



Sport in Society

Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: 1743-0437 (Print) 1743-0445 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcss20>

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To cite this article: Vidar Halldorsson, Thorolfur Thorlindsson & Michael A. Katovich (2017) Teamwork in sport: a sociological analysis, *Sport in Society*, 20:9, 1281-1296, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2017.1284798

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2017.1284798>



Published online: 01 Feb 2017.



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Teamwork in sport: a sociological analysis

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ABSTRACT

The importance of creating and maintaining a working order and solidarity among sports teams is one of the more taken-for-granted assumptions among participants and observers. Even so, delineating the dynamics of its importance, especially in regard to teamwork and insider knowledge (or secrecy) remains unexplored. This paper attempts to fill this gap by employing classical sociological concepts from Durkheim, Mead, and Goffman to discuss the practical and sociological importance of teamwork. We examine two internationally successful Icelandic sport teams to show how the prosocial aspects of teamwork, secrecy, and backstage behavior, keep teammates bonded to each other and to the culture in which they become embedded. Our analysis also highlights the importance of collective representations, organic solidarity and the dynamic processes involving self-presentation, ideoculture and negotiation of meaning.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that bringing together a group of highly skilled individuals does not ensure a successful team (see Cashmore 2002, 256; Lidor and Henschen 2003). The formation of teamwork involves, in its more rudimentary arrangement, transforming an aggregate of skillful individuals into a coordinated and cooperative social group. Such a group works well enough as a collective unit to inspire an overarching identification separate from individual interpretations of singular skills. Teams, it seems, are like other social groups characterized by emergent structural properties that shape experiences and constrain behavior and influence agency. Such structural properties consist of characteristics symbolized by coordinated group behaviors that resist simple reduction to individual characteristics. Understanding the creation and maintenance of these collective properties of social groups is one of the defining tasks of sociology. Classical sociologists such as Durkheim ([1895] 1964) and Mead (1934) provided the foundation by proposing the existence of a social reality external to, and greater than, the sums of individuals. The sociological focus on group properties, which has continued to be the hallmark of sociology, has furthered our understanding of the dynamics of group life through the construction of cohesion, integration, social control, power, inequality and domination as well as creativity and agency. Sociologists have shown that these concepts provide the generic basis of all social life.

Given the importance of teamwork for practitioners in many arenas, it is unsurprising that it is an increasingly popular topic that has become associated with an explosion of interest among researcher from various social science fields. However, some interesting gaps remain, especially in regard to the lack of systematic attention to the topic of teamwork in sport. The existence of such gaps is surprising because sports provide a particularly interesting site to explore classical sociological themes about the nature of social groups. It exists in competitive and cooperative worlds simultaneously, making performance a distinct term relevant to symbolic interactionists. The idea of simultaneous performances, as discussed by Mead via his concept of sociality (1932), allows for concomitant awareness of the self in regard to one's own abilities and in regard to the abilities of the other. This premise can serve as the groundwork for systematic research of teamwork. The criteria for the level of performance are evident in that successful teamwork often becomes translated into specific results. The translation makes sport performance an ideal subject for analysis on the culture, tradition, and social fundamentals of sporting success (Pescosolido and Saavedra 2012).

Teamwork evokes immediate recognition among sociologists interested in the organization of small social groups. Even so, explicit discussion of teamwork in sport seems mostly confined to sport psychology. In the course of making teamwork not only understandable to coaches and athletes, but also conceptual and pedagogical, sport psychologists have taken ownership of the academic and practical work of teamwork in sport. Sociologists rarely work with sport teams to improve or analyze teamwork in practical settings. Few have been invited to offer their skills to sporting teams that wish to improve teamwork. The entire concept either seems taken-for-granted or ignored altogether in the sociology of sports research. Our perusal of sociology of sport texts failed to find any systematic discussion of the concept as a sociological process.

As a way of providing a corrective for what we perceive as a gap in the sociological literature we propose that a sociological analysis of team sports in general and of teamwork in particular, can contribute to the refined and complex awareness of how sport teams work. We conduct a case study of two highly successful and internationally recognized Icelandic sport teams. One, the Iceland's men's national handball team represents the smallest populated country to win an Olympic medal in a team sport and a European handball championship medal. Two, Gerpla, an Icelandic women's gymnastics team, has won two European championship trophies and three Nordic championship trophies since 2009. We chose these teams strategically (see Flyvbjerg 2006; Ragin and Becker 1992) owing to their international success, their representation of different sports, and their gender specificity.

We propose that analyzing team sports contributes both to the refined and complex awareness of small groups and to our understandings of how sport teams work. Our focus will cover ground associated with the sociology of sport in general and the sociological examination of group life, in particular, especially as such life applies to the notion of a team.

