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THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF A SUCCESSFUL SPORT TRADITION: A CASE STUDY OF ICELANDIC TEAM HANDBALL

Thorolfur Thorlindsson and Vidar Halldorsson

ABSTRACT

In this study, we analyze sport as a cultural product of a particular place. We use the concept of “tradition” to highlight the collective (as opposed to individual) aspects of sport, emphasizing the importance of temporality, emergence, and novelty in social processes. We conducted a case study of internationally successful Icelandic men’s team handball that provides an interesting topic in this respect. Our findings challenge decades of research on sport that has stressed innate talent, individual qualities or physiological processes rather than the sociocultural processes. They support the interactionist approach to culture showing how local culture, rooted in specific interaction settings, influences the formation and development of a successful sport tradition. It is the way that cultural elements interact and combine in various networks that is crucial for national variations in playing sport. The social processes involved are best captured by Mead’s concepts of emergence, novelty, and the principle of sociality. These concepts help us to explain how unique national styles of playing sports derive from general cultural and social mechanism that interact to produce emergent and novel national variations. Our findings also support and extend earlier work on craftsmanship indicating that crafts-work, which is a part of an organized community resembling the old “workshop,” explains in part how innovations originate in sport-specific and other local networks. These theories offer a sociological

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extension of pragmatic theories of learning, emphasizing the group in the tradition of Mead.

Keywords: Cultural production; interactionist theory of culture; sport tradition; collective achievement; craftsmanship; Mead

INTRODUCTION

All major sports have at one time or another witnessed the development of national or local variations in the playing style of sport teams, reminding us that sports traditions are a product of particular place (Fine, 1979; Gieryn, 2002; Halldorsson, 2017). Sports have strong roots in the local community. They are framed by the local culture and embedded in local networks and norms. They thrive on the local support of fans and depend heavily on local resources (Corte, 2013; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, & Katovich, 2014; Houlihan, 2006; Peterson, 2008). Brazilian football and the East African distance runners are two examples of local sporting traditions that have developed into a global success. Several scholars have suggested that traditional culture forms the basis for the great tradition of running among the Kenyan people (Bale & Sang, 1996; Manners, 2007; Pitsiladis, Onywera, Geogiades, O'Connell, & Boit, 2004) and for football in Brazil (Lever, 1983; Salema & Morales, 2004).

Sport has also a very strong global dimension. The same rules and regulations of a sport are applied all over the world, regardless of nationality and ethnicity. Professional sport teams in many countries include players and coaches from many nationalities. Sport expertise, the knowledge base of sport, and the opportunities to succeed are to a considerable extent located at the international level. Globalized and highly institutionalized events such as the Olympic Games attract the attention of billions of people all over the world. It is unsurprising; therefore, that sport has been presented as a prime example of globalization (Andrews & Grainger, 2008; Donnelly, 1996; Kobayshi, 2011; Maguire, 1999; Rowe, 2003).

There is an abundance of sociological research on the interdependence of sport and society as well as the local and global dimensions of sport. Research on the collective base and the development of national and local variations in playing style or the development of successful sport traditions is, however, limited. While there are notable exceptions to this rule (see Bale & Sang, 1996; Carlson, 1988; Chambliss, 1988; Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, & Katovich, 2014; Peterson, 2008), the shortage of sociological research is striking.

The lack of sociological research on the development of successful sport traditions may be due to the overemphasis on individual-level explanations of sport achievement. As the sociologists Robert K. Merton ([1960]/1973) pointed out more than 50 years ago, research on the nature of excellence has been more concerned with individual-level explanation than sociocultural ones. Merton ([1960]/1973, p. 424) indicates that to study what kind of "social environments

evoke or suppress the effective development of identifiable aptitudes” should be a starting ground for a sociological approach to achievement.

The sociological study of achievement should not be confined to the study of individual characteristics. One world-class Brazilian football player or one Kenyan runner may raise interesting questions about the role of socialization and the social environment in the production of a top world-class athlete, but it does not make for an interesting social phenomenon or a central sociological topic. The emergence of a large group of world-class athletes, coaches, and strong national teams that continue to come from a confined geographical area constitutes a social tradition, which is a topic for a sociological inquiry. It highlights the collective aspects of sport and the importance of culture and social organization.

The current study with its focus on sport as a cultural production is a step toward a better understanding of how the local culture nested in the micro-interaction order plays a key role in the social formations of sports traditions. We conducted a case study of Icelandic men’s team handball that provides an interesting topic in this respect. Its international success has caught considerable attention over the years. Sport specialists wonder how such a tiny country can be so successful in such a popular international team sport (Gregory, 2012; Halldorsson, 2017; Kuper, 2012; Thorolfsson & Gunnarsson, 2013, p. 34). Iceland is by far the smallest country to win an Olympic medal in team sport and to win a medal in the European handball championship.

We use the concept of “tradition” to highlight the collective forces (as opposed to the individual forces) that shape the nature of sport disciplines and teams. The emphasis on the collective nature of a tradition assumes that everybody, not just one individual in a group of people, a school class, or a community can show excellence (Berger, 2004). We study local variations in playing sport as a group phenomenon (Becker, [1982]/2008; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; McCain, 1981; Shils, 1981) rather than the achievement of individuals.

But social traditions do not exist in a social and cultural vacuum. Athletes and sport clubs are embedded in a variety of local social networks. The overlap of sport-specific networks with other community networks provides a strong connection between sport and the local culture (Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson et al., 2014). Cultural elements that are reproduced in social interaction in specific interaction arenas, outside sport may influence sport activity in various ways (Fine, 1979; Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson et al., 2014). We therefore explore several ways in which the wider social and cultural context influences the emergence and the development of the Icelandic team handball tradition.

A main contribution of our cultural analysis to the current literature is that we extend Becker’s ([1982]/2008) and Fine’s (1996) theories of craftwork in the direction marked earlier by Thorstein Veblen (1914) and C. Wright Mills ([1951]/2002) and more recent work by Harper (1987), Sennett (2009, 2012), and Thorlindsson (1994). We argue that the craftsmanship theories set forth by these sociologists represent a sociological version of the pragmatic approach to learning and innovation. It is a cultural orientation that focuses on the collective

approach to problem-finding and problem-solving, nested, maintained, and changed in a community of interacting people.

In the classical sociological traditions of Durkheim and Weber, we also explore how cultural values influence the emergence and the development of Icelandic handball. We argue that the interactionist's theory, with its emphases on the interaction order, provides a fruitful approach to analyze the collective aspects of sport success.

Finally, we build on researchers who conceive the relationship between the local and the global as a dynamic interaction (Andrews & Grainger, 2008; Bairner, 2001). We see globalization of team handball as a key element in the development of Icelandic handball. Global phenomena enter into the local interaction order in various ways (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). The global organization of sport rests on the micro-interaction order and various local cultures (Fine, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1999).

The goal of our study is not to isolate the influence of a particular variable on a given outcome. Rather, we want to explain the uniqueness of a particular case with reference to general social processes and mechanism. Our analytical strategy is not based on the standard mechanistic model that seeks to isolate key variables and demonstrate their regular association and their individual contribution to a given dependent variable (see Abbott, 1988; Becker, 2014, pp. 12–16). Rather, we argue that George H. Mead's theory of social processes, involving emergence and novelty, guided by the principle of sociality, offers the best conceptual framework to capture the cultural production of a sport tradition (Mead, [1932]/1980). In other words, we study one particular case in detail in order to understand how general social mechanisms come together to produce a novel variation in the national style of playing the team sport of handball. The challenge is to show how a detailed knowledge of a particular case can help us to understand the cultural production and the social organization of a successful sport tradition.

