

Message to Sociologists Around the World from the Japan Society of Sport Sociology

Japan Society of Sport Sociology

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On March 11, 2011 a massive earthquake and tsunami struck eastern Japan. A nuclear power plant in Fukushima Prefecture was damaged, and radioactive materials escaped from the reactor. The result was a combined catastrophe with both natural and human causes. As of this writing one and a half years later, the number of deaths related to this is over 20,000 people. Around 71,000 people were forced to relocate out of the three prefectures most affected, 61,000 of those from Fukushima Prefecture alone.

A disaster of this magnitude calls into question many of our assumptions about how our society does and should function. This includes the role of sport in our society. The sociological study of sport is a fairly new discipline, both in Japan and in the wider world, but it is a discipline that has seen rapid growth and is now a robust youth, ready to take on the world. In the following pages we would like to introduce you to that youth, and how it was affected by the March 11 disaster.

I. The origins of sociological research into sport in Japan

The development of a new intellectual field comes about from new ideas, intellectual inspiration, or a new epistemology, but such an intellectual endeavor becomes a social reality largely in response to actual social demands. The dawn of the sociology of sport in Japan also occurred in such conditions.

1. The background to the birth of a sociology of physical education

After Japan's defeat in World War II, education in Japan was subject to the occupation policy of the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ). Under the slogan of "democracy and science," the goal of education shifted from inculcating loyal subjects of the imperial state to educating people to be desirable citizens of a democratic society. This meant a 180-degree change of direction for physical education, which had most strongly reflected the wartime system of cooperation with the war effort and national unity. Education needed to be reformed in its entirety, from curriculum content to teaching methods. Specifically, teacher-centered disciplinary instruction in which the students merely follow commands and orders in unison became taboo. Military drills and group calisthenics were replaced by sports and dance as the main contents of instruction. In addition, the orientation shifted from the state to the students themselves; it was thought that the close connection between school learning and the life of the children in their local communities should be emphasized. This great transformation from prewar to postwar physical education led to the development of sociological research into physical education, the precursor to the sociological study of sport in Japan.

2. From research into group learning to studies of active play

The goal of creating “citizens of a democracy” and the teaching method of “self-motivated learning,” along with the emphasis on sport in the curriculum, made learning in small groups necessary, and as a result learning activities became exercises in group democracy. For that reason, group dynamics and other small-group theories were applied to physical education, and much research was conducted into the efficiency of learning, enhancing democratic human relations, and leadership. That then led to research using the playgroup model, which developed into research on school sports clubs, sports days, and athletic meets.

In addition, interest in the relationship between learning and life gave rise to an awareness of the importance of understanding the reality of the day-to-day lives of schoolchildren. Research was accordingly conducted into the daily lives, active play, and human relations of children in their families and communities. This research became the linchpin linking learning in the schools with life in the community, and from there developed into research into sports and recreation in villages and towns, at the workplace, and in the home. This sociological research into physical education was salient until the end of the 1950s. Over 100 related papers were presented at the annual conferences of the Japan Society of Physical Education (established in 1950) during its first ten years.

3. The establishment of the Sociology of Physical Education Section within the Japan Society of Physical Education

The educational system was overhauled by the standardization of the curriculum guidelines of the Ministry of Education in the 1960s. Sociological research into the school curriculum tapered off, and interest turned to physical education in the community. The first phase of postwar reconstruction had been completed, and the economy was growing partly due to a boom in special procurements from the American military during the Korean and Vietnam wars. This was accompanied by a growing interest in health, leisure, and recreation, and fostering physical education in the community became a policy issue. Moreover, sporting mega-events such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the annual National Sports Festival, which is held in a different prefecture every year, raised interest in increasing opportunities for ordinary citizens to engage in sports, not just athletes. In addition, to counteract the soaring medical costs related to the spread of so-called lifestyle-related diseases and diseases of affluence, policies that promoted sports in the community were adopted. Against this social background, and in response to burgeoning sociological research in the Japan Society of Physical Education and several national conferences on the subject, a Sociology of Physical Education section was established in 1962.