The social order of sport teams

Individual characteristics are important for teamwork. Basic skills and personal characteristics influence the way teams work. Valuable assets such as trust, commitment and positive emotions are contagious (Christakis and Fowler 2008). Some individuals spread these qualities to their teammates, while others create negative energy and fear of failure on the field. There is abundance of research that focuses on these attributes on the individual

level and their contribution to team culture, cohesion and leadership (Carron, Bray, and Eys 2002; Carron and Chelladurai 1981; Chelladurai 1990; Pescosolido and Saavedra 2012). We recognize the importance of this work, but we want to draw attention to the collective aspect of teamwork. We focus therefore on the social context that contains culture and the collective aspects of groups and institutions, which cannot be reduced to individual psychology. We follow the lead of Durkheim, Mead and Goffman that proposed a structural theory of the emergent nature of social groups and the dynamic nature of social interaction (Durkheim [1895] 1964; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934; Sawyer 2002; Thorlindsson and Bernburg 2004).

Our study is not an attempt to 'apply' or 'test' these classic theories on teamwork of the two aforementioned sport teams in the hypothetical-deductive tradition. Rather, following Becker, we see the connection between theory and research to be 'that theories raise questions, suggest things to look at, point to what we don't yet know' (Becker [1982] 2008, xi). In other words, classical sociological theories provide a framework that points us in the direction of sociological analysis, that makes us aware of new challenges and suggest theoretical directions.

Thus the theories of Durkheim and Mead provided a host of conceptual tools to analyze the external or intersubjective social reality. Durkheim's concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity, collective representations, social integration and social regulation have been widely used to analyze the collective nature of social groups in sociology, criminology and public health. Mead formulated a theory that stressed the collective emergent nature of the social act. But unlike Durkheim he developed his theory at the micro-level emphasizing the dynamic and collective efforts responsible for completing purposive acts (1934, 177, 178). Mead's idea of simultaneous performances and the social nature of the self can serve as the groundwork for systematic analysis of teamwork that often becomes translated into specific objectives that individuals recognize literally and appreciate symbolically, as a product of collective effort (Pescosolido and Saavedra 2012).

Teamwork evokes immediate recognition of the activities of small groups of interactors, engaged in a complex form of drama, filled with coordinated and deliberate activities, but also riddled with the threat of clumsy missteps and the ongoing threat of a faux pas (Goffman 1959). Social integration, cohesion and solidarity in regard to teamwork, then, becomes embodied in the cooperative performances activated by interactors as they, often simultaneously, work at cooperating with others identified as teammates while working to conceal, deceive, and manipulate others that represent, formally or informally, an opposition.

Goffman (1959, 85) used the term 'performance team' as a way of making 'reference to any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine.' Individuals within teams will find themselves in an important relationship with other team members in which they recognize a reciprocal interdependence and bind themselves together on the basis of their familiarity with each other. Each member of a team relies on other team members to 'pull off' a performance to preserve the flow of any team process. In effect, Goffman reminded sociologists that actors' commitment to the micro moral order also glues such actors to the temporal anchor of broader endurance, associated with a more Durkheimian macro order.

Team members, then, demonstrate moral character through competence and commitment. Even when one seems less committed to demonstrations of competence and commitment than others, as when one engages in 'role distance', moral character becomes demonstrated in the breach (Goffman 1961, 103–107). Creating some symbolic space between role and personhood still requires public acknowledgment of the interaction

order (Goffman 1967, 85–88). While moral consensus remains invisible to the human eye and cannot be shared explicitly, its demonstration through performance provides social engagement analogous to teamwork. The implicit character of such work lends intrigue to any endeavor, prompting Goffman to refer to teams as ‘secret societies’ (1959, 108).

The notion of a team as a secret society has particular relevance in the context of sport. Obviously, from a dramaturgical perspective, sport teams epitomize secret societies by creating distance between their endeavors and the endeavors of opponents on the one hand, and creating and maintaining distance from an audience on the other hand – lending to the team a ‘we’ vs. ‘they’ mentality. We take for granted that sports teams keep team information within the team, in the backstage, and away from competitors and the audience, much like in business (Evans 2010). Even in this era of global media sport we only see the teams onstage and we have limited knowledge what goes on in the process of building a team, backstage.

