport has become the participation of the elite, a way of spending free time, this pattern quickly gained the approval of wider social groups that aspire to participate in elite communities. It should, however, be borne in mind that the implementation of elite models in the sphere of sport is, in itself, ennobling and prestige-adding (Lenartowicz, 2012).

The second mechanism functions in a similar way, by means of which it is possible to explain the high level of participation regarding (post-) modern societies in sport, which is motivated by the willingness to participate in the distribution of social prestige by its participants. The driving forces behind this mechanism are certain cultural patterns, closely related to the cherished values and norms that serve to implement them. In a traditional society, but also in a modern society at an early stage of development, health and physical fitness were primarily instrumental values. They were to be used to perform work, mainly physical, but also, if necessary, to defend homeland. Thus, physical activity did not have a prestigious value because its aim was to develop “the biceps of workers and soldiers”, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1995: 8-109).

Prestige in (post-) modernist culture was gained by participation in sport, namely when sport was recognised as the norm (way) of realising aesthetic and hedonistic values, i.e. those values to which access is often the objective and meaning of life for individuals who are higher in the social structure. Therefore, the recognition of participation in sport as one of the most effective ways to meet needs has become a value appreciated not only by elite communities, but also by wide social circles. Being in line with the (post-) modern criterion of aesthetic attractiveness in society and, on the other hand, experiencing pleasure, is the goal of a significant percentage of the members of this society. Achieving these objectives is largely due to participation in sports, thanks to which body mass can be corrected, proportions between individual parts of the body improved, but many kinetic pleasures and extreme experiences within them may also be experienced.

The consequence of gaining social prestige via sport is the development of characteristic social control, which, in a way, symbolically forces individuals and communities to participate in it. This happens as follows, namely that individuals and communities participating in sport face positive sanctions in the form of recognition and respect, while those who do not participate encounter negative sanctions in the form of lack of recognition and respect, and often disapproval (Lenartowicz, Dziubiński, Jankowski, 2017: 195-210).
Conclusions

Being aware of the theoretical and methodological complexity concerning the undertaken research problem, it can be concluded that the majority of regularities detected in society and its culture in relation to prestige, apply to describing and explaining the presence and creation of prestige in the sports community and sports culture.

Sport itself – as a social institution, and in relation to other institutions, due to its numerous advantages and values, enjoys relative recognition and social respect. On the other hand, various sports disciplines, sports groups, as well as individual players, enjoy diverse prestige. Social prestige in sport is a consequence of access to this valued sports resource, which is sports success. In other words, winning medals at major events, achieving record results and winning the most valuable awards – adds and multiplies prestige. A prerequisite for prestige in sport is access to other valued social resources, such as wealth, power, media coverage and presence in mass culture. It is also worth knowing that all valued social resources, including prestige, come together most often, having different connections and configurations.

Sport, common in the (post-) modern society and (post) modern culture, has become prestigious due to its recognition as an element of the life of elite communities, and participation in it provides recognition and respect to the elite. In this way, a pro-sport society and a pro-sport culture has been developed, in which socialisation to sport has become an element of social socialisation, and informal social control is of pro-sport nature and positively sanctions participation in sport.

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