The Interactionist Approach to Culture

Culture is a central feature of every society. It affects everybody that enters into it. It shapes families, communities, and nations. It transcends individuality, race class, and gender. The cultural turn in sociology reflects this all-embracing presence of culture in human behavior. There is, however, a considerable reluctance to use culture to explain both individual and group behavior (Fine, 1979; Landes, 2000, pp. 1–4; Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2008). One of the reasons for this reluctance is that cultural influences are both complex and subtle and hard to isolate in relation to other kinds of variables. It is difficult to disentangle, isolate, and interpret the influence of culture on individuals and groups. Cultural elements are therefore often bypassed in the search for "harder" independent variables. Seeking technological solutions to both practical and theoretical problems may for several reasons be more attractive for social scientists (Fine, 1979; Landes, 2000, pp. 1–4; Swidler, 1986).

In order to overcome some of the ambiguities in cultural analysis, we must specify what it is in culture that influences social phenomena. We must identify the relevant cultural elements that enter into any particular analysis. Sociologists of culture have stressed different features of culture in this respect. We distinguish between three overlapping lines of thought. They are to be understood as ideal types that do not exist in pure form in sociological research.

The first line of thought focuses on motivational power of cultural values. This idea has been a central part of sociology ever since Weber's analysis of the role of the protestant ethic in the rise of capitalism ([1930]/1992). It was popularized by Parsons voluntarist theory of action ([1937]/1968). It assumes that cultural values, which are transmitted via socialization to children, motivate, and direct social action. C. Wright Mills ([1959]/2000) and later Scott and Lyman (1968) contested Parson's position and argued that culture is more of a justification than a motivation for action. It provides vocabularies of motives or scripts that can be used to justify behavior. Vaisey (2009) has convincingly argued that both processes are at work in social encounters. He presents a dual process model that integrates justificatory and motivational behavior into a coherent theoretical approach.

The second line of thought sees culture as a tool kit or repertoire of practical skills and strategies that help people deal with everyday life situations. Swidler (1986) maintains that culture provides tools that are used to construct strategies of action. The tool kit theory of culture has been extended by sociologists that draw on theories of cognition to explain how culture influences individual behavior (DiMaggio, 1997; Schafer, 2014). For some of these theorists, the idea of schema provides a conceptual link to connect the external cultural context with individual moral calculations (Schafer, 2014).

The third line of thought is the symbolic interactionists version of pragmatism. This approach deviates from the first two in important ways. First, it holds that cultural meanings derive from interaction (Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1979; Mead, [1934]/1970). Culture is created, maintained, and transmitted through interaction. Culture is not interaction, but knowing and using culture is inevitably tied to specific interaction contexts. The small group is the prototype of these interaction contexts (Fine, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). It is therefore fruitful to examine culture within the context of specific interaction settings (Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1979). Unlike most cultural approaches the symbolic interactionists approach does not focus on culture in action as an individual activity. Rather, it emphasizes interaction within the small group. This characteristic of the interactionist approach is fundamentally different from other dominating approaches to culture. Thus, many of the central problems related to the influence of culture on individual action are dissolved in the interactionist system. Debates about motivation *visa* via justifications, contradictions in the tool kit theory (see Vaisey, 2009), and the need to introduce schema or individual cognition (DiMaggio, 1997; Schafer, 2014) to connect group and individual levels are rooted in the various strains of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European dualism (Thorlindsson, 2011). Many of these problems of dualistic thought were overcome in Mead's theoretical system. He rejected the dominating idea that

meanings, ideas, and intentions (motives) were strictly private and subjective. Instead he argued that experiences that are sharable by members in a group were both objective and universal. The focus on the collective aspects of society and interaction, as the bases for objective knowledge and individual development, makes Mead's system radically different from the individual-level theories. Culture, according to Mead, is part of "the world that is there" (Mead, [1934/1970]). It provides the context for a meaningful social interaction. Culture comes into play through interaction. New variations of culture (*idiocultures*) develop in interaction settings (Fine, 1979). Culture can therefore influence groups and individuals in many ways. It is part of a complex social process that can provide meaning, motivation, and justification, as well as tools or schemas (perspectives) to tackle problems that rise in interaction and of individuals or social groups.

The Concept of Tradition

We use the concept of "tradition" to highlight the collective as opposed to the individual nature of sport. We stress that team handball, like any other sport, forms a cultural tradition in its own right. It is characterized by its own internal social dynamics that shape its development. Sport, like art and science, is therefore self-fertilizing in the sense that many innovations flow from the development of the sport tradition itself (see Corte, 2013). Shils defines tradition as "anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (1981, p. 12).

Focusing on tradition helps us to study local variations in playing sport as a group phenomenon, with its roots in the past, rather than solely the achievement of individuals, in the here and now (Corte, 2013; Halldorsson, 2017; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; McCain, 1981). The concept of tradition emphasizes temporality, emergence, and novelty. It locates the past in the present (Becker, [1982]/2008; Shils, 1981). Any social tradition of art, science, or sport includes inputs and experience from a variety of networks. As Becker ([1982]/2008) points out in his analysis of jazz musicians:

[...] artists create a tradition a world of conventional discourse, a gallery of exemplars to be imitated, conversed with, or rebelled against, a context of other works in which any particular work makes sense and gets meaning. (p. 361)

Sport teams like jazz musicians are part of a social tradition that is nested in the community of interacting people playing sports. They do not start their interaction afresh every time they meet. They rely upon expectation and shared understandings that have developed over time. They build on collective memories, common pasts, and joint imagined futures (Faulkner & Becker, 2009; Fine, 2010; Katovich & Couch, 1992). Team handball like any other sport forms a cultural tradition in its own right. It is characterized by its own internal social dynamics that shape its development.

Mead's Principle of Sociality, Emergence, Novelty, and Adjustment

Mead offers the principle of sociality as an alternative to the idea of linear development and deterministic view that characterizes many epistemological systems ([1932]/1980). It is an attempt to overcome duality and offer instead a constructive pragmatism that places knowledge within experience. Mead rejects the view that a single past determines every present. He recognizes, however, that the present emerges out of social interaction of individuals and groups that are placed in different social contexts that provide the conditions for social emergence. Human beings have the ability to occupy several systems at once. They participate in many social groups that give rise to multiplicity of emergent situations. Mead uses the principle of sociality to describe the processes that go on between an old and a new system. It is the principle of adjustment that the new system has to make in response to a novel event. This response involves the emergence of a new reality, a system or a perspective, that allows for rational or a meaningful reorganization of both the past and the present. Sociality, according to Mead, is both the form and the principle of emergence. The principle of sociality helps to understand adjustments that are made in societies and social groups. It is the principle of social change. The principle of sociality indicates that cultural elements from different social settings or arenas of social society overlap and interact in complex ways to produce novelties, adjustment, and emergent social phenomenon that shape the formation and the development social traditions.

The Social Organization of Sport in Iceland

Sport is social in the sense that it is socially organized and it is nested in various social contexts. The local sociological perspective emphasizes the embeddedness of social actors in social networks and social interaction that is tied to a recognizable specific interaction scene (Fine, 2010). It produces a local social order that has its own structure (Fine, 2010). The social organization of sport may highlight some elements of culture and downplay other elements. Thus, the organization of sport in Iceland may highlight important cultural values and habits and give sport “cultural tools” that influence the way sport is done. Social conditions and the various social and cultural elements may interact in complex ways with sport-specific elements to produce variations in sport traditions.