Goffman extended Durkheim’s theory of social solidarity by showing how solidarity and cohesion are generated through interaction rituals, impression management, and self-presentation. Successful teamwork is achieved by agreement or consensus of members of a team on how to perform an act. This line of behavior emerges as rituals, derived from shared pasts that team members repeat, become entwined in complex interactions between team members. Although the goal of ritual invites re-enactment, it also involves negotiation, impression management, and the establishment of a dynamic between personal and collective identities within this secret society, a form of social solidarity that Durkheim would describe as organic solidarity. Team cohesion can also emerge through a more rigid authoritarian style that deemphasizes personal identity to the point of nearly diminishing it in favor of a monolithic collective that resembles Durkheim’s notion of mechanical solidarity. The staying power of such an order is, however, often compromised by the weight of its manifold rules (Goffman 1959, 111).

Regardless of how team solidarity and cohesion emerge, from cooperative inter-dependence to force, some kind of team ethos, or ‘a thin party line,’ will emerge (Goffman 1959, 113). Team members do not necessarily expect undying reverence to this party line, but they do expect that any contradiction to the ethos should remain backstage. Thus team cohesion depends on secrecy as it strengthens the ‘team ethos,’ keeping everything that disrupts it backstage. Despite the continual temptation, and the frequent cases of giving-in to such temptation via ‘tell all’ documents, the ethos remains onstage. All team members should not show their ‘out-of-team’ selves but the ‘collective representations’ of their in-team selves, or the more non-profitable products of the dramatic interaction that emerges within the backstage.

The success in maintaining secrecy as a team, sociologically, rests on at least three sociological processes. First, team members agree to keep any signs of irreverence backstage, knowing that to do the opposite would show disrespect to the attitude of others. Second, the rituals associated with the team allow individuals to maintain ‘face.’ Such maintenance serves two functions – avoiding embarrassment and accumulating moral capital as a team player. The reliable display of a ‘social face’ locates the team player within a cohesive front but also adds to the quality of the teamwork that will, in some aspects, determine team success (Goffman 1959, 5). Third, secrecy correlates with what Simmel (1906, 478) termed an ‘energetic consciousness’ or a type of catharsis that keeps members of a team focused on their own objectives and their competitive relationship to an opponent, working to block such an objective.

Methods

We conducted a case study of two Icelandic sport teams. Our cases are strategically selected. We wanted our cases to be both extreme and paradigmatic (Flyvbjerg 2006; Ragin and Becker 1992). Both cases are extreme in the Icelandic context in the sense that the teams in question have been unusually successful in international competition. We argue that for a tiny country like Iceland to be successful in international competition with much bigger countries it must make use of effective teamwork. They are paradigmatic in the sense that represents effective teamwork. Thus, examining two of the most internationally successful Icelandic teams would offer a good research site to understand good teamwork.

The first team, the Icelandic men's national handball team has a long tradition of international success (Thorlindsson and Halldorsson 2013). This long-standing success was highlighted in 2008 when the team won a silver medal at the Beijing Olympics, becoming the smallest nation to win an Olympic team medal, and in 2010 when the team won a bronze medal at the European Championship, becoming the smallest nation to win a European Championship handball medal.

The second team, Gerpla is a women's gymnastic team that was established in 2000. It has won the European Championship twice, in 2010 and 2012,¹ and the Nordic Championship three times, in 2009, 2011 and 2013. Gerpla also represents the smallest nation to win a European Championship and Nordic Championship in team gymnastics.

Case studies are according to Ragin an '... essential part of the process of producing theoretical structured descriptions of social life and of using empirical evidence to articulate theories' (1992, 225). Our sociological analysis goes, as most case studies do, back and forth between theory and data (Ragin and Becker 1992). Often observations generate new questions or they raise problems that make us reevaluate theoretical issues or search for new theoretical ideas. The theoretical ideas that emerge raise new question that make us look at different empirical aspects of our data. This means that we use what we learn at each step in the research to make our next step more efficient to further our understanding of the theoretical and empirical aspects of our case. Both theory and data are part of the analytical process of doing casework.

Our empirical material comes from several sources. First, we conducted ten formal and in-depth interviews with team members, five interviews from each sport with two coaches and three athletes. The interviews were conducted on various locations in the years 2009–2013. They were semi-structured and generally lasted around sixty minutes. All the interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder. Second, we conducted fifteen informal interviews with coaches, staff and team members of both teams. They were conducted verbally on various locations. These interviews were used to use ideas in conjunction with our ongoing analysis. Third, we used material from various documents, such as books, newspapers and magazines; television coverage of games and sporting contests, and news and online news sites. Last but not least two of the authors spent countless hours watching the teams in competition. The first author also spent numerous hours making observations in connection with practice of the teams, and the teams' participation in some of their major international tournaments.