The creation of the Sociology of Physical Education Section within the Japan Society of Physical Education meant that sociological research on physical education, which had theretofore developed more or less spontaneously in relation to physical education policy, now had a place to refine itself academically, and for researchers to liaise and work together. In reality, since its formation the Sociology of Physical Education Section has performed a vital role by actively organizing original research activities such as workshops and retreats, and providing the basis for joint research that enables large-scale studies. In 1972—the tenth year since the section’s

founding—the first issue of the journal *Sociology of Physical Education* was published; ten years later, in 1982, the title was changed to *Sociology of Sport and Physical Education*. For 20 years this journal was the engine driving sociological research into sport and physical education in Japan.

During this time, through participation in joint research with the International Sociology of Sport Association and participation in its conferences, and also stimulated by the growing sociological interest in sports which accompanied their rapid development, scholars in Japan began to feel restricted by the physical education paradigm and considered moving to the next stage. Interest in the huge social phenomenon of sport was rapidly growing in the field of general sociology as well, and various sociological discussions of sport began to appear sporadically. The time was right to establish a society for the sociology of sport in Japan.

II. The Japan Society of Sport Sociology: The First 20 Years

The Japan Society of Sport Sociology (JSSS) was established in 1991. As was seen in the previous section, until that time the sociological study of sport in Japan was conducted mainly by scholars affiliated with the Society of Physical Education. With the establishment of the new society, many scholars affiliated with the Japan Sociological Society joined, bringing new perspectives and methods to their research. The new society also promoted exchange between scholars from the fields of sociology and physical education.

The first conference was held on March 30-31, 1992 at Nara Women's University. About 20 presentations were given, and a symposium was held on the theme "Sociological Approaches to Traditional Sports." Symposia became regular fixtures of the annual conferences. Some of the early themes were: "Beyond Modern Sport" (1993, Kagawa University); "Issues in Sport and the Body," and an open symposium called "Sport Events and Citizen Participation" (1994, Aichi University); "The Merits and Demerits of Media Sport" (1995, Meikai University); and "Theoretical Possibilities for Sport Sociology" (1996, Miyagi University of Education).

The JSSS had 165 members as of its first executive board meeting in September 1991, but this number had increased to around 300 by the time of the fifth annual conference, a membership that it maintains to this day. An international symposium entitled "Sport Can Change the World" was held at the sixth annual conference in March 1997, hosted by Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. This symposium was a natural result of the Society's emphasis on internationalization; from its inception the JSSS has invited keynote speakers and other scholars from overseas to its annual conferences.

The 1997 symposium included 20 scholars, ten from within Japan and another ten from overseas, and consisted of four sessions. The session "Sport Culture and the Transformation of Contemporary Society," discussed the influence of commercialization and globalization on the sport cultures of Japan, America, Canada, and France. In the session on "Sport and Power," questions of power in sport and power structures imprinted on the body were analyzed from the perspectives of cultural studies and gender theory. The session on "How Sport Can Change Asia: The First Asian-Hosted World Cup" discussed the changes that the globalization of soccer might bring to international relations in Asia, as well as to the daily lives of citizens there. The session on "Sport and the Formation of the Modern Nation State" discussed the role of sports in the formation of the

modern nation states in Korea, England, northern Europe, and Japan. The results of this international symposium were published in the book *Henyō suru gendai shakai to supōtsu (Sport and the Transformation of Contemporary Society)*, edited by the Japan Society of Sport Sociology (Sekai Shisōsha: 1998).

Eleven years after the international symposium, JSSS had the opportunity to host the 5th ISSA World Congress in Kyoto in 2008, in cooperation with the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA). The World Congress, held at Kyoto University, was attended by 280 participants from 32 countries, who gave 167 oral presentations and 23 poster presentations. The theme of the World Congress was “Sport and Society at the Crossroads.” The purpose was to discuss how sport could contribute to the creation of a prosperous society in this age of increasing globalization.