Five characteristics of the social organization of sport in Iceland are crucial in order to understand the cultural production of sport in general and the formation of a successful handball tradition in particular. First, the sport clubs, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, were rooted in the voluntaristic movements that were influential in Iceland as in the other Scandinavian countries (Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, & Katovich, 2014; Halldorsson, 2017; Peterson, 2008). Sport developed along similar lines as the other voluntaristic organizations such as the workers unions, temperance movement, the scouts, and many other voluntary organizations. They were grassroots movements that were intended to foster democracy and build civic society (Halldorsson, 2017; Peterson, 2008; Seippel, 2008). The roots of these clubs provided a strong

connection with the national culture of farmers and fishermen. It strengthened the bond of sport to some fundamental cultural values and approaches that characterized Icelandic culture.

The second characteristic of Icelandic organization of sport is that sport clubs are organized at the local community level (Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson et al., 2014). The participants are coached by educated coaches and laymen, and run or supported by parents and the local community at large. The sport clubs emphasize competitive sport and promote systematic training and a fixed curriculum. The Icelandic club system with its voluntaristic organization and mass participation strengthens the influence of community networks involving family, friends, and representatives of institutions. These networks play an important role in creating a positive environment, recognizing and directing material, human and social resources toward, formal sports (Halldorsson et al., 2014). The local community provides social capital (Seippel, 2008; Thorlindsson, Bjarnason, & Sigfusdottir, 2007; Thorlindsson, Valdimarsdottir, & Jonsson, 2012) as well as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) that helps to enforce the importance of engagement in formal sports and the effective interface between enduring beliefs and resourceful (e.g., material support) commitments to sustain beliefs (Halldorsson et al., 2014). Also, the influence of the social context at the local level is in part mediated through informal sport and free play (Halldorsson et al., 2014).

The local people due to voluntary work and leadership provide local variations between communities in sport organizations. Research from diverse areas indicates that these informal networks not only cluster in relatively smaller enclaves, but also thrive in such areas (Halldorsson, 2017; Halldorsson et al., 2014). This may explain the geographic concentration of success (Buchanan, 2002; Watts & Strogatz, 1998; Zucker, Darby, & Armstrong, 1998). Fine's (1987) analysis indicates that most cultural elements deriving from participation in formal sports become part of an informal communication system within a relatively small geographical space. The small group system, in turn, creates its own idiographic culture (Fine, 1987).

The third characteristic of the Icelandic sport clubs was their emphasis on mass participation encouraging everybody, regardless of age, sex, and class, to join (Halldorsson, 2017). The major aim of the Icelandic sports movement was from the beginning sport for all. Sport as other voluntaristic movements highlighted cultural ideals and provided people with an opportunity to have fun and develop their skills. It was part of wider efforts to build up national networks and communities and teach democratic values (Halldorsson, 2017; Lúðvíksson, 2012).

The fourth general feature of the Icelandic sport organization was its fusion with English amateurism in the early part of the twentieth century (Finnbogason, 1943; Nordal, 1987; Thorlindsson, Karlsson, & Sigfusdóttir, 1994). Two of the leading scholars of Icelandic culture, Sigurdur Nordal (1987, p. 301) and Gudmundur Finnbogason (1943, pp. 62–63), have emphasized the amateur ideology as a key characteristic of good sport tradition. Nordal (1987, pp. 297–298) explicitly recognized the English version of the amateur ethos as

ideal, while Finnbogason (1933) traces it in part to the old Nordic cultural characteristics. Peterson (2008) has pointed out that the fusion of upper-class English ideology of amateurism with the Scandinavian “sports for all” movement produced a particular organization of sport. When this particular sport model later mixes with international professionalism, it somewhat paradoxically leads to a successful participation in international sport competition. The mixture of English amateurism and Scandinavian type of sports for all movements preserved some of the English ideology of fair play, intrinsic motivation, and the demonstration of skill for its own sake. But it also stressed the collective aspects of sport as well as cultural values such as dedication, hard work, and equality of opportunity, downplaying the importance of individual innate talent.

The overlap of sport-specific networks with other community networks provides a strong connection between sport and the local culture. We therefore suggest that mixture of sport for all, amateurism, rooted in the voluntaristic association spirit of the early twentieth century may help to bring some important cultural characteristics such as an emphasis on craftsmanship, intrinsic motivation free play, and the demonstration of skill into sport (Halldorsson et al., 2014). It may further help to explain the cultural differences of athletes and teams from different geographical areas (Shinke & Hanrahan, 2009). When these elements mix with current professionalism they may provide a healthy resistance to “a mechanical winning at all cost ideology” and provide a good formula for a successful sport tradition (see Halldorsson, 2017).

OBSERVING ICELANDIC HANDBALL

Team handball is a well-established international sport. The International Handball Federation (IHF) was created in 1946 and in 2015, 195 participating national federations comprise it (IHF, 2015). Team handball consists of seven players on the court at any one time, out of a squad of 14 players. The game is fast and physical, and it is played in two 30-minute halves. Handball has been included in the summer Olympics since 1972. The Olympics are one of the three major competitions in world handball. The other two are the World Championship that has been held regularly since 1954 and the European Championship since 1994. European teams have dominated the international handball scene where they have won all gold medals in men’s Olympic and World Cup competitions. There are professional leagues in many European countries. Asian countries have also been successful. South Korea and Japan have regularly been contenders for some of the big titles. Handball is also gaining popularity in North Africa and South-America.

Icelandic Handball

The Icelandic handball tradition provides an interesting case to study the collective base of sport. Iceland is by far the smallest country to win an Olympic medal in team sport and it is also the smallest country to win a medal in the European handball championship – with a population around 330,000. The

international success of Icelandic handball has caught considerable attention over the years. One of Denmark's most experienced and extinguished player, Lars Christiansen, was recently quoted saying, "Iceland has achieved magnificent success as a handball nation and it is quite remarkable that such a tiny country can produce so many good players" (Thorolfsson & Gunnarsson, 2013, p. 34). This view has also been voiced in the international press (Gregory, 2012; Kuper, 2012).

Iceland has produced large number of players that have played with the best teams in many countries. They have won national league titles in Germany, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Sweden, and several other countries, as well as the European Championship, now known as the Champions League. Icelandic coaches have also enjoyed high prestige in international handball. In 2015, three strong European handball nations, beside Iceland, had Icelandic national coaches and Iceland has further three head coaches in the most prestigious national handball league in the world, the Bundesliga in Germany. Icelandic coaches have in recent years regularly been voted among the best coaches in the world.

For Iceland, to have individual athletes or coaches at the highest level is an achievement in itself. It is, however, much more difficult for such small country to produce a national team that can regularly compete with the best in the world. To achieve international success, you need to have at least two or three top players for every position on the field available at the same time. This is a tall order for a small country. Over the decades, Iceland has managed to do that and win the best nations in the world, including reigning World, European, and Olympic champions. But handball success at the international level does not consist of winning isolated matches. It is a more difficult achievement to qualify for the Olympics, European, and World Cup final tournaments. Iceland has managed to do that on a regular basis. Iceland has qualified for the top tournaments consistently since 1958 (see Halldorsson, 2017). It has qualified for the Olympic Games more often than any other Nordic nation. Recent statistics further reveal that only four nations in the world have qualified more often for major international tournaments than Iceland, since the year 2000; Spain, France, Croatia, and Germany (Benediktsson, 2012).