Findings

The invisible force of team culture

Fine (2003) argued that over time all groups develop a unique and distinctive *idioculture*. An idioculture,

... consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis of further interaction. (Fine 1987, 125)

In this light, Luckmann (1967) considered the interactions between members of a team as reaffirming the desirable conventional values of the team (basically, to win within the boundaries of custom) as they are recreated in negotiation and transformed into traditions. Such traditions create their own power, which transcends the individuals that make them up (Birrell 1981; Shils 1981). These structural and cultural traditions are further embedded into the everyday life of actors who, generally speaking, lack explicit awareness of how overarching realities affect and influence them (Granovetter 1985). Mead (1934, 255) also made the analogy of the individual in society as living in 'a certain sort of organism.' Both the handball team and the gymnastic team have developed a specific idioculture, but both teams share some important socio-cultural characteristics.

Athletes, from both sport teams, noticed a special atmosphere in their sport clubs, which they described as some kind of 'an invisible force' that helped them succeed. A handball player described the importance of such a tradition that provides an invisible force at his local club when he came to play at the senior level:

I found that the boys my age at a similar caliber as I was, but were in other teams, needed to do more than I did, only because they were not in the team that I was in. They were talented and all became good handball players but it seems that we were more protected, in a positive way. We always had something positive that kept us going, some kind of an invisible force from this environment. (Vilhjálmsson 2013)

This 'invisible force' was also noted by one of the gymnasts who said that the younger girls she coaches at Gerpla 'really want to win and say they have to win; they are going to win the European Championship, because they represent Gerpla.' She added:

If you are a gymnast at Gerpla you have the chance to go further than if you are in some other club. You want to match the expectations of the club and you always have someone to look up to, who has done it before. This was not the case in my former club where I felt stale.

The gymnast described a social rush common to many competitors who become, in a stereotypical fashion, lifted together by the shared experience of striving toward a shared goal. This 'stereotypical lift' (Shih, Pittinsky, and Amabady 1999; Walton and Cohen 2003) emerges when one plays for a certain team, club, or country. It has energizing effects on the individuals that partake in such cultures. They believe they should aim for success and should achieve success. One of the younger gymnasts acknowledged this lift by noting:

A great spirit emerged with the older girls when they became the first to win something. Then the new girls come in and are affected by the spirit. The atmosphere, the cohesion, and how we practice have managed to hold through all this time. (Clausen 2013, 13)

The rush of being part of a team in pursuit of a collective goal resembles, in part, the spirit of Sherif's (1958, 349, 350) 'superordinate goals.' Obviously, the rush exists in conjunction with a competitive orientation that Sherif decried, but the emotional feeling, expressed

individually and shared collectively, does encourage a collective standpoint in the specious present. Such a standpoint, while not purely playful in a non-competitive world, does provide a sense of collective responsibility and belonging. As Swidler (1986) argues, cultures that provide its members with a sense of responsibility to the collective goals of a group, even in a competitive atmosphere, also provide 'toolkits' of habits, skills and styles from which people construct strategies of action.

Further, the training of both the handball and the gymnastic teams were in many ways like a craft workshop (Sennett 2008). The experienced athletes led by example, set the standards for coordinating behavior and taught the younger and less experienced athletes the tricks of the trade, both explicitly and tacitly (Polanyi 1958). This formal and informal coding of activities is an example of what Mead described as 'a process of education' of belonging to a community (1934, 254). The communication was informal and open and the athletes were friends (see further in Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, and Katovich 2014; and for musicians in Green 2002).

The senior players saw themselves as keepers of the team culture. In effect, the seniors taught the juniors the importance of functional and categorical identities, or effective ways to coordinate with others and an emotional attachment that comes with successful coordination respectively (see also Christakis and Fowler 2008). The particular process of such team control allows coaches and sport administrators to effectively de-authoritize themselves; they do not have to be the ones who tell the players, directly, what to do. They follow the cultural tradition that has emerged through time, just as they themselves learned the tricks of the trade when they were younger. The importance of such senior-to-junior educational process bolsters a shared and common orientation to the past (see Shils 1981); one of the unwritten rules of being experienced athletes on the team coincides with lodging each other in clear and consistent traditions (see Katovich and Couch 1992, 17–18).

Since the juniors come to play on the same team and represent the team along with the seniors, it is also in the seniors' best interest to educate the new members of the team properly. One handball coach told us that, 'Some of the seniors (veterans) are always assisting the juniors (novices). They share ideas, give advice and make suggestions on how to behave and compete in practice and competition, on and off the field.' This notion of serving the best interests of the team while, concomitantly, serving the best interest of particular individuals (the seniors) is illustrated in the following quote from one of the gymnast coaches:

They [the new girls] come in and need to start noticing and experiencing the culture of the team. They feel it instantly if their behavior is not in line with the culture in the group. This is made crystal clear by the older girls, which control the culture of the group and keep the younger ones in line with how to train and behave in practice.

