

Teamwork in sport: a sociological analysis

Vidar Halldorsson^a, Thorolfur Thorlindsson^a and Michael A. Katovich^b

^aDepartment of Sociology, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland; ^bDepartment of Sociology, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

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

Introduction

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