Even more difficult still is to succeed in a competition such as the World Championships and the Olympic games where a team has to compete at top level day after day. Commenting on his experience as a national football coach for Sweden, Nigeria, and Iceland, the successful Swedish coach Lars Lagerbäck points out that the small population of the Scandinavian countries is a great disadvantage because the chances that they have enough good players at the same time are slim. The small size of the Scandinavian countries makes them unlikely to win the big international tournaments (Ágústsson, 2013). Iceland is tiny compared to the other Scandinavian countries (e.g., Denmark is about 17 times bigger than Iceland and Sweden is about 30 bigger times than Iceland). Iceland's is, in fact, one of the smallest of the nations that play international handball.

Method

We conducted a case study of Icelandic handball to examine the collective aspects of the emergent development of successful sport tradition. We examined Icelandic handball through a wide range of observations and material resources for eight years (2008–2015). Our approach is explorative. The aim was to identify some of the key local and cultural characteristics of the Icelandic handball tradition. The study relies on various sources to identify, analyze, and highlight some of the main trends and factors of the Icelandic team's achievement. We (1) conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with members of the national team; players, coaches, and staff; (2) collected newspaper and magazine interviews featuring current and former players and coaches along with other articles on Icelandic handball; (3) followed media coverage of the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games and other major international tournaments; (4) relied on other published material such as a documentary of the team's success in the 2008 Olympics entitled *Pure Silver is Better Than Gold* (Gott silfur gulli betra) and books on the history of Icelandic handball; (5) attended the *Successful Teamwork* (Árangursrík liðsheimild) continuing education course at the University of Iceland in 2009 held by the team's coach and team psychologist; (6) made some local ethnographic observations in connection with Iceland's participation in major international tournaments and at Icelandic sport clubs, both at training and competitions, at junior and senior levels, where we spoke to players, coaches, other staff, and parents.

Additionally, the second author has worked as a handball coach and as a consultant for many Icelandic junior and senior handball clubs from 2001 to present, providing us with good access to the important resources pertaining to the Iceland tradition of playing handball.

ANALYZING THE CULTURAL FOUNDATION OF ICELANDIC HANDBALL

Culture of Craftsmanship

The concept of craft refers to a body of knowledge, skills, and techniques, which can be used to produce objects, perform music, serve a meal, and so on. The social organization of craftsmanship emphasizes informal relationship and authority based on skill and experience (Berger, 2004; Fine, 1996; Sennett, 2009, pp. 53–55; Thorlindsson, 1994; Thorlindsson, Halldorsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2018). Craftsmanship is organized around the workplace. The workplace is public in the sense that everybody's skill and work ethic is visible. The quality of skill and work is nested in the community of workers. The task at hand is constantly being discussed and judged by workers that rely on each other performances. Well-organized workshop is a mixture of tacit and explicit knowledge. The craftsman is a part of an organized community that centers on the workshop (Sennett, 2009, pp. 65–66). Craft is a teamwork, which is based on attitude and skill. The training of the Icelandic handball team is in many ways a craft workshop characterized by informal learning environment where players share

ideas, give advice, and make suggestions on how to play the game both on and off the field. One Icelandic handball coach noted that:

Before the 2008 Olympics two or three players started to express themselves on team issues and when these things began to fruitfully work out other players began to add to the discussion at team meetings and at practice.

Sennett's (2012) notion of teamwork and cooperation as craft, which is based on team attitude and social skills, stresses that by working together individuals learn the rituals and informal gestures of the group. They learn to identify problems and search for innovative solutions. This type of teamwork is evident in the Icelandic national handball team. The older and more experienced players see it as their role to teach the newest members how to practice, to improve their skills, and to be a part of the team. One of the coaches stated:

Some of the senior players on the team are often working on the collective aspects of the team. They are assisting the younger players, helping them to get better and to fit into the team.

The senior players lead by example, set the norms of behavior, and teach the younger and less experienced members the tricks of the trade. They do so both explicitly, by showing and telling the younger players what to do, but also tacitly, where their attitude and behavior sets the norm of behavior that the younger players follow.

One key characteristic of the culture of craftsmanship is the holistic inductive approach. Harper's (1987) analysis of Willie the all-around craftsman demonstrates this approach well. It shows how Willie utilizes his "many-sided knowledge" of material and his holistic understanding of engines and all kind of machines to repair and seek creative solutions to solve practical problems. Gudmundur Gudmundsson, the Icelandic coach, who coached the Icelandic Olympic medal winning team, is known for his wholistic approach and a detailed preparation (Paaske, 2015). One player in the Danish national team, which Gudmundsson later coached, reflected on the differences between Gudmundsson and Wilbeck the former Danish national coach as follows:

Gudmundur goes probably more into detail with some things. He has some definite ideas about how our defence should be and he puts much emphasis on explaining things in detail. (Bt.dk, 2015)

In a similar way, C. Wright Mills ([1951]/2002) argued that the transformation from work generalists to specialists decreased the workers' motivation and experimentation. The traditional methods of the general craftsmen in which work was seen more as play were replaced by levels of standardization and the associated loss of holistic understanding, creative solutions, intrinsic motivation, and alienation of workers. This holistic approach is reflected in the Icelandic tradition of playing handball. The players strive for a holistic understanding of the game. Gudmundsson, the former national coach, points out that the players would come to him with ideas to improve all aspects of the game. Commenting on Olafur Stefansson, the team captain the national coach points out:

[...] as a player he was always searching for “the truth” in handball. He wanted to improve himself, search for new possibilities and new ideas, both regarding game strategies and tactics, training and all preparations from A to Z.

The captain himself declares:

I have always loved the game as such – to look at it from a certain perspective, as a space that I occupy. I try to break the game down, find all the little building blocks in it – there are so many things in it (the game). [...] if you have the imagination and the humbleness to slow down and break things down you can find the most beautiful elements. This is my world and of course I try to expand it.

The players also point out that because the game has not developed up to the point that they can rely on experts in all areas, they have to find out for themselves how to improve their specific skills. They do that in a holistic way. As one of the players observes:

The football [soccer] world has evolved much faster [than handball], where footballers have bunch of people around them who are on their backs and help them with such issues [diet, mental preparation, specialized training and so on]. It's not like that in modern handball. The players have to have the initiative and think about everything for themselves.

One characteristic of the craftsmanship approach is the use of the creative elements that reside in a group of players themselves, their interaction on and off the field. According to Svensson, a former Swedish international player, “Iceland always plays fast and creative handball. Therefore the Icelandic team is always interesting to watch” (Mbl.is, 2013). The Icelandic players also talk about a strong culture characterizing the team, a culture, which in some ways favors experience, creativity, spontaneity, and craftsmanship. One of the players recently talked about how well the players know each other. They can make good decisions because they can count on their experience and on each other. He emphasized the tacit knowledge and the innovative elements in the team:

We have been playing together for six to seven years and if we face problems on the field the players can communicate and solve the problems, on the field.

The Icelandic national coach further elaborates this point by emphasizing the importance of having many team leaders on the floor at the same time.

I learned from the Olympics how important leaders are. A handball team needs at least 5–6 leaders.

A key characteristic of the craftsmanship approach is its emphasis on task and the skill involved to complete it. Becker ([1982]/2008) argued that the artist-craftsmanship approach consists of developing of skill to produce things or perform certain tasks (e.g., music) rather than making money or winning. Research indicates that task-oriented athletes who tend to focus on the here and now, as opposed to goal-oriented athletes who tend to focus on results, are more successful in competition (MacDonald, Cote, Eys, & Deakin, 2011; Smith, Small, & Cumming, 2007). Although the Icelandic team sets itself goal-oriented goals, such as getting a medal at the 2008 Olympics, the preparations are built on task

orientation where everybody contributes to the task. In the training period before the 2008 Olympics, the team players themselves put together a qualitative control system – an enticement system – for the team. The system was intended to break down the key elements of training and to highlight the fundamental tasks for improving player and team performance. This example of the player's initiative and creativity captures the difference between activity and achievement. It emphasizes what you have to do to complete a task, in this case aiming for a medal in the Olympics.