Such information of how to behave is not only passed explicitly from athlete to athlete, but also tacitly in which new team members are further affected by the team culture (Polanyi 1958). This process of culture development has been described by Antin (1984) as 'tuning.' The younger athletes learn from and follow the tradition that the older and more experienced athletes have created or sustained, as the examples above illustrate. In this sense, Goffman referred to new team members as 'sweet conspirators' that engage in maintaining the stability of some definitions of a situation that members created within the context of a team (1959, 237). As one senior gymnast said, 'If, the juniors don't comply with the norms of the team they will be dropped from the team.'

In effect, the seniors view the juniors, almost immediately, as beholden to ‘the generalized other;’ even though the juniors may not be aware of such an other immediately, their ability to recognize it as quickly as possible is linked to their life chances of belonging on the team. The expectation of awareness of a generalized other runs both ways. The senior gymnast mentioned above further stated that all of the senior gymnasts must be aware of the importance of welcoming new girls into the team. As she stated, ‘People put in more effort if they feel welcome so we try to let them all feel welcomed because we want to get the best out of everyone.’ The aforementioned impact of sharing pasts and having pasts in common also applies. As all the girls on the gymnastic team know of each other and have established deep friendships, they put in an extensive amount of emotional labor so as to eliminate a feeling of being outsiders in an already close knit group. This labor became evident for the younger gymnasts when they became part of the senior gymnastic team. One of the younger gymnasts acknowledged the importance of emotional continuity by noting:

When we became part of the team we learned by imitating what the older girls in the team were doing. Then it develops with the individuals in the team into an awesome team spirit. (Clausen 2013, 13)

It is important to note that this transmission of the team culture and values did not emanate from specific individuals who established themselves as leaders. Rather than a ‘hierarchy of credibility’ noted by Becker (1967, 241), a more horizontal shape of the team emerged, with all participants feeling responsible for re-creating the team concept in their interactions with others. The team, then, did not represent the influence of specific individuals, but seemed to symbolize a collective mentality. As one of the handball players noted:

It doesn’t really matter which players are in the squad each time, there is always this spirit of enthusiasm and engagement. You could say that whoever comes into the team learns instantly the shared mentality of the team and what it means to be in this group. (Einarsson 2014, 11)

Goffman (1967, 8–10) noted that in particular settings, individuals are inclined to behave according to a code of conduct that becomes etched into an awareness of belonging to a particular group. The ‘correct’ self-presentation (Goffman 1959) is an important aspect of the team. It helps to promote solidarity and cohesion. At the same time it serves to promote the existing cultural code. When an individual transgresses such a code within the group, if he shows ‘a wrong face’ or becomes ‘out of face,’ for instance, he/she is ‘likely to feel ashamed and inferior because of what may happen to his reputation as a participant’ (Goffman 1967, 8). To avoid being ‘shamefaced,’ individuals on the team align their self-image to the collective future of the team, presenting them as loyal to the temporal orientations held in high esteem by the team.

The new members also contribute to the culture through negotiating and improvising successful performances in ways similar to jazz musicians (Faulkner and Becker 2009). The emergent character of a team becomes visible, coinciding with the extant and honored cultural tradition of the team. In this way, the references and re-creations of team not only align the team members, but also give them a social thrill – the team concept appears as new and refreshing as it is old and honored.

Collective representations and the importance of keeping things backstage

According to Civettini (2007) similarity in groups increases teambuilding processes and further team efficiency. This process of similarity-to-team co-orientations applies to the two

teams we compared and contrasted. The athletes in both teams are a homogenous group. They come from similar cultural backgrounds with extensive shared pasts (Katovich and Couch 1992) and they consider themselves as friends. In the groups we examined, their team practice became a way of reaffirming their friendships and building upon their shared pasts and collective representations. The on-going sense of teamwork also works as allowing for emergence within the routines. With an extensive shared past and affirmations of affection, the teams engage in routine, but also find ways to tweak the routine with novelty, without disrupting the team-oriented goals. One of the handball coaches spoke of the enjoyment of playing with the national team because the players are sometimes dying of boredom in their league teams. 'The players really enjoy coming in for national team periods and meeting their teammates and they start to put more soul into it. They love playing for the national team, more than their own team.' He further noted:

On international weeks the players are supposed to be on vacation from their regular jobs but despite that they practice two times every day and attend a team meeting. I have never really understood this commitment to the national team. It seems, somehow, to boost their energy, though their bodies are desperate for rest.