There were two keynote speeches: “Violence against Women in Sport – Recognizing an Invisible Crossroad,” and “We, Japanese, Gotta have WA?” In keeping with the Olympic year, an open symposium was held on the theme “The Olympic Games: Tradition, Globalization, Media, Power” in which the following presentations were given: “The Olympics in East Asia: The Crucible of Localism, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Globalism,” “The 1964 Tokyo Olympics and East Asian Problems: Torch Relay in Okinawa and Tokyo,” “A Catalyst for Korean Modern Transformation and Globalization: The Significance of the ‘88 Seoul Olympics,” and “Between Dream and Reality: Competing Narratives of the Beijing Olympics.”

Two additional symposia were held for congress participants: “Sport and the Public Sphere” and “Transformation of Sports in Asia at the Crossroads: Tradition, Modern, and Postmodern.” In addition, two workshops were held concerning the body: “Invention and Authenticity in the Traditional Body Culture of Japan” and “Digital Sport.”

These two international conferences organized by JSSS not only raised awareness within Japan of worldwide trends in the sociology of sport; they also helped bring the research of scholars in Japan to the attention of the world, and gave young scholars the chance to present their work at an international conference.

III. The Japan Society for Sport Sociology Today

As of September 2012 JSSS numbered 379 members, of which 63 were students. Its 22nd annual conference was held in March 2013. Its journal, *Japan Journal of Sport Sociology*, expanded to two issues per year in 2009; Vol. 21 No. 2 was published in September 2013. The society is presided over by an executive board, and in addition to the editorial board of the journal, also includes committees for research, international affairs, and public relations.

The 20th annual conference had been scheduled for March 2011 in Tokyo, but two weeks before the conference was to begin, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. At first the organizers considered cancelling the conference altogether, but in the aftermath of the earthquake a lot of publicity was given to the so-called “power of sport” in the lives of the people living in the Tohoku area, and JSSS realized the need to investigate the potential influence of sport in the face of such an unprecedented disaster. This led to the decision to postpone the conference for three months and hold it in June.

The theme of the rescheduled conference was “Sport in the 21st Century.” Participants considered the manifold problems associated with sport in the twentieth century and how sport sociology can contribute to their solution. The topic of the keynote symposium was “Deconstructing Sport Sociology: A Sociology of ‘Sport Sociology.’” The main purpose of the symposium was stated as follows: “JSSS is not merely an academic society for the study of sport; the practice of sport sociology should question and challenge the frameworks of knowledge that are the premises of sociology and modern society.” Ironically, as sport has become more and more prominent in our society, this important mission has been forgotten; this symposium sounded the alarm against the trend toward a perverse academism that can be seen in the sociological establishment, where many scholars tend to be conservative and devote themselves to building their résumés.

Due to the rapid growth of the mass media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, spectacle sports continue to profoundly affect the politics, economics, and cultures of contemporary societies. “Sport is a microcosm of society,” as the saying goes, and in sport we can discover a plethora of phenomena ripe for sociological analysis. The younger generation in particular tends to find sport a seemingly glamorous object of research. Some of the many possible approaches include: the political meaning of sporting events in the spatial configuration of cities and regions, sport as a site of gender issues, sport as body technique and the subject of body theory, sport as communication and its relationship to the media, national and international sport policy, (physical) education and sport, and the social history of sport. Methodologically speaking, there is the standard hypothesis-testing model of research, interpretive methods based on fieldwork, monographs, discourse analysis and historical sociological research using historical materials and literature, phenomenology, cultural studies, and the list goes on. There are also many themes related to changes in the phenomenon of sport itself: for example, the dangers that the unending escalation of sport performance poses for athletes, especially those at the top level; the decline of company sport teams, which for many years have been a mainstay of amateur sport in Japan; the influence of the mass media on popular sports; and a potentially new type of public commons. The role of sport in a simultaneously globalizing and localizing world, and the various problems of contemporary sport after the “end of modern sports” are also being discussed. But on the whole, research interest seems to be oriented toward the cultural phenomenon of sport in today’s world, and although interest is growing in the groups and classes that support this culture as well as in questions of power, this interest is still somewhat limited. For that reason, most research topics are self-contained, relying on existing sociological methodologies, and not many research topics actually raise sociological issues arising from within sport itself.

