Social Classes Influence on Sport Participation:
A Literature Review on Sociology Concepts and Sport Sociology
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Introduction

Do social classes affect one’s sport participation? This research question has been examined within the context of sociology for years and has many important policy implications. Sport participation is a form of physical activity that can reaffirm and promote healthy lifestyles, which in turn creates a healthier society and population. Moreover, a healthier society has the potential of reducing healthcare costs (Sari & Lechner, 2015) and attribute to economic growth in areas of human capital (Muñoz-Bullón, Sanchez-Bueno, & Vos-Saz, 2016). Thus, for policy makers looking at the relationship between sport participation and social class (SES or socio-economic status) can assist the public sector in creating policies that can potentially create tangible and intangible benefits for society.

This paper attempts to review literature addressing this relationship between sport participation and social class. In the proceeding sections, social classes as well as generalized motivations and barriers for sport participation are defined. Next, specific sociological terms related to social class are defined, discussed, and applied to context of sport participation. The terms addressed include: capital, luxury, tastes, and omnivorous consumers. Based off this literature review and discussion, it is concluded that the conscious and unconscious establishment of social class norms, beliefs and culture define and influence sport participation.

Generalized Literature Review of Social Class and Factors of Sport Participation

Social Class Defined

Social classes are found within all societies; they are based off individual social attributes and properties. Individual social attributes are related to socio-economic (e.g. race, ethnicity, income) and socio-education (e.g. college degree, vocational certification) resources. Meanwhile, social properties relate to structures in which individuals and groups are based in. These structures can be affiliated with unequal distribution of economic and educational resources (Ferreira de Almeida, Luís Machado, & Firmino da Costa, 2006).

Further, social classes and properties can form a status hierarchy, where individuals can be classified by intangible characteristics (e.g. esteem, prestige) obtained by tangible resources, like
economic wealth (Social Class, n.d.). Ultimately, social classes are defined by their intangible and tangible characteristics, where a “class” is most often referred to as a group of individuals who have similar economic circumstances (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopædia, 2014).

It is important to identify the most common classifications of social classes: upper-class, middle-class, working-class and lower-class (Social Class, n.d.). Upper-class individuals are often perceived as the group in society with the highest degree of intangible characteristics and greatest economic resources. Due to this perception, as well as their accessibility, and ability to utilize different types of resources, the upper-class is sometimes referred to as the dominant class. Concurrently, the lower-class is perceived as disadvantageous, with little attainment of intangible characteristics and little to no access to economic resources. In referring to economic resources, Appendix A and B provide supplementary information in defining the social classes within Western culture.

Factors of Sport Participation: Motivations and Barriers
There are several intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and barriers associated with sport participation. Figure 1 illustrates an cumulative summary of findings addressing motivations and barriers associated with qualitative studies of sport and physical activity within the United Kingdom (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). These findings are restricted to one country, however additional literature has found similar motivations and barriers in sport participation. One common theme seen in Figure 1 is motivation through social interaction and networks.
The motivation of social interaction can, also, be found in a study examining college students in the United States. It was discovered that motives to participate in sport resulted from factors of enjoyment. Moreover, “affiliation” was seen as one of the highest motives (Kilpatrick, Hebert, & Bartholomew, 2005), which was defined as “spending time with their friends”. Though social class was not defined within this report, it can be hypothesize that this “affiliation” is correlated to social class.

One factor not address in the two previous studies is that of time constraint. A study from Spain identified time as a major barrier in sport participation and identified some professions as a barrier (Lera-López & Rapún-Gárate, 2007). It was found self-employed professions, entrepreneurs, middle managers, farmers and skilled workers had a negative interrelationship with sport participation. These results are not unreasonable, as these professions can produce time constraints. The time constraints produced may be caused by the low wage associated with the profession, thus requiring the individual to work a longer duration to earn additional wages. Secondary, the duties associated with these professions may require supplementary working hours, thus creating a time constraint. The idea of time constraint can be a characteristic...
correlated with social classes, however sociology research has not directly investigated this potential relationship.