In other words, coming together means that the players celebrate their shared past and their homogenous backgrounds. Thus the team culture and the homegnious background of the players strengthens their solidarity and their intrinsic motivation. One of the senior gymnasts further spoke of winning trophies as secondary to other means of being on the team. She said:

All the practice, to be a part of something that has been developing for years where everyone is aiming for the same goal, wants the same, are doing the same, and are ready to do all they can, to be a part of this empire. By taping together their loose ankles, taking pain killers, not being able to get out of bed in the morning but never complaining about it because everyone is doing it. It's awesome to be a part of something like that, I just love it.

The quotation above also illustrates the importance of secrecy as a way of honoring and maintaining the team ethos. Teammates avoid complaining about injuries or physical problems so as to align themselves with superordinate objectives. Any problems regarded as serious are kept, at least initially, backstage. Furthermore, knowing that everybody honors such segregation, keeping up healthy appearances frontstage and discussing seriousness of injuries backstage adds to the the team cohesion.

While almost all of the Icelandic handball players are professionals, they do not get monetary payments for competing at major international tournaments or being successful at major tournaments. This lack of monetary compensation contrasts with most of their opposing players on other national teams. Further, all of the gymnasts compete on an amateur level; they pay for team trips and participation fees at their sport club. Rather than making a lack of monetary payoff an issue, the athletes from both teams seem interested more in their behavioral coordination as team members. The coordination symbolizes collective motivation and emotional allegiance to the team rather than a monetary outcome (see Halldorsson, Helgason, and Thorlindsson 2012).

One of the underlying bonds that seems to emerge as the team builds their solidary alignments is steeped in their feelings of exculsivity. The team practices together as friends and builds upon shared histories, but also does so in segregated settings, removed from external monitoring. Such seclusion affirms the feeling of performing in a revered space, a specialized backstage that further reminds each of the team members of the strengths of

their association. In effect, many key elements, such as friendship, trust and strong social bonds, that strengthen group solidarity are developed backstage. As Birrell (1981) argues, social bonds are strongest between individuals who share a common sense of backstage cohesion; they use such cohesion to guard the team's secrets.

Even though teamwork was valued and favored by team members of both teams, and the teams seemed united on the frontstage, elite athletes are in many ways ego-centered – which can make team building a challenging task. Backstage constructions of team unity do not ensure seamless transitions from individualistic pride to team camaraderie. The practice period can involve a roller coaster of emotions, conflict and drama. The athletes internalize ambitious goals for themselves as well as the team. Their personal ambitions correlate with the increasingly commercialised and idolized world of sport, which has become almost fever-pitched, accelerated by promises of money for individualistic exposure that many find hard to resist. The combination of athletic ego and financial compensation (often) beyond one's imagination can invite a type of individualism in which, to use the famous words of Goffman, can 'disintegrate into islands inhabited by solitary, cultish men, each in continuous worship at his own shrine' (Goffman 1956, 478).

The team members recognize the disparities between team identification and individual aspirations. All understand that each one on the team wants to expand his or her career and to test one's limits. The individuals are competitively driven and competition helps them push themselves further. The intensity of competition makes practice sessions for both teams very competitive. A handball coach stated, 'The atmosphere in practice can be very tough. The players are all trying to use their time to show what they can and there's a lot of intensity in practice.' When the competition level at practice rises, especially when a number of athletes are competitive, it affects the whole practice and further the whole culture of practice in the team. One of the gymnastic coaches observed that, 'there is some kind of ego-boost that occurs in the competition.' But the intensity goes beyond ego-boosting *per se*. Doing well in practice allows members of the team to 'keep face' (Goffman 1959). The coaches of both teams encourage such competition in practice as it not only accomplishes the overt, practical goals associated with improvement, but also the latent goals associated with a more intersubjective unity – or with the establishment of a social consciousness indicating that teammates operate 'on the same page.' One of the gymnast coaches observed the following in regard to the competitive spirit of the gymnast:

If one of them makes a new jump, they all want to make new jumps, and if one of the girls gets to make one more jump than the other at the end of practice, the others come and say 'how come she gets to go again, what about me?'

Competition between individuals inspires intensity of action that further intensifies practice and stretches both the physical and mental toughness of the athletes. It also encourages, indirectly, a social atmosphere, even when taking time-out from practice. One senior gymnast noted that, 'There are injuries, crying and tiredness and frequently we need to have emergency-meetings; fortunately they are held.' Another of the senior gymnasts further accepted this competitive atmosphere as important for success, stating that, 'It would be abnormal if there wasn't in-team competition, if it weren't we didn't really want to improve.' This in-team competition can be seen as another example of the backstage metaphor of a secret society in which performances occur outside of audience awareness. On the frontstage, the team appear united, almost ego-less. One gymnast described the united frontstage appearance in this way:

We circle up together, smile, encourage each other, wear identical uniforms, hair, and make-up, and never show a sign of weakness. If you hurt yourself you pull yourself together and fake your way back without limping.