This aspect of craftsmanship is further reflected in the fact that the Icelandic players do not get payed for playing for the national team, nor do they receive bonus payments for good results, which is in sharp contrast to their opponents. They have been noted to be intrinsically motivated (Halldorsson, Helgason, & Thorlindsson, 2012).

An important characteristic of the crafts-approach is the emphasis on organized community that centers on the “workshop” (Sennett, 2009, pp. 65–66). By working together, individuals learn the rituals and informal gestures of the group. They learn to identify problems and search for creative solutions. One of the coaches stated that:

Some of the players are always trying out new things, to see how they work [...] some of them are almost obsessed in regards to mastering new skills.

The quality of your work is collective. The workshop approach emphasizes the team. Individual skills are evaluated in terms of their contribution to the team and the task at hand. The standards of quality are set in face-to-face interaction in the workshop. It is nested in the community of workers. It is constantly being discussed and judged by co-workers that rely on your performance. It is being organized by rules of performance that are built into the work.

The Influence of Cultural Values

The main characteristic of the interactional approach to culture is that cultural elements such as values are negotiated and changed in interaction. This means that cultural values can take on different meanings depending on the context that they are expressed in. Thus, the most common values like dedication, hard work, and commitment, not to mention values such as nationalism, can take on different meanings depending on how they come together or how they combine or interact with other cultural elements in interaction settings. Thus, values as any other cultural attributes can have vastly different implications in different societies or at different historical epochs in the same society. Also, the interactionists along with sociological theories such as Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital hold that values and norms that are embedded in social networks can become important resources to accomplish all kinds of tasks. The notion that sport, in all its diversity, is influenced by shared social attitudes, values, and norms of the people playing it, highlights the collective nature of sport. Individuals embedded in social networks where these values are emphasized may bring them into play in sport-specific activities. If these critical values are

missing in sports, good coaches can teach them in sporting environments. Interestingly, some successful coaches have emphasized the role of values and ideas in success. The American basketball coach John Wooden created a legendary winning tradition when he coached the UCLA Bruins emphasizing general values as hard work, self-discipline, and dedication that characterized the mid-west culture in which he grew up. He incorporated them into his famous “pyramid of success” because he felt that they were fundamental to success in sport (Wooden, 1997). But, it is important to recognize that these common values took on new meanings when they were renegotiated in different context where they became part of the UCLA tradition of playing basketball.

Common values like dedication and hard work are expressed differently in a culture that values free play and flow and intrinsic motivation than in a culture that emphasizes outcomes, such as winning at all costs. Foreign experts have noted this combination of hard work, dedication, intrinsic motivation, and flow, which coaches and commentators sometimes refer to as “playing with the heart.” When the Pole, Janus Czerwinsky, became the first foreign coach of the Icelandic national handball team in 1976, he noticed these elements of enjoyment and play in the Icelandic players. He stated: “It was obvious that the players were interested in what they were doing, they played with their hearts” (Steinarsson, 1995, p. 73). This is further evident in the Icelandic handball team today where “the team is characterized by hard work, joy of playing, and a strong team cohesion” as one of the coaches, argued (see Discussion).

Further, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) suggest that nationalism may provide important material for the forming of new traditions. The display of national flags, national anthems, and ritualized form of celebrations of old values and norms may help to form a new tradition that displays strong roots in the national culture (Cerulo, 1989). Icelandic handball is a good example of such contextualization. National pride played a role in the development of Icelandic handball. After Iceland won Denmark for the first time in sport, in a handball match in 1969, one of the players says he’ll always remember the happiness in the eyes of an older sentimental man who thanked the players, for the first ever win against Denmark, after Iceland achieved sovereignty from Danish rule, with these words “Finally we are independent” (Sigurpálsson, 2012, p. 490).

Values of nationalism may contribute to the individual player’s willingness to make considerable sacrifices for the team (Halldorsson, 2017). When a handball player not fully recovered from injury, played for the Icelandic national team, and helped it win an important match, the German Bundesliga club’s chief executive of his team said: “Why a married family man with two children will risk his job and even his life to play for a national team is in my view incomprehensible” (Ásgeirsson, 2013). Sigurdsson, former playmaker and captain of the Icelandic national team, and former coach of the German national team, comments:

All teams that we [the Iceland national team] play have players in the best national leagues in Europe. We have no advantage in that respect. But what we have, that the other teams don’t,

is the unfailing attitude of sacrifice, which the players have for the team. I can honestly say that no other team has that. That's what people here [in Germany] talk about, that the dynamics in the Icelandic team are unique. (Vilhjálmsón, 2013)

One Icelandic player described what handball means for the nation:

[...] there is nothing that the Icelandic people feel is more valuable or unites the nation better than the Icelandic national handball team.

Another player commented:

I felt it during the Olympics, especially when talking to the guys on the team that we were not in this for money; we were in this to play for our nation.

The voluntaristic characteristic of sport organization in Iceland provides a set of informal relationships that connected sport with community networks. The players shared pasts, social conditions, and collective memories that may have given them a stronger sense of solidarity and intensified the dedication to the national team (Corte, 2013; Halldorsson, 2017; Katovich & Couch, 1992; Shils, 1981). Furthermore, the relatively young age of the Icelandic republic and the collective memory of colonialism provided extra motivation to play for the national team and prove that such a small country can be a contender among sovereign nations.

Clustering and Informal Networks

Research indicates that density of informal networks is important for innovation. Several scholars have contrasted the standardized and fixed methods with the more informal approach of craftsmanship (Becker, [1982]/2008; Mills, [1959]/2000; Sennett, 2009; Thorlindsson et al., 2018; Veblen, 1914). Also, scholars have suggested a close relationship of craftsmanship to sport and play (Chambliss, 1988; Halldorsson et al., 2014). Pragmatists, such as Dewey ([1916]/1997), saw play as free and intrinsically motivated activity. Dewey maintained that it was one of the drawbacks of the modern economic system that it had rendered play to the status of idle excitement while work had become a mean toward an end ([1916]/1997). Mead ([1932]/1980), in a similar way, approached learning from a theory of knowledge that emphasized play, activity, and experimentation as the basis for both knowledge and learning. Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Piaget, 1950, 1965) emphasized the role of play and activity for the development of cognitive development and the moral thought of the child. In other words, clustering of informal networks and emphasis on play combine to create a fertile ground for a crafts-like approach for innovation.

Olavsson (2012) has argued that the key to the success of Icelandic handball is the clustering of practicing and playing handball in the main urban areas of Iceland. He maintains that the existence of many small handball clubs in and around the capital area of Reykjavik has forced "Icelandic coaches and players into a unique situation where they interact, cooperate, compete and share knowledge across clubs" through informal interaction (Olavsson, 2012, p. 4). Scholars from different academic traditions, including the craftsmanship

approach, have emphasized face-to-face interaction and informal networks. As Michael Polanyi has pointed out:

It [craftsmanship] can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice. This restricts the range of diffusion to that of personal contacts, and we find accordingly that craftsmanship tends to survive in closely circumscribed local traditions. (Polanyi, 1958, p. 53)

The clustering of most of the Icelandic handball teams in a relatively small area created informal networks and exchanges that helped to advance the game of handball. The training of the Icelandic handball team is in many ways a craft workshop characterized by informal learning environment where players share ideas, give advice, and make suggestions on how to play the game both on and off the field – as noted earlier.

