



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Towards a feminist playology: social sport studies and the limits of critique

Heuvel, N.A.E. van den

Citation

Heuvel, N. A. E. van den. (2021, December 9). *Towards a feminist playology: social sport studies and the limits of critique*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247110>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247110>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction: Social sport studies and the limits of critique

Why do elite women's football players sacrifice their health, social life and financial security to playing their game? One elite women's football player quips: *'Football is actually not that important, but then at the same time it is.'* This paradox illustrates the collision of two incongruent systems of values, two different notions of "importance". According to the one, football is unimportant, according to the other it is not. Sacrificing one's health, social life and financial security to something unimportant is not a rational thing to do. For a player to make those sacrifices, there must be a sense in which the importance of playing football outweighs these real-life values: a mysterious commitment that can explain why women's football players would sacrifice their health, social life and financial security to playing their game.

This project started with the aim of developing our understanding of the social significance of the experiences of elite women's football players in the Low Countries. More precisely, it pursued the following research question: "how do elite women's football players experience football as both an emancipatory and an oppressive practice?" It asked this in the context of two related developments. First, women's football has seen enormous growth over the past years in terms of levels of participation and media attention. Second, the sport is no longer solely an amateur one, but became semi-professional with increased infrastructure, facilities, sponsorship and support systems. Both developments should, however, be understood in relation to the still dominant image of football as a masculine sport. It was only in 1971, with the end of the ban on organized women's football in Europe, that women's football players could officially occupy a place on the field and it was only in 1979 that the Dutch football organization enshrined girls' football in its regulations.

That was the starting point. The data that emerged from the empirical part of this study forced me to focus on another question however, which is the question with which I started above: "How can we account for the willingness of players to make sacrifices in terms of health, social life and financial security?" It turned out, as will become clear shortly, that the question of emancipation and oppression could not be approached until the question of sacrifice was clarified. And the existing literature was unable to do so. Although the making of sacrifices seems to be part and parcel of any elite sportsperson's life, the insights that we find in the current field of social sport studies are not able to make adequate sense of the elite women's football players' experiences of sacrifice. These insights, largely informed by Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralism, allow us to make sense of the diverse ways in which elite women's football players are constituted as subjects in the context of the above-mentioned developments and the dominant image of football as a masculine sport. However, these theories appear insufficient for making sense of the women's football players' experiences of sacrifice. In short, these frameworks understand the willingness of players to make sacrifices in terms of normalising and oppressive productions of subjectivity. The data of our study points out that this understanding overlooks a deeper level of experience which the paradox with which we started illustrates, namely

that there is something in or about playing football that cannot be understood in terms of instrumental reason: the irreducible lived meaning of playing football underpins the player's ability to make sacrifices for its sake. And the data gathered in this study shows that the current models that we find in social sport studies are not sufficient. As a result, the central aim of this dissertation is to use the elite women's football case to develop a method that provides adequate theoretical tools to theorize the very fundamentals of what it means and takes to be and become an elite sportsperson.

The thesis that I put forward is that the existing Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist frameworks that we find in the field of social sport studies must be supplemented by the theory of play inherited from Johan Huizinga, Eugen Fink and Hans-Georg Gadamer for both conceptual and ethical reasons. As I shall argue, the theory of play allows us first of all to make sense of the player's experience of sacrifice. More precisely, understood as an independent, irreducible structure of experience, play allow us to make sense of the women's football players' experiences of sacrifice in a way that is compatible and complimentary to those insights of Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian post-structuralism, which remain indispensable. Secondly, the theory of play makes visible that the existing frameworks miss important insights in theorizing the subject, and, by extension, brings forth a notion of freedom and resistance that is currently *lacking* in the field of social sport studies. 'Lacking', as we cannot find these notions in the field of social sport studies, but also 'lacking' because the field of study is in need of alternative ways to think about freedom and resistance. This thesis thus contains a systematic point, namely our discovery that "players play", that their experience cannot be understood without an account of play as such, alongside an analysis of what that means; and a methodological point, namely that in order to take into consideration that players play, we need a new method, which I describe as a feminist playology. The prefix feminist refers to the commitment of this method to understand sport as a gendered activity.