While the above examples emphasize the secret societies involved in backstage places another set of team-oriented activities represents a kind of ritual as noted by Durkheim ([1893] 1997) and Goffman (1959). These collective rituals affect team spirit and team bonding. Individuals and teams employ rituals in sport for various reasons and one is to relieve and resolve anxiety (Sennett 2012). An illustration of this resolution was made by one of the gymnast coaches:

Going into competition we emphasize eye contact with all the girls making a circle. There comes this moment where everyone makes an eye contact with other team members, and then they start to smile and burst with energy. Then we remember to enjoy the moment. There is some kind of collective cohesion that emerges where everyone feels that we are in this thing together, some kind of 'let's do it' moment.

In Goffman's terms, athletes want to 'save face' by showing an attitude based on displaying all possible effort to the closely-knit people or community. One handball coach noted that since Iceland has so few players to choose from, the players feel that they have no choice but to do all they can for the team and their country. As this coach noted, 'It's almost as if they're obliged to do it.' One experienced gymnast highlighted another aspect of sacrifice, sacrifice from social life, where she was motivated to 'save face' for her friends:

It's awesome to win the European Championship and all that but I found the win more important for the public to accept what we are doing. All the sacrifices we have made through the years that most people didn't understand or really accept. But with these wins we convinced everyone that we were doing something worth doing.

Giulianotti (2005) argues in a Durkheimian sense that athletes and teams gain sacred status as community representatives by showing 'spirit,' 'heart,' or 'soul' while 'passionless' teams and athletes, on the other hand, lack the general community appeal. Birrell (1981) has further linked Goffman's definition of ideal characteristics, such as pride, honor, and dignity (Goffman 1967, 9, 10) to the sporting context, where the showing of 'the right' attitude can aspire individuals to heroic status. In the context of national competition these characteristics become part of collective representations highlighting desirable cultural sentiments. Thus, athletes are motivated to show grace, both before their teammates, backstage, and more importantly, before the audience, onstage.

Organic solidarity and skilled agency

Classical sociology asserts that it makes all the difference how group solidarity is achieved. Different types of group solidarity and cohesion imply differences in social organization and the dynamic interplay of social structures and individual agency. Less attention has, however, been paid to the fact that teams can achieve cohesion in various ways, which may hinder or enhance performance. In particular, a team can be organized by ties of co-operation and dynamic interactions between individual and group of individuals – as a small group. This type of organization derives from the interdependence of different tasks and contributions to the team and deep knowledge of each player's skills and personal style through a kind of organic solidarity (see Durkheim [1893] 1997). Such solidarity highlights the importance of all team members coordinating as individuals and as identified with a collective effort,

providing agency, resources, and freedom to make important decisions in the heat of the game on the playing field (see also Corte 2013; Farrell 2003).

An emphasis on effective teamwork associated with organic solidarity served as a fundamental part of the forming of both the handball and the gymnastic teams. The coaching staffs of both teams were aware of the importance of selecting the right type of athletes to make a team in terms of athletic ability, understanding of the complexity of intertwined roles, and displays of character. One of the gymnast coaches said, 'We always try to choose gymnast that can contribute to the team.' Similarly, one of the handball coaches stated that, 'I didn't necessary pick the best hand-ballers, I picked the right players for the team.' Team selection, then, included the standard measures of talent that often became defined as objective measures, but also relied on more intuitive and subjective measures to evaluate a person's contribution to the team spirit, as a whole.

Consistent with organic solidarity, both teams had many leaders who contributed in different ways to team functioning. The gymnastic team did not appoint a specific captain or specify any formal leader roles within the team. But with time, such roles emerged. The coaches ignited this process by taking some of the most experienced girls for a chat to hear their opinion of the team. Afterwards, these girls took more control within the team as if the other team members regarded them as assistant coaches, although never appointed as such. Neither team we studied was built on the physical abilities of their athletes alone. The selection process for the teams was built on a range of athlete's abilities, physical, social and psychological. It was also built on the ability to coordinate, on the spot, in emergent moments, based upon their shared histories of coordination, which becomes the basis of organic solidarity. The coaches promoted and relied on the agency of individuals whose various abilities were important for team development. Thus, larger structural elements do not only affect team building, but also depend heavily on the agency of individuals (Corte 2013). This dynamic interplay of structural factors and individual agency reflect the social aspects of successful teamwork in sport.