These motivational and barrier concepts addressed above are supported not only with the social sciences, but within the discipline of economics. From a theoretical perspective, Figure 2 provides insight into the various disciplinary models associated with sport participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Factors affecting participation</th>
<th>Methodological Emphasis</th>
<th>Predictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classical economy</td>
<td>Maximise utility subject to income/time constraint</td>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>Participation demand varies directly with income, inversely with work hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New household</td>
<td>Maximise utility subject to income/time/domestic production constraint</td>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>As above, but domestic activity will reduce participation demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Hierarchical choice influenced by experience, discrete frames of commitment</td>
<td>Explanation/prediction</td>
<td>Participation varies with income, previous participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Keynesian</td>
<td>As above and social relations</td>
<td>Explanation/prediction</td>
<td>Participation also varies with socioeconomic status and that of identified groupings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological</td>
<td>Choice influenced by dialectic of identity formation</td>
<td>Explanation/prediction</td>
<td>Participation varies with gender, previous participation, participation of identified groupings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. Summary of theories associated with participation (Downward, 2007 pp. 623).*

**Sociological Concepts & Their Relation to Sport**

Sociology is the study of social worlds created, organized, maintained, and changed by people and relationships. While, social worlds are an ascribable domain of influence dictating lifestyles and social arrangements. From the broad research of sociology has come the specialized field of sport sociology, which recognizes sport as its own social phenomena and construction. Simply defined, people involved in the realm of sport have created, through interactions with others, their own social, political, and economic environment (Coakley, 2009).

The subsequent sections examine general and sport specific sociological concepts related directly to the interrelationship between sport participation and social class.
Defining Capital

There are three primary types of capital outlined in sociology literature and related to social classes: cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital. Figure 4 provides definitions and examples of the three classifications of capital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Capital</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>The suitable preferences, tastes, skills, and knowledge affiliated with consumption, that may be converted to economic capital or institutionalized.</td>
<td>Education, Books, Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Social network, connections or obligations that can be transformed into economic capital and can be institutionalized.</td>
<td>Clubs, Associations, Nobility, Knighthood, Social Titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Capital</td>
<td>Capital or elements that can immediately and directly made into money or a monetary value and can be institutionalized.</td>
<td>Property Rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Types of Capital Defined and Examples (Bourdieu, 1986).*

Each type of capital can be challenging to acquire. For instance, economic capital is difficult to obtain if one is unemployed, or if they are young (because they lack experience or education to gain a higher wage).

Increasing one’s economic capital may allow one to move up in the hierarchical social class, but this does not guarantee an increase in social capital. Social capital is never guaranteed or immediately accessible to a social group or construction. For example, an individual who wins the lottery, may gain economic capital, and be considered “upper-class”; however, they may be socially excluded from the upper-class due to their lack of social connections and cultural capital. They may have the money to become a member of a prestigious organization, but it does not mean other members will accept or interact with the lottery winners; members of the organization could consider the lottery winners “imposters” due to their lack of social and cultural capital.

Hence, referring to the example, cultural capital may be the most challenging to acquire because it is often used to maintain and legitimize social constructions or classes. Especially when referring to the example of education as cultural capital; education can shape one’s life and can
affect the opportunities associated with class mobility, social capital, and career options, in turn affecting opportunities of gaining additional economic capital.

**Interrelation between Capital & Sport**

In relation to sport, how are these forms of capital related to the social construction of sport? One example is it has been found that participation in organized sports increases children’s perceived competence, creates higher traits of persistence, and expectations of future success (Roberts, Kleiber, & Duda, 1981). These findings have two implications related to social and cultural capital. First, within the paper of Roberts et. al (1981), social class is not mentioned regarding the participants, or their parents, but it can be hypothesized that participation in organized sport is a “norm” or expectation of their social class. Secondly, it can be said that organized sport is a form of education and legitimizes specific athletic skills or tastes in sport, in turn creating and reinforcing cultural capital of a social class.

Furthermore, there has been the social development of labeling sports based off social classes. Mass media and academic literature have addressed and developed the identifying of “prole sports”, which were named after the proletariat, or working class, and are this classification of sport is often avoided by upper-classes (Wilson, 2002). Meanwhile, “posh sport” has been used sometimes in mass media to describe upper-class/luxury sport (Sedghi, 2014).