From its inception the JSSS has emphasized international exchanges, and has maintained research exchanges with scholars from Asian countries such as the Republic of Korea (ROK) and China, and Western countries as well. As has already been mentioned, the results of such exchanges led to the two international conferences hosted by the JSSS. Furthermore, JSSS has signed an academic exchange agreement with its counterpart in the ROK, under which the two organizations regularly invite scholars from the partner country to their respective annual conferences. In addition, almost without exception scholars from overseas are invited to the annual JSSS conference as keynote speakers or symposium participants, and their presentations and comments are introduced in

the journal, deepening the impact of the cultural exchange.

The number of graduate students and young researchers in the field is steadily increasing, reflecting the rising interest in sports. However, since the sociological study of sport is still a young field, much more still has to be done to increase the quality of the research and to communicate it effectively to the larger society.

IV. What the Future Holds

The future of JSSS can be contemplated mainly in terms of three aspects: 1) research activities; 2) organization and governance; and 3) contributions to local communities, society, and the world. However, first we must consider the historical and sociological conditions behind the current state of sport in contemporary society.

The advance and maturation of capitalism in the 20th century, the progress of mechanical civilization, the birth and collapse of socialism, and the unification and breakup of nations and states have caused much unhappiness and created dangerous conditions that threaten the lives and health of billions. Under these circumstances, what can sports do to preserve universal human rights and contribute to world peace? Even ten years into the 21st century, humankind faces unprecedented global crises. Japan in particular faces an unprecedented, ongoing crisis; for in addition to the immense damage caused by the severe earthquake and terrible tsunami, people continue to feel threatened by the invisible fear of radioactive exposure from what could be called the man-made disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant. In times like these, attaining and sustaining peace, democracy, and human rights is indispensable for the existence and survival of sports.

From this perspective the activities of JSSS will have to be reconsidered in terms of all three of the aspects mentioned above. We can say first that research into sport sociology in Japan has to develop a more critical perspective on understanding the real problems to be solved and to open up new possibilities of sport studies. As our membership and volume of research continue to grow, we must exert all possible efforts to muster the strength to resolve the crisis in modern sports. Secondly, the organization and governance of JSSS may need to be reformed in accordance with this purpose. The problems that will define the future of JSSS, such as the increasing escalation and extremism of championship sports and the relationship between sport and the media, are diverse and multidimensional, and are becoming increasingly complex. The JSSS must develop even further to adequately address these problems. And lastly, researchers should be strongly aware of what is at stake in the community in which they live, or in Japan as a whole. Since 3/11 many researchers have had to ask themselves what sport can do now, in regards to the great earthquake. In the same vein, the concepts of “sport as a culture of peace” and “sport as a culture of nonviolence” are being brought into question. In addition, the themes of sport and sustainable development and sport and the environment have not been adequately addressed. We need to expand into new fields of research and methods, with a friendly eye toward sport for people of diverse genders, physical and mental abilities, and sexual orientations.

V. Message to the World

In response to the damage caused by the 3/11 disaster, aid workers and volunteers from all over the country rushed to the stricken areas, and large amounts of relief aid were delivered. There were also many press reports of the role of sporting activities as a form of relief aid and assistance. In the initial stages athletes, like everyone else, were mainly engaged in activities related to survival, safety, and the basic necessities: activities such as rescue, transportation of supplies, and setting up evacuation centers. For athletes, coaches, and others, it was not a time for engaging in sports.