Another important characteristic of the closeness of the social world of team handball in Iceland and the clustering of Icelandic handball networks is that most Icelandic children have access to elite players in the small community, which has provided youngsters with the methods, the role models, and the encouragement to set out on a handball career (Halldorsson, 2017). The young players associated with the older players in the community-based indoor handball facilities, learned from them, and watched them become local heroes and professional players in the best European leagues. This closeness with the elite players signaled to the young local players that it was a realistic goal to play with the best.

The community-based voluntaristic nature of sport organization in Iceland provides a complex set of networks that interlock sport with community, increasing the contact between players, both within and outside formal handball settings. More interaction creates shared background and increases trust, transference of practices, values, and attitudes. The Icelandic players came from a similar social and cultural background and had interacted with each other informally in a range of social contexts. Even though they played with different clubs in different countries, they knew and trusted each other. They were not only players, but they were friends (Halldorsson, 2017; Vilhjálmsón, 2013). These qualities of trust and togetherness are essential for creative development of play in sport (Corte, 2013).

This line of thought is supported by sociological research on the spatial influence on achievement (Cianciolo, Matthew, Sternberg, & Wagner, 2006; Corte, 2013; Halldorsson, 2017; Zucker et al., 1998) and success in science (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Powell, Koput, Bowie, & Smith-Doerr, 2002; Von Hippel, 1994; Zucker et al., 1998). This research suggests that informal local interaction is one of the key elements in explaining local achievements in science and art (Negus, 1996; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Powell et al., 2002; Von Hippel, 1994; Zucker et al., 1998). Sociological research further suggests that tacit knowledge is an important element in the local influences on productivity (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Powell et al., 2002; Von Hippel, 1994). When knowledge becomes more tacit in nature, it increasingly depends on face-to-face interaction and informal contacts that favor geographic propinquity.

Global Influences

The globalization of team handball was a key element in the development of Icelandic handball. First, it was the globalization of team handball that gave the national team the status and the importance that motivated the players, politicians, and leaders of organized sport in Iceland. For this small nation with its newfound independence, from Denmark (in 1944), winning in international sporting contests against much bigger nations was a source of confidence and national pride. As Merton ([1960]/1973) has pointed out, the social system of recognition and the social sources of prestige play a crucial role in the development of excellence in science; this analysis extends easily to sport. The international success has generated national interest. The players have generally been known in Iceland as “Our boys” since the 1970s and in some cases, national television ratings for handball matches have reached 80% (Ásgeirsson, 2010). The interest in the games of the Icelandic team is further evident from the fact that not a single transaction was made on the Iceland stock exchange during the semi-final game in the 2008 Olympics, held between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., on a regular Friday (www.visir.is, 2008).

Second, the international community offered players from a small country like Iceland the opportunities to play professionally with the best players and to receive advanced coaching and the best professional expertise. This is especially important because Iceland does not have the resources to host a professional league. Ever since the mid-twentieth century, Iceland has had many world-class handball players (Steinarsson, 1995). The Icelandic press has followed the career of these players and highlighted their success abroad. So despite the small population of Iceland and the amateur status of the sport at the national level, a substantial amount of Icelandic handball players are used to play at the highest level in club and international competitions. An unintended consequence of this outflow of Icelandic players abroad, borrowing the term from Merton (1936), provided younger Icelandic players the opportunity to play at the highest level in Iceland, at a relatively young age. This helped them gain substantive and valuable play experience at the top level over their peers from other countries.

Third, the early international success of Icelandic handball also helped to produce a cumulative advantage or a *Matthew Effect* (Merton, [1960]/1973) that shaped the local sporting scene making handball one of the main sports in Iceland. The handball success contributed to the perception of Iceland as a great handball nation, similar to the case of football in Brazil (Lever, 1983). Thus, the increasing globalization of team handball reinforced these tendencies and gave handball a cumulative advantage at home among the sporting disciplines in Iceland. Cumulative advantage can influence various aspects of handball, attract potentially good players from other sport disciplines such as basketball and football, toward handball, and move resources in the direction to handball.

Forth, the Nordic model of playing handball was fruitfully mixed with a very different but a successful Eastern European handball tradition in the late twentieth century. Excellent coaches came to Iceland from Eastern Europe early on.

These coaches had major influence on Icelandic handball. As Gislason, a former national coach, pointed out:

Many great coaches came from the Eastern block to coach handball in Iceland, while handball clubs in other countries first and foremost sought players from those countries. (Guðbjartsson, 2012, p. 267)

While sports, including handball, in Scandinavia and many Western European countries focused on individual skills, free play and intrinsic motivation, sports in Eastern Europe were more systematic and organized, and built on discipline and early sport specialization (Beamish & Ritchie, 2006; Guttmann, 2004; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). The import of handball coaches from East Europe to Iceland therefore added emphasis on tactics and careful planning and disciplined team execution to the free style of playing of handball in Iceland (see Halldorsson, 2017). One former national team player described this in the following way:

Bogdan [a Polish Coach, which was very influential for Icelandic handball] taught us how to play systematically. Before he came there were e.g. no rules how to play defence.

Those foreign coaches brought with them new ways of doing things and technical expertise that has been very influential for Icelandic handball and still is. They brought a system and tactics to the tradition of free play and instilled stronger sense of discipline and emphasized the importance of the fundamentals of the game strengthening the basic education of Icelandic handball coaching in general. These styles of play then mixed with local social and cultural traditions of doing things to form a tradition of Icelandic handball (see Discussion).

Finally, the Icelandic handball professionals who had succeeded on the world stage also provided youngsters with positive sociocultural stereotypes as handball players. Making them believe that if they work hard enough, they could make it too. This leads to a stereotype lift (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Shih, Pittinsky, & Amabady, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2003) in which youngsters believe they can, and are even destined, to do as well as their heroes regardless of the country's small population and geographical isolation. The Icelandic players and coaches that were highly visible in the international competition strengthened the ties of Icelandic handball with the international scene, making global handball events, professional leagues, and international competitions even more influential in the formation and the development of local traditions of playing handball. Two key historical events are especially notable in the recent history of Icelandic handball, which provided a tipping-point effect for handball. The first was in 1989, when the Icelandic team won the B-world championship in Poland. The second was in 1995, when Iceland hosted the World Cup Finals for the first and only time. Both events received national recognition in Iceland.

The Cultural Dynamics of a Sport Tradition

Social traditions have important cultural and social elements that characterize them from the beginning (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; Shils, 1981). They can be recombined and reorganized to produce innovation through emergent social processes (Corte, 2013). Innovations that happen within developing sport traditions emerge out of fundamental elements of the tradition through social interaction of individuals and groups (Corte, 2013).

The aforementioned mixture of East European and Scandinavian traditions of playing team handball that has been considered one of the hallmarks of Icelandic team handball provides an interesting example of the emergence of novelty rooted in the cultural production of Icelandic team handball. Players and coaches came in contact with both styles of playing handball, because both styles were played in a relatively small area in the southwest of Iceland. Thus there were players and coaches that, as Mead would have put it, were within both systems at the same time. It is important to note that the Icelanders' contact with Eastern European handball did not lead them to the abandoning of their free play Scandinavian style of playing handball to take up East European team handball. Rather, a new style of playing handball that emerged out of the two systems. The two styles of playing handball took elements from both traditions where these elements called for adaptations in the dominating system to the new elements. One of the former Icelandic players who played under the highly influential Polish coach Bogdan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and himself later became the national team coach said:

I think that we, the players who later became coaches [...], learned a great deal from him [Bogdan], but we also learned a great deal of how not to do things. (Björnsson, 2015)

Thus, the Icelanders seem to have picked out what they considered to be useful in the East European system, and ignored other elements, so a new style of playing handball emerged.