Prole sports are considered inexpensive, thus not requiring much economic capital, making them attractive to lower-classes of people (Nixon & Frey, 1996). Moreover, prole sports are more physically dominating, affiliated with hard manual labor, and characteristics of toughness or asceticism (Eitzen & Sage, 1991; Nixon & Frey, 1996).

In addition to characteristics of the type of sport participation, it is important to note the decision and frequency to participate in sport of lower-classes. As previously discussed, within the section of motivations and barriers of sport participation, professions affect sport participation (Lera-López & Rapún-Gárate, 2007). Many of the negatively correlated professions could be said to be affiliated with lower-classes. Further regarding the type of sport, a cross-sectional survey from Belgium examined the patterns of sport participation of social classes and found lower-class
individuals were more likely to choose non-participation behavior in sport than middle- and upper-classes (Scheerder, Vanreusel, & Taks, 2005), meaning they were less likely to be associated with a sports organization (e.g. sports club).

Another examination of the lower-class, regarding youth sport participation, was done in the United States which examined sport participation of lower-class youth in high school and after they graduated. Results showed in both time periods, lower-class youth participated less in organized sport in their high schools and in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Walters, Barr-Anderson, Wall, & Nemark-Sztainer, 2009). These results were interpreted to reflect economic capital and time constraints. Specifically, it was mentioned that fees to participate, purchasing equipment, availability of parents and need for the youth to assist the household in producing income may be related to their decision to not participate in sport.

The findings associated with posh sport is overall reverse of the results reflecting participation of prole sport. Referring to the Belgium study, it was found that higher social classes overall participated more frequently in sport than lower-classes. Higher class sport participants were more likely to be members of a sport club and were more involved in outdoor sports, racquet sports and in later cross-sectional responses, lifetime sports (i.e. aerobics, walking, non-competitive sport) (Scheerder et.al, 2005). The idea of upper-classes participating in lifetime sports was seen, also, in a cross-sectional study completed in the United States. It appears the upper-classes choose sports that are competitive, but demonstrate a form of grace and civility without being physically dominating (Stempel, 2005). Hence, it can be inferred that it appears the upper-classes have drawn a boundary and created an element of cultural capital with a preference in less physically demanding sport.

Luxury

Luxury is often used as an adjective to describe something of high quality or refinement. In economic literature of Sombart, luxury is the consumption of any good or service that goes beyond necessity (1999). However, the question is what makes a good or service a necessity? Sombart within this book, Leibe, Luxus und Kapitalismus, described the concept in greater detail. In Figure 3, the concept is defined and charted by Faurholt Casba (2008).
Beyond the determination of necessity, it can be identified that the characteristics of luxury can vary and are fluid. Sombart indicated that luxuries can be qualitative or quantitative, as well as altruistic or egoistic. Thus, it can be inferred the essence of luxury is defined by the one who consumes it. However, it is important to consider five additional characteristics to a luxury (Appadurai, 1988):

1. Luxuries are restricted to the elites (upper-class) by either law and/or price.
2. To obtain a luxury maybe complex – it may or may not be due to real scarcity within the market.
3. Luxuries may have “semiotic virtuosity”, meaning they have their own signs, symbols or special interpretation related to skill or art (i.e. cultural capital).
4. Luxuries have their own code of conduct when consuming; there is an appropriate way to consume a luxury (i.e. social capital).
5. The consumption of luxuries is connected to body, person, and personality.

Considering the attributes of luxuries, one can see how the upper-class through their capital, especially economic capital, can obtain luxuries with much more ease than the lower-classes.

*Figure 3. Diagram of Sombart’s concept of luxury (Faurholt Csaba, 2008, p. 5; Sombart, 1999).*
Luxury in Sport
Sport can be a luxury, it can be an exhibition representing tangible and intangible characteristics (e.g. economic status, prestige, power, drive, grace) of the upper-class (Stempel, 2005). This idea of sport as a luxury can be related to the characteristics of qualitative or egoistic. Sport can be a qualitative luxury, as it allows for the development of refinement, intangible, or semiotic virtuosity characteristics (i.e. cultural capital). Concurrently, sport as an egoistic luxury can be used for purely self-enjoyment. Conversely when compared to upper-classes, lower-classes may participate in sport as a dual-purpose (e.g. self-enjoyment, health).