This research contains thus an empirical part followed by a theoretical part that interprets the findings. In the empirical part of the research, I gathered data in three domains. First, I carried out content analysis of diverse media material to reconstruct the public debate and to track down networks of informants and key stakeholders. Second, I observed several football matches at various clubs in the Low Countries and spent a week as a participant observer in one of them. Third, I carried out semi-structured in-depth interviews with technical staff members, club managers and elite women's football players, ranging from the so-called pioneers of Dutch elite women's football to current day players. I detail the data and the procedures further in chapter 1. An overview of the data collection and the data can also be found in appendix 1. The theoretical part of the work consists first of all of an analysis of the data informed by the theoretical insights that we find in the field of sport studies. There, I conclude that we need to both confirm and supplement the existing theoretical frameworks. Second, I formulate the central question this research poses:

How should we conceptualize the experiences of the elite women's football players in order to do justice to the experience of sacrifice that always accompanies it? Third, I analyze the experiences of sacrifice in terms of play. Fourth, I critically establish the conditions under which the diverse theses that we find in the Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist paradigms and the theory of play can complement each other. Finally, on this basis, I establish a new method to do full justice to the experience of the elite women's football players. This method is called feminist playology.

Overview of the chapters

The first three chapters of this thesis present my empirical research about elite women's football in the Low Countries. Chapter 1 gives a detailed presentation of the empirical methodologies I used and provides an overview of the key findings that emerged from the data. Chapter 2 begins with a presentation of the existing theoretical framework of sport scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities. Secondly, it presents the analysis of the data that emerged from the interviews conducted for this study, informed by the insights provided for by the existing frameworks that we find in the field of social sport studies.

The analysis presented in chapter 2 argues for the necessity of both maintaining and supplementing the key theoretical insights that we currently find in the field of social sports studies. As the current paradigms predict, the empirical research concludes that both the 'policing of gender' and 'high performance' are central to the experiences of elite sport players. The theme of 'high performance' in particular, is central to those social sports studies that interrogate the modern instrumental approach to sport and its neoliberal developments. The theme of 'gender policing' is central to all those social sport studies that focus on identity construction and the question of gender-normalization, transgression and compliance in relation to high performance sport. However, the analysis reveals that a key part of the data that emerged from the interviews, namely those many entries that refer to sacrifice, cannot be accounted for by the existing frameworks in social sport studies. More particularly, these entries show that in contrast to the view upheld by the existing frameworks in social sport studies, the themes of 'gender policing' and 'high performance' do not exhaust the experiences of elite women's football players. The existing framework thus fails us when it comes to making sense of the references to sacrifice that we find in the data. What this implies is that our data analysis pushes against the established view that elite athletes solely intend sports as a form of gendered labour. Accordingly, chapter 2 concludes that the available methods that we find in the field of social sport studies are insufficient to account for the experience of the players as represented in the data.

On this basis, chapter 3 starts with the formulation of the central question this research poses: **How should we conceptualize the experiences of the elite women's football players in order to do justice to the experience of sacrifice that always accompanies it?** In order to answer this question, this chapter seeks theoretical insights that (i) allow for an understanding of the theme of sacrifice; (ii) allow for a theorisation of the experience of 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice' as unified (for the women's football players experience 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice' in conjunction with one another). To this end chapter 3 critically discusses two related, yet distinct theories. These are the an-economic theory of sacrifice, such as we find in the work of the main figures of the Collège de sociologie, amongst whom Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris and most notably Georges Bataille, and the pre-rational theory of play such as we find in the works of Johan Huizinga, Eugen Fink and Hans-Georg Gadamer amongst others. On this basis chapter

3 concludes that a synthesis of both theories provides a deeper concept of play that allows us to make sense of the experience of sacrifice in a way congruent with the experience of 'high performance', 'gender policing'.

Chapter 4 of this thesis presents the philosophical significance of the introduction of play within the existing frameworks in social sport studies. I argue in this chapter that we must establish a method capable of giving a comprehensive account of the data that emerged from the interviews with the elite women's football players. More particularly, I argue that the theory of play makes visible that the existing frameworks in social sport studies misses important aspects of the experience of elite sportspeople. Accordingly the central question set out in this chapter is: how does the theory of play force us to rethink the existing frameworks in social sport studies? To this end chapter 4 provides a synthetic account of all the insights that have proved indispensable for the analysis of the experiences of the elite women's football players, in their own estimation. Thus, importantly this chapter does not simply complement the existing frameworks with the theory of play, but it establishes a method capable of making adequate sense of the experiences of the elite women's football players as a whole, one that is currently lacking.