Later, the demand for sporting activities began to grow. A representative case is participation in the National High School Baseball Championship, one of the most widely popular sporting events in Japan. Many high schools in the stricken regions had their sporting facilities destroyed, their equipment washed away in the tsunami, and even some of their players were missing. In response, people from all over the country collected baseball gear and sent it to the stricken high schools through a variety of networks. High schools and municipalities that had escaped major damage offered their facilities to the stricken schools for practice. In this way the three prefectures in Tohoku were able to successfully hold their respective preliminary tournaments, and each prefecture sent a team to the national tournament at the fabled Kōshien Stadium. Images of these valiant young men were displayed prominently in the media, and were a great comfort not only to direct victims of the disaster, but also to distressed people all over the country. Sports uplifted people suffering from the disaster, and helped them forget the trauma, if only for a moment. It was as if sports could give people the strength to recover from the cataclysm. Athletes, as well as musicians and other entertainers, held charity events and donated the proceeds as emergency aid. However, we need to be a little skeptical of the media's exaggerated claims for the "power of sport." Sports by themselves cannot materially relieve the suffering and sorrow of those who have lost their homes, their communities, and their loved ones.

Incidentally, this "combined catastrophe" has given rise to predictions that it may be the catalyst for major changes in Japanese society, and that the nature of that transformation may possibly show the world the way toward a "new kind of society." Here we would like to offer two observations. The affected communities were virtually destroyed and their local networks need to be reconstructed. This has brought renewed interest in the development of European-style comprehensive community sports clubs. Initially conceived as an extension of government policy, can these clubs bring about the possibility of local renewal? Robert D. PUTNAM believed that when people "individualize" by withdrawing from local networks, the public sphere is undermined and eventually the values of individualism will face a crisis (Putnam, R. D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Under these conditions, sports offer the possibility of creating new networks. In actual fact, it is known that these kinds of clubs contributed to reconstruction after the recent earthquake by utilizing their networks for relief activities. Local sports organizations in the disaster areas reportedly resumed their activities by initially carrying out material and physical support toward reconstruction. Community formation by the club model promises to create possibilities for a "new public sphere" in Japanese society, which is experiencing a decline of mid-range civic organizations, as in America. One could say that

network-formation in disaster areas is in some ways a kind of social experiment. However, there are also some problems with this club model of community formation. As Francis HSU wrote, Japanese society is based on the “*iemoto*” system, in which groups are organized hierarchically around a strong leader. Hsu believed the “*iemoto*” system is incompatible with the club system (Hsu, F. L. K., *Clan, Cast, and Club: A Comparative Study of Chinese, Hindu, and American Ways of Life*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1963). Contemporary Japanese, while no longer entirely comfortable with traditional concepts of personhood, also still find it difficult to become complete “individuals.” The search for a new form of community is thus a problem that involves all Japanese, and for that reason it will continue to attract attention.

Another problem is the media. One of the issues that the recent earthquake brought to light was the role of the mass media. At the critical moment, the major mass media organizations barely performed their function of informing the public. Regarding coverage of the accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Plant in particular, the media giants such as television and newspapers could only repeat information released by the government. This served only to magnify the general sense of crisis. Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath most sponsors pulled their advertising from television, and in its place broadcasters repeatedly ran the same bland messages of encouragement from the Advertising Council Japan, which were of no help and only increased the feelings of betrayal among the people, who yearned to know what was really going on. In contrast, Twitter and other social media provided much detailed information on the conditions in the affected regions. This is similar to the role played by cell phones in the aftermath of the Kobe Earthquake of 1995. When we consider the subsequent spread of cell phones, we can anticipate the potential for social media. In light of these developments, the relationship between sport and the media should probably also be reconsidered.

It is expected that the Great East Japan Earthquake will force a change of course in various aspects of Japanese society, not only in sports. In the wake of the disaster, those of us involved in sport sociology need to look to the future of the relationship between sport and society.

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