Tastes
Tastes have been indirectly discussed within this paper, however a brief analysis and examination of taste within the realms of generalized, and sport specific, social worlds and constructions should be examined as a form of social and cultural capital. In sociological terms, taste provides an identity associated in the processes of exclusion and inclusion of a social world (Douglas & Isherwood, 2005). Within the context of social interaction/action, taste is a conscious, or unconsciously, executed activity, which originates from social determinants (Hennion, 2007).

Discussion of Tastes Related to Sport
Defining tastes is easy, but interpreting tastes in relation to social class and sport can be a challenge. It has been determined upper-class sport participants enjoy lifetime sport and luxury sport, which can be defined as a taste. Notwithstanding, a taste in a sport does not mean an individual will participate. A study completed in Israel found that tastes in sport were constrained by cultural capital (Yaish & Tally, 2012). In retrospect, the results illustrate taste in sport and participation in sport are not the same, nor are they necessarily correlated. Results determined cultural capital has more influence determining the cognitive preference in a sport than it does on determining the act of participating in the sport. Further, it was found that economic capital has greater influence on the decision to participate.

Lastly, in relation to taste and social capital, it was found sport participation was fully moderated by the respondents’ parental education, while the respondents’ own education was only slightly
mediated taste (Yaish & Tally, 2012). Furthermore, it was found that parental education had a greater influence on younger generations of sport participants than older. This finding infers that social capital (i.e. family) can influence sport participation, but that the ability to expand one’s cultural capital (e.g. experiences) or external social capital (e.g. non-family members) can potentially effect tastes and participation.

**Omnivous Consumer**

Social constructions are not binary when referring to taste. As previously addressed, tastes change with the acquisition of experience and social connections (Yaish & Tally, 2012). Hence, tastes can be placed on a spectrum that varies at different levels, with highly intellectual or rarefied tastes (i.e. highbrow) on one end and minimum tastes that lack intellect or culture (i.e. lowbrow) on the other. Across this spectrum, one can stereotypically place a social class; however, there is research illustrating a shift in tastes, where specific classes venture and engage in activities outside of their cultural, social, or economic boundaries. This shift in tastes and decision to consume capital outside of the class norm is known as the omnivore thesis. Moreover, this type of individual is referred to as the omnivorous consumer (Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007).

Omnivorous consumers are most associated with the upper-class participating in activities that is stereotypically associated with lower-class tastes. This change in taste of the upper-class, as described by Ware et. al, undermines the idea of snobbery and illustrates potential tolerance amongst different classes’ capital (2007). Five justifications have been suggested to explain the development of the omnivorous consumers (Peterson & Kern, 1996):

1. Structure changes in society that allow greater access to consume various capital (e.g. increased standard of living, opportunities in education).
2. Changes in values associated with social capital, specifically creating social connections based off characteristics of societal groups (e.g. race, ethnicities, religion, gender).
3. Changes in overall artistic or cultural standards of capital.
4. Generational shift in attitudes, values, and politics.
5. Social classes taking part in “status-group politics”, meaning classes take part in “popular culture” and integrate them into their class’ culture.
Omnivous Consumption in Sport
The above justifications were identified based off research analyzing the consumption and tastes of music. However, it has been found that omnivous consumers are found within the realm of sport as well. Distinctions between social classes have remained, however they have diminished over the last decades. It was determined, for example in Belgium, that from the late 1970s to the late 1990s the prerequisite of being associated with middle- and upper-class society was being a member of a sports club. Nevertheless, sport club membership of these two classes have declined and it was found upper-class individuals are increasing their participation and dominating the area of non-organized sport activities (Scheerder et. al, 2005).

These results can be viewed as omnivous consumption in three ways. First, it can be claimed that that upper-class individuals tastes are becoming congruent with that of lower-classes; specifically upper-class are taking on behaviors similar to lower-classes, by limiting their expenditure on sport participation (i.e. economic capital). Secondly, it appears that upper-class individuals may have adapted the fourth justification, meaning there has been a social shift of tolerance in accepting activities that are inexpensive and performed more by lower-classes. Lastly, there is a possibility this result is consistent with the fifth justifiacion, as there is potential that the new “popular culture” associated with sport participation is non-organized/informal sport instead participation in a sport club. Thus, it can be stated that the upper-class has adapted their class culture to a taste that is similar to lower-classes.