Another example of innovation is the development of the "Beijing defense." This was a defense that developed almost spontaneously during the Beijing Olympics. It was a creation of the players, along with the coach within the team. The development of the "Beijing defense" is an example of a collective invention that happen because the players focusing on the task at hand started to improvise in a coordinated way. The Icelandic national handball team played a 6-0 zone defense most of the time. It is crucial for this defense to work that every player keeps his position according to the organizing rules of the game. If a player moves out of position, the defense breaks down. When the Icelandic defenders started to move out of the zone to block the outside shooters of their opponents and to stop plays in their early stages, they were braking the most basic rule of the zone defense leaving a hole in the defense and offering the opponents a good scoring opportunity. This did not happen in the Icelandic case, because the other defensive players on field moved spontaneously, but in harmony, to cover the space that was left in the zone defense. The result was a defense that was a mixture of zone and a man-to-man defense that seemed to

work well most of the time. Also, it appeared chaotic to the teams playing Iceland. They had a hard time analyzing it and coming up with effective solutions.

Again the development of the “Beijing defense” is a good example of Mead’s principle of sociality and emergence. But the emergence of the “Beijing defense” also illustrates another element of Mead’s theory of creativity, namely his idea of the open self and an open community that are processes, which overlap the creative process. The social self is an open system that overlaps with variety of interaction settings (systems). The individual has the ability to be part of several different systems. Thus, a handball player is able to be a part of the systems of zone and man-to-man defense, which sets the principle of sociality in motion, resulting in the emergence of a new type of defense.

The Cultural Production of a Sport Tradition and the Problem of Context

It is clear that inventions of new styles of playing handball in Iceland can be meaningfully described in terms of the internal history of the Icelandic handball tradition. But it is equally clear that an internal analysis of a sport tradition is sociologically incomplete. Social traditions do not exist in social and cultural vacuum. It is, however, a lot easier to document how certain cultural processes operate within a given social tradition than to show how they are rooted in the wider social and cultural context. The social context and the cultural elements that may influence the formation and the development of a successful sport tradition do not determine the way a particular sport is played. The form and content of the Icelandic tradition of playing handball cannot be deduced from the wider cultural and social context. Values of nationalism, intrinsic motivation, and emphasis on craftsmanship do not determine how Icelanders play handball. They enter into a process where they interact with global handball expertise, formal organization of sport and informal sport-specific networks, as well as other cultural and social elements and produce a tradition of playing a particular sport. It is therefore in principle difficult to demonstrate how local or national cultural conditions combine with local sport-specific organization and networks and global sports to produce variation in national sport traditions.

The relationships between the internal development of a tradition and the local culture may, however, take different forms. Coaches may, in some cases, take values, tacit understanding, or ideas from their local environment and adapt or apply them to specific sport settings. But even in the simplest cases the influence of culture may not be straightforward.

Nationalism does not rise out of the tradition of playing team handball. It is a general cultural value that exists in one form or another in most cultures. Its influence on Icelandic team handball cannot be described in a linear or even a multilinear fashion. Instead, the processes involved are better described by Mead’s principle of sociality. The influence of nationalism on Icelandic handball can only be understood in relation to several other factors. The countries recent independence and the young age of the Icelandic republic provided an extra motivation to play for the national team. Furthermore, nationalism was

particularly important for Icelandic handball, because it was the only big team sport where Iceland was among the best in global-level competition. Thus, it was the globalization of handball that gave nationalism its momentum for Icelandic team handball.

In other words, it is the way that nationalism combined with other cultural elements and social factors that give handball its cumulative advantage, provided a dedication that mixed with the intrinsic motivation, holistic understanding, and the craftsmanship tradition to produce novelties in Icelandic team handball. These social organizational factors and the cultural elements that we have identified are part of sport in various cultures all over the world. They are not specific for Iceland. It is the way that these variables interact and combine that is important for the formation of a successful sport tradition. They come together in a social process to produce emergent and novel traditions of playing sports.

The influence of craftsmanship on the formation and the development of Icelandic handball may be even more difficult to trace than the influence of nationalism. The analysis above documents the craftsmanship-like characteristics of Icelandic team handball. We argue that these characteristics are rooted in the wider cultural context. Sociologists have argued that the culture of craftsmanship is characteristic for Scandinavian and Icelandic culture (Finnbogason, 1943; Harper, 1987; Thorlindsson, 1994; Veblen, 1914). Harper (1987) maintains that the approach of the Icelandic farmer/poet – the bricoleur approach to work is one example of this kind of craftsmanship. Thorlindsson (1994) argues that the Icelandic fishermen's approach to knowledge resembles that of the reflective practitioner (see Shön, 1983). Their approach is that of the skilled craftsman, built on experience and observation. Fishing, which has over the centuries been the main occupation of the Icelanders, is a mixture of sport and industry. It is tempting to draw a parallel between the fishing in Iceland and the Kenyan "cattle running" described by scholars that have studied the successful tradition of Kenyan runners (Bale & Sang, 1996; Hamilton, 2000; Manners, 2007).

The crafts-approach to sport overlaps with the various other cultural and social elements to produce novelties in playing sports. Thus, the crafts-approach overlaps with the emphasis on informal play highlighted by Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, and Katovich (2014). They argue that informal games allow for honing of skills and provide a good opportunity to foster intrinsic motivation, flow, and craftsmanship (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sennett, 2009). An overly structured and formally organized environment and an authoritarian and rigid style of coaching may reduce intrinsic motivation, the experience of flow, and craftsmanship, all of which are essential aspects of long-term success (Halldorsson et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thorlindsson et al., 2018). In short, the informal play and the culture of craftsmanship overlap in the sense that they promote some of the same aspects of culture. But they did not overlap completely. Both play and craftsmanship brought new elements that interacted with other cultural and social elements to produce novelties the Icelandic tradition, of playing handball. These novelties emerged according to Mead's

principle of sociality. They became part of the self-fertilizing process of the Icelandic handball tradition that helped to produce novelties in the styles of playing handball.

The mixing of the Eastern European and Scandinavian style of playing team handball is an example of a development that did not originate in the wider social context. It can be meaningfully described as part of the development that took place within the tradition of handball. It is tempting to argue that there were no influences outside handball that influenced this development. This development may, however, be a good example of a sport innovation that was heavily influenced by out of sport factors. All handball nations, especially the European nations, had basically the same access to both these traditions. This begs the question why the Icelanders alone started to mix these traditions in the way that they did. Our analysis suggests that the self-fertilization within the Icelandic handball paradigm lies in the cultural elements and the social organization of sport. Informal play with its emphasis on intrinsic motivation and individual skill stands in strong contrast to Eastern European tradition. But when that informal culture mixes with the culture of craftsmanship stressing holistic understanding and improving the task or the project, incorporating useful elements from different styles to form a new tradition becomes the natural thing to do. Thus, our analysis above suggests that the culture of craftsmanship played an important role in the development of a sport tradition because of the way it interacted and combined with other cultural and social elements. Furthermore, the density of informal networks helped to facilitate the emergence of a new style of playing handball.

The tradition that emerged was a new tradition it was neither an Eastern European nor a Scandinavian style of playing handball. It was a tradition that worked well for a country that had a smaller pool of big and fast players to choose from than the much larger countries. It enabled the tiny country of Iceland to compete successfully with the best countries in the world. The process and the mechanisms involved are best described by Mead's concept of sociality (Mead, [1932]/1980). Mead assumes that the principle of sociality is a general principle that applies to phenomena in different systems. It takes, however, on a different form depending on the nature or structure of the system involved. The processes are part of readjustment where a national tradition of playing handball incorporates an emergent event from various sources into its system. This type of sociality constitutes what Mead referred to as the temporal mode of sociality ([1932]/1980, p. 51). It is through the "sociality" of the elements involved that a new style of playing handball the mixing of the systematic Eastern European and the more free play Scandinavian style of playing handball emerged.

Finally, the "Beijing defense" seems like a good example of development that took place within the tradition of handball. It was the innovation of the team. Its development may, however, be a good example of a sport innovation that was heavily influenced by out of sport factors. Friendship ties, trust and informal relationships that are formed outside of sport may play a role in what happened on the field. In the same vein, the craftsmanship approach, which is a part

of the wider social context, may encourage holistic understanding, new solutions and innovative ways of playing handball. The social processes involved illustrate Mead's theory of creativity well. An individual, as Mead suggested ([1932]/1980) initiates the creative process. The adjustment process is, however, made by the whole team, which marks the creation of a new emergent form of playing defense. This new form (system) of playing defense is then shared and developed further by the wider community of handball players.

CONCLUSION

This study portrays the rise of a successful sport tradition as a sociocultural product. Our findings highlight the collective nature of sport success stressing the embeddedness of athletes and sport clubs in variety of local social networks, structures, and the national culture. They show how social norms and tacit understanding that are reproduced in social interaction in specific interaction scenes (Fine, 1987) influence sport activity through various mechanisms. The analyses show how the voluntary organization of sport combined with cultural values and attitudes, tradition of craftsmanship, characteristics of global team handball, and opportunities in the international world of team handball produced a tradition that enabled the tiny country of Iceland to achieve international success in the sport.

Our findings challenge decades of research on sport that has devoted far more attention to innate talent, individual qualities or physiological processes than to social influences (Halldorsson et al., 2012). They suggest that the dominating academic focus on sport success has been too narrow. It is important to pay more attention to the social and the cultural context. Too much emphasis on innate talent and individual qualities leads to misplaced elitism and the overestimation of the instrumental view of sport success and the winning at all cost ideology. In the same vain, it leads to an underestimation of the collective aspects in sport success. Our findings are, however, in line with earlier work on sport success that emphasizes intrinsic motivation (Chambliss, 1988; Halldorsson et al., 2012), the beneficial role of amateurism in professional sport (Halldorsson, 2017; Peterson, 2008), the role of informal play (Halldorsson et al., 2014), the social aspects of creativity and innovation in sport (Corte, 2013), and the mundanity of skill development in sport (Chambliss, 1988).

The current analysis lends support to the interactionist view of culture in several ways. It indicates that the focus on face-to-face interaction in small groups is vital for the understanding of innovation and the cultural production of a successful sport tradition. Thus, our findings suggest that innovations, which happen within sport traditions, may in some cases emerge out of fundamental elements of the tradition through social interaction of sport-specific networks (see Corte, 2013; Halldorsson et al., 2014). The cultural and social elements that characterize sport traditions at the beginning can be recombined and reorganized to produce innovation through emergent social processes that rise out of face-to-face interaction in various handball-related networks. Also, the influences of the wider social context are mediated through local networks that are

tioned to specific interaction scenes. Thus, our findings show that the density of social networks around the many small handball clubs in the southwest of Iceland created informal interaction arenas that provide fertile grounds for innovations. These findings rhyme with the work of Knorr-Cetina (1999), which has convincingly argued that all knowledge creation, even in the natural sciences, is rooted in the local “epistemic culture.” Sport like art and science is embedded in local epistemic cultures that may vary from one location to another. In order to understand innovations in sport, we must take into account the cultural foundations and the local social organization of sport, as well as the local networks that exist outside of sport. Every handball tradition is an open community that overlaps and interacts with several other interaction settings. This multiplicity of interaction scenes and networks creates an ideal situation for emergent processes that are guided by sociality. The present emerges out of the interaction of individuals and groups that are placed in different social contexts.

The findings of this case study are consistent with several theoretical perspectives that maintain that innovations emerge in collaborative interaction networks that can be described as internal development of the specific tradition in question. This is, in fact, what most studies in science, innovations, and art do. We have attempted to go beyond this and trace the influence of the wider social and cultural context on the emergence and the development of the Icelandic traditions of playing team handball. Our approach rests on two main pillars. The first pillar is the theory of craftsmanship that represents a specific type of cultural approach that is rooted in the organization of the small group. The works of Becker ([1982]/2008), Fine (1996), Harper (1987), Mills ([1951]/2002), Sennett (2009, 2012), Thorlindsson (1994), and Veblen (1914) represent a sociological extension of pragmatic theories of learning with an emphasis on the group and the collective nature of crafts-work in the tradition of Mead. It highlights the pragmatic approach to learning, focusing on intrinsic motivation, the task, and the team rather than on individual performance (Thorlindsson et al., 2018). The craftsmanship extends three aspects of the pragmatic tradition. First, it undermines authority based on status hierarchy. Because the crafts-approach focuses on the task and the problem-finding and problem-solving as a group process, it conceptualizes individual skills in the context of the team. The role of individuals is evaluated in terms of their contribution to the team in relation to the task at hand rather than in the context of a given status hierarchy. Second, craftsmanship offers a sociological theory, a collective theory of learning, focusing on the group. Crafts-work is a task bound collective social processes that emphasize informal relationship and tacit learning. It is a part of an organized community that centers on the “workshop” (Sennett, 2009, pp. 65–66). The standards of quality are set in face-to-face interaction in the social context of the “workshop.” By working together individuals learn the rituals and informal gestures of the group. Third, the craftsmanship theories see work as a continuous process of learning and skill building (Thorlindsson et al., 2018). Because the process focuses on problem finding as well as problem-solving in the search for creative solutions the boundaries of knowledge and skill are continuously being pushed.

The second pillar of our approach is our use of Mead's theory of social processes involving emergence and novelty that are guided by the principle of sociality. This study demonstrates the importance of approaching cases studies like this one with the right conceptual and epistemological tools. Mead's concept of emergence and sociality provides such tools. The principle of sociality helps to explain how unique national styles of playing sports are rooted in general cultural and social mechanism. It helps us to understand how cultural elements, which are part of sport in various cultures all over the world, interact to produce emergent and novel national variations in the Icelandic team handball tradition. It is the specific way in which they combined in Iceland that produced a successful handball tradition. Thus, the principle of sociality, as Mead suggested, explains the form and the structure of emergence in the development of Icelandic team handball tradition.

Global contexts are crucial for the development of sports. Thus, there exists a global level of knowledge and expertise that is highly codified. Research on innovations in science, technology and economic activity indicates that codified knowledge may travel the world with a relatively little friction (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskel, 2004). Sport is no exception to this rule. Codified knowledge and expertise in sport is easily spread through various mechanisms of the professional international world of sport. Global connections are crucial for the development of local sports. They help local sport import codified knowledge in order to develop and become better. The global environment provides all kinds of opportunities and resources that influence the development of sport. But even in this area of globalized sport the local environment that is characterized by informal settings and tacit knowledge is an important source of innovations. The building of a successful sport tradition, however, scientific, will never become just a technical issue. It will always be a social and cultural activity that thrives on local culture. The principle of sociality and the concept of emergence are necessary conceptual devices to help us understand how elements from different social contexts, both local and global, overlap and interact in complex ways to produce a tradition of playing handball that is like all other handball traditions, like some other handball traditions, and like no other handball traditions.

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