

A Sociological Perspective on RAE

There are surprisingly few sociological studies of RAE. Sociology is the study of human relations as social processes on all levels of society. Sport exists in society and is constructed out of human relations. So society is the larger entity, and the main aspect of sport is thus that it has to be understood as a part of society. You can imagine a society without sport, but you cannot imagine sport without a society. So to understand sport, and different aspects of sport, as in our case RAE, you have to understand the society that sport is a part of, either we study the sport of, lets say, 18th Century England or Icelandic Sport of 2015.

Thus the main sociological aspect is that sport is a part of society. But if we leave the matter there, we will risk falling into a reductionist analysis, where sport merely reflects society, like a mirror. And that is not true, for sport has also, on the other hand, a very rich internal life, defined by it's own logic and played on its own field, in Bourdieu's sense. You can have the lowest grades in your class, but at the same be the best player on the pitch. You can be unemployed, low educated and poor, but at the same time a celebrated sport coach or club official.

And there is truly a world of difference if you are on the field or outside it. We have all heard the derogative comment: "I cant understand why twenty-two full grown men run after a small ball", and we know that whoever says that is not situated on the field of sport. On the other hand, anyone agreeing with the old Bill Shankly statement that "football's not a matter of life and death, its much more important than that", he or she is most likely situated on the field. So you really have to go in and out of these two perspectives to fully appreciate the relationship between Sport and Society.

What is, then, the sociological relevance of the concept of RAE? In itself, relative age is not a sociological issue. It is a biological process, a process of growing. Relative age effects, however, is a sociological issue. The word effects implicate that relative age is affecting the workings of different social constructions. In our case these constructions are selection systems within sport, but they exists also for example in school (through grading) and in the handling of children according to diagnosis like ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). Relative Age Effects can be seen as un-anticipated consequences of the selection systems used by practically all sports, to identify talent among children and youth. As a matter of fact, age is one of society's most basic social variables, besides gender, social class and ethnicity. These are all structural factors that divide people into different groups and then treat these groups in different ways. In this case the effects of age, or growth, are at work within a cohort and within a period of time, most often a calendar year or another twelve-month period.

Nowadays, after hundreds of studies over three decades, basically saying the same things, very few practitioners, and no researcher, denies that Relative Age Effects will occur when a group of children or youth are exposed to selection systems within sports. But is that a problem? Does not talent uncover, eventually?

To answer that question we would like to suggest a dichotomy - something that is quite popular among sociologists - to handle the two perspectives of sport in society and sport in itself, for the purpose of discussing RAE in a sociological way. This dichotomy

holds two forms of fostering: democratic fostering and competition fostering. They highlight the need to understand the relation between sport and society where different logics, fostering regimes and needs are articulated in a characteristic contradiction - where democratic values, particularly equality in participation, clashes with elitism in the form of competitiveness.

The first perspective could be described as sport being society's answer to political questions (democratic fostering). All over the world nations support the sport movement, but for different reasons along a scale "from medals to healthier citizens", or different mixes between motifs. For instance, the sports movements in the Scandinavian countries have, in an historical perspective, been comparatively well supported by the State. State support for youth leisure activities has been directed to different youth organizations, particularly sports clubs. Government grants to sport are given primarily because it fulfils, through its various activities, a number of goals which do not necessarily have to do with sports, but which society considers important to achieve by means of government funding: public health, democracy, equality, cultural Integration and Fair Play.

All of these goals are underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which means that sport activity for children should be based on the needs and interests of the children, not the adults. And it is not the children who construct the selection systems. This perspective - where sport is used by society as a problem solver for the political system - has also been more emphasised over time.

The second perspective builds on the needs of sport itself, with the core motif of competition (competition fostering). So for sports clubs in the Scandinavian countries, heavily funded by society to promote health, democracy and equality, at the same time fostering top athletes is an essential part of their pursuit. Selection systems, constructed to produce top athletes, exist at all levels within the sports movements - local, regional and national. And selection systems, according to RAE research, cannot be used without the appearance of Relative Age Effects.

In this way, RAE is irresolvably linked to competition. Competition is the essence of sport, controlling the internal logic of its activities. Competition fostering is about teaching how to deal with competing - winning and losing, relating to opponents and fellow players, functionaries and audiences, becoming part of the team or not, being a stand-in, sitting on the bench or being left outside. To compete leads to ranking and selection, since the goal of competition fostering is to create as successful athletes as possible, and in the long term the top elite that may assert itself against international competition in World Championships and Olympic Games.

In the eyes of the political system in the Scandinavian countries, the ideal sport practice of sports clubs, worthy of a huge economic and ideological support, is the one combining the two types of fostering, so that they "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:13-17). But in practice most of the societal support to sport is given to the sport movement for other reasons than to achieve medals and championships. Most of the talents do not uncover eventually. They drop out of sport, for reasons that are very often linked to the selection systems. If we look at sport from the first perspective, that of society using sport to support health,

democracy, equality and integration, RAE are simply devastating. The consequences of RAE are unhealthy, undemocratic, unequal and desintegrational.

The reason not to forbid the use of selection systems in sport is according to the second perspective, that of sport itself. The argument would be, then, that sport needs the selection systems to identify future elite athlete. The vast majority of studies on Relative Age Effect shows, however, that RAEs represents a form of bias, of irrationality, and they are counter-productive to both talent-identification and to the motives of the State to support youth sport. In the long run this could lead to the public acceptance of a generous tax-paid support to youth sport being jeopardized.