Conclusion
This paper reviewed academic literature addressing the relationship between sport participation and social classes. An overview of social classes, factors of sport participation, as well as several sociological concepts were discussed. Specifically, upper-class, posh and luxury sport participation were defined, as well as lower-class sport participation and prole sports. It can be concluded that social class does affect the type of sport participation, and potentially the frequency of participation. Furthermore, the type of sport participation is based on tastes associated with the social class, and three different forms of capital: cultural, social, and economic.
Nevertheless, it is important to identify and take into consideration the shifts in social class tastes, related to the concept of the omnivous thesis. The thesis supports the idea that social worlds and constructions are not static. Tastes in specific sports and tastes associated with actually participating in sports can change and be adapted internally within the social class, as well as adapted to be tolerant and assimilate with that of other social classes.

These concepts addressed in this paper are important as they are relevant to implementation of social policies and to the development of future sport programs. As a future practitioner, within the sphere of sport development, it is important to be familiar with the interrelation of sport participation and social class to ensure the creation of a sports program is congruent to the characteristics of the social class that will be receiving the program.

Moreover, sport participation can provide tangible and intangible benefits to society (e.g. economic growth, healthcare costs, subjective well-being). However, these benefits can differ not only by social class, but by the geographical location in which the social class is located. Hence, it is suggested that future research should address the interrelation of social class, sport participation and geographical location. There is some literature examining this topic (Eime, Charity, Harvey, & Payne, 2015), but cross-country comparative studies of this interrelationship are scarce. Additionally, it is suggested that more descriptive characteristics of social classes, such as time constraint, are identified in relation to sport participation to better define social classes. The completion of said works would be benefiting to international and transnational sport development projects and would greatly attribute to properly developing a theoretical model addressing the motivations, barriers, and taste spectrum of social classes participation in sport around the world.
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Appendix A: Defining the Middle- and Upper-Class Income in Western Culture (Pew Research Center, 2017a)

### Who is ‘middle income’ and ‘upper income’ in Western Europe and the U.S. in 2010?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Lower Income</th>
<th>Middle Income</th>
<th>Upper Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>49,823</td>
<td>60,475</td>
<td>86,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>34,620</td>
<td>47,600</td>
<td>72,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>32,539</td>
<td>45,724</td>
<td>62,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>31,590</td>
<td>43,797</td>
<td>61,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>21,850</td>
<td>37,791</td>
<td>56,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>20,980</td>
<td>33,600</td>
<td>50,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>56,843</td>
<td>74,674</td>
<td>91,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>33,625</td>
<td>43,500</td>
<td>60,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>30,122</td>
<td>41,342</td>
<td>58,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>36,329</td>
<td>52,000</td>
<td>68,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>43,607</td>
<td>61,700</td>
<td>79,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>61,132</td>
<td>80,452</td>
<td>105,800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Incomes are expressed in 2011 prices and purchasing power parity. Middle-income households have disposable incomes that are two-thirds to double the national median disposable income, after incomes have been adjusted for household size. Lower-income households have incomes less than two-thirds of the median and upper-income household have incomes that are more than double the median.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the Cross-National Data Center in Luxembourg (L5).
Appendix B: Defining the Percentile of Social Classes Based off Income of Households (Pew Research Center, 2017b)

In most Western European countries, middle-income tiers are smaller, and lower-income tiers are larger, when the U.S. median income is used to define middle-income boundaries.

% of adult population in lower-, middle- and upper-income households, 2010

Note: Middle-income households have disposable incomes that are two-thirds to double the overall median disposable income, after incomes have been adjusted for household size. Lower-income households have incomes less than two-thirds of the median and upper-income households have incomes that are more than double the median. The “national income standard” uses each country’s own median disposable household income. The “U.S. income standard” uses the median disposable household income in the U.S. In the latter case, income boundaries in all countries are expressed in 2011 prices and purchasing power parities.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the Cross-National Data Center in Luxembourg (Lux).