

Sociology of tennis: research on socialisation, participation and retirement of tennis players

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ABSTRACT

This article covers some of the most relevant research studies related to tennis sociology. They will be classified in content areas for clarification including topics related to participation, socialisation of players, retirement, gender, social class and structure in tennis.

Key words: socialisation, participation, retirement

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology of sport can be defined as a field or sub discipline of sociology that studies sport as part of social and cultural life. From this view, culture is seen as the ways of life that people create as they participate in a group or society; and society is understood as a collection of people living in a defined geographic territory and united by a political system and a shared sense of self-identification that distinguishes them from other people (Woods, 2007).

Sport in general and tennis in particular is a field of sociology because they are a sub-culture of society as they are given special meaning by particular people in societies, they are tied to important ideas and beliefs in many cultures and they are connected with major spheres of social life such as the family, religion, education, the economy, politics and the media (Coakley, & Pike, 1998).

Sociology can cover many areas of research and interest as shown in Figure 1.

	THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Tennis Sociology	Participation	Interests, players, spectators, practice levels.
	Organisation	Clubs, federations (national and international), IOC, governance.
	Socialisation	Integration, roles, player careers, retirement.
	Family	Parental involvement, family schedules, participation.
	Ideology	Race, gender (women issues), social class, inclusion of special populations.
	Economics	Expenditure, TV rights, sponsorship, salaries of players, coaches, business markets and marketing.
	Media	Technology, traditional, social, popularity, impact.
	Politics	National pride, ideology, controversies, government policies.
	Education	School, interscholastic, intercollegiate.
	Religion and moral values	Ethics, violence, gambling, doping.
	Health	Habits, environment.

Table 1. Areas of sociological research in tennis.

SOCIALISATION OF PLAYERS

Socialisation is an active process of learning and social development that occurs as people interact with each other and become acquainted with the social world in which they live in. Socialisation helps individuals to learn and fulfil a certain role in society by combining their personal attributes with significant others in given situations.

The socialisation of elite tennis players in Sweden was studied by Carlson (1988) who concluded that it is not possible to predict who will develop into a world-class tennis player based on individual

talent alone. He found that personal characteristics and early life experiences in combination with social structures, a historical tradition of sport and a positive tennis culture within a community contributed to their success. The local club system and community were found to be positively influential on the players' relationship with their coaches and continuation to play tennis.

The factors that facilitate or hinder the development of healthy tennis clubs in the Netherlands were explored by Pluim et al. (2014) in order to identify suitable interventions that would help clubs to reach 'healthy club' status. Four emerging themes were identified: provision of healthy foods, injury prevention and health services, social health and safety around the club. The main facilitators were found to be support from club management, having appropriate policies in place and having appointed officers. The main barriers were identified as a lack of policy templates, inadequate knowledge of coaches on injury prevention and injury management and fragmented access to relevant information.

The socially relevant oppositions between tennis clubs in two French towns, Nantes and Strasbourg, were highlighted by the studies of Suaud (1989) and Wasser (1989). The interdependency of tennis skill levels with the players' social positions and their positions in the club revealed that tennis is an area of highly diversified practices included in equally different lifestyles.

In the case of socialisation of elite wheelchair tennis players, Roux (2012) found that players were empowered by taking part in wheelchair tennis to facilitate goal attainment and to enhance social integration. Stanescu (2014) considered participation in wheelchair tennis to be an opportunity for social integration for people with disabilities. It created the opportunity whereby players could create a positive self-identity and tennis allowed for the development of life skills.

PARTICIPATION AND ORGANISATION

Participation in the game and the social role of tennis organisations have gained considerable interest and focus by researchers. When examining how demographic market segments differ based on commitment to tennis, participation frequency and purchase intention, Casper (2007) found significant differences with tennis commitment based on age; participation frequency significantly differed based on ability level; and purchase intention significantly differed based on income and ability level.

The relationship between demographic segments (age, sex, income, and skill level) of community tennis association members and commitment was studied by Casper & Stellino (2008). They found enjoyment to be the strongest predictor of commitment and repetition across all demographic categories and suggested that a marketing campaign focussed on the health benefits rather than the competitive element were more appealing especially to less skilled players.

Participation commitment and skill level was also investigated by Casper & Andrew (2008). They found that collegiate athletes reported significantly higher levels of tennis commitment, involvement opportunities, and social constraints, while reporting lower

tennis enjoyment levels compared to recreational players. When investigating skill level, advanced players reported significantly higher levels of sport commitment than intermediate and beginner players, and beginner players reported significantly lower levels of sport commitment than intermediate players. In addition, advanced players reported significantly lower sport enjoyment and significantly higher involvement opportunities and social constraints than lesser skilled players.

When Coate & Robbins (2001) studied whether top-ranked male tennis professionals were more dedicated or committed to their careers than the top-ranked female professionals, they found no evidence that this was the case between the time period of 1979–1994. In fact, despite substantially lower prize money and earnings, they found that the women pros competed for as many years as did the men and just as intensely in terms of annual number of tournaments played.

RETIREMENT

There have been several studies on player retirement in tennis. In their research, Allison & Meyer (1988) studied the experiences of elite female tennis professionals and their perceptions of their competitive years and subsequent retirement from tennis. Results showed that the players did not find disengagement from their competitive years traumatic, but rather found it as an opportunity to re-establish more traditional societal roles and lifestyles.

Australian female professional players participated in a study by Young et al. (2006) to describe their feelings about leaving the tour. The main findings of the study suggested that those who planned to leave the tour found the transition process easier, whereas those who did not plan to leave the tour found the process more difficult. Most players did not regret leaving the tour, and, although the remaining players responded that they regretted leaving, none attempted a comeback. Tennis Australia implemented strategies to assist current players on the professional tour based on the results of this study.

When exploring career retirement, role exit and related identity issues among Swedish ex-professional tennis players, Stier (2007) found that a 'role restricted' socialisation, intense media exposure and overemphasis on performance and competition brought in a 'role-identity fusion'. It was concluded that career retirement was a gradual, transitional process of psychological and social adaptation and quest for self-identity. As such it was challenging for the players, but not as dramatic as much scientific literature suggests.

SungHee et al., (2013) explored elite Korean tennis players' career transition experiences, focusing on psychological components such as self-identity and coping strategies as well as socio-cultural influences through the process. Their results provided practical implications for supporting athletes' career transitions for example developing a balanced self-identity and life skill during their athletic careers, providing proactive intervention and future research directions suggesting the examination of athletes' retirement decision-making process.

CONCLUSION

The active participation in tennis creates a self-identity for the player that stems from socialisation and carries through to their retirement process and decision affecting their enjoyment and participation rates. Whether entering the game for the first time as a beginner or the choice to retire after several years committed to the game, these decisions are influenced by important beliefs and ideas connected to major spheres of social life such as family, education and culture.

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