Conclusion

Our analysis identified the importance of a special 'idioculture' for successful teamwork. The team members themselves experience this culture and described it as 'an invisible force,' 'an awesome team spirit,' 'a spirit of enthusiasm and engagement,' and a 'shared mentality' that members either gladly follow or they honor to avoid being 'shamefaced.' Thus new members must adjust to the prevailing cultural tradition and align their self-image and activity to the team 'spirit.' If one fails to express the team spirit, he/she loses face in the eyes of his/her significant others. This type of atmosphere or team spirit is collective. It cannot be fully explained by individual characteristics. It is created and maintained in part through socialization of new members and in part by the fact that individuals are embedded in the social networks that are defined by team structure (Granovetter 1985; Thorlindsson 2011). The embeddedness of individuals in a sport team that has a strong culture and a stable structure means that they have to interact according to the social rules that define the interaction order – which, Shils (1981) noted as 'the past in the present' (34–44). Because the team culture is produced in concrete interactional settings, team culture, solidarity and performance are dynamic processes that involve self-presentation, negotiation of meaning, and improvising successful performances. This dynamic appears similar to jazz performances

(Faulkner and Becker 2009) that emphasize improvisation within an established framework, making teamwork new and exciting as well as old and honored.

The force of culture is in part captured by collective representation. It helps us to explain how the powers of cultural sentiments that reside outside the team are turned on to strengthen the power of team solidarity and enhance performance. Thus successful teamwork is facilitated by shared social motivations that function as collective representations. Collective representations have more power to create team cohesion and trust in situations in which individuals come from homogeneous backgrounds, share interactional pasts, and establish ongoing informal networks. Durkheim's theory of collective representation thus helps to capture important aspects of team building and team performance. It helps to explain how cultural sentiments; values, norms and attitudes promote collective motivation to strengthen social bonds and to create solidarity and cohesion.

The analysis above provides us with a clear contrast between two different social worlds, described by Goffman as backstage and frontstage. By situating a team in different social contexts provides us with the opportunity to analyze teams on two distinct levels. Thus it is vital for team solidarity to keep some serious problems and conflict backstage. Also, many key elements, such as friendship, trust and strong social bonds, that strengthen group solidarity are developed backstage. Again, social bonds are strongest between individuals who share a common sense of backstage cohesion; they use such cohesion to guard the team's secrets (Birrell 1981). Finally, knowing that everybody honors the code of keeping up good appearances frontstage and leaving the problems backstage adds to the team cohesion.

In other words, secrecy plays an important part in honoring and maintaining the team ethos. Teammates avoid complaining about injuries or physical problems aligning themselves with superordinate objectives. Thus sport teams epitomize what Goffman terms as 'secret societies' that refer to a team oriented approach to rituals, derived from shared pasts. The findings show how rituals invite re-enactment; they also involve negotiation, impression management and the establishment of a dynamic interaction between personal and collective identities within this secret society.

Our analysis underscores the importance of studying how solidarity and cohesion are achieved. It shows how the social structure of a team where solidarity is organic is different from a team that is characterized by mechanic solidarity. These differences have important implications for team effectiveness. Because organic solidarity derives from the interdependence of different tasks and deep knowledge of each player's skills and personal style through a kind of organic solidarity (see Durkheim [1893] 1997), it provides more agency, resources, and freedom to deal with unexpected things and make important decisions in the heat of the game on the playing field (see also Corte 2013; Farrell 2003). Organic solidarity becomes more important as these sports develop to a higher level of complexity. It allows the teams to handle more complex types of plays without losing solidarity (Durkheim [1893] 1997; Thorlindsson 1978).

A sport team is an interaction order. It is to be understood as a small group that involves face-to-face interaction, temporality and emergence. The emotional and the ritual elements of communication combine to strengthen collective aspects of team spirit by giving the right messages. They help to create team confidence, positive feelings, togetherness, collective motivation and support. Failure to do this results in a loss of face in regard to teammates. This type of atmosphere or team spirit is collective. It cannot be fully explained by individual characteristics. While we recognize that individual characteristics is vital for effective

teamwork, we maintain that we need to change the focus from the ‘oversozialized’ individual to the team-level of face to face interaction.

A sport team must be analyzed as an open community located in a multiplicity of interaction scenes and networks. Every team depends on a secret society that operates backstage. Secrecy and the ability of teams to keep disruptive things backstage may combine with homogeneity and shared pasts to strengthen the power of collective representation. These elements may come together to evoke a sense of privilege and exclusiveness as well as enjoyment of playing for the national team. Including the wider social-cultural context, to the analysis, provides academics and practitioners in the field of sport with a wider lens for viewing team building and teamwork and opens up new dimensions for analysis and interpretation.

Note

1. The team Gerpla represented that Icelandic National team in 